

THE TALK

Branches on Obama's family tree

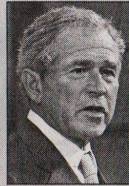
Genealogist Megan Smolenyak, who traced President Barack Obama's roots to Moneygall, Ireland, says it's not unusual for people with an ancestor who arrived early in North America to have plenty of cousins they can document — including a few famous ones. Brad Pitt is Obama's ninth cousin, she says. Other distant cousins of President Obama's:



Warren Buffett



George H.W. Bush



George W. Bush



Dick Cheney



Rush Limbaugh



Sarah Palin



Brad Pitt



Harry Truman

Source: Genealogist Megan Smolenyak, author of a new book, "Hey, America, Your Roots Are Showing."

Star cousin? It's relatively common

A genealogist explains we all are likely linked to celebrities, albeit distantly

By KATHERINE SKIBA

Tribune reporter

WASHINGTON — The news stories invariably raise eyebrows: Barack Obama is related to Brad Pitt. Madonna and Ellen DeGeneres are cousins. John Edwards and Britney Spears are cousins, too.

How can it be?

Genealogist Megan Smolenyak explains it in a new book, which features chapters on Barack and Michelle Obama. If a person goes back 10 generations, he or she will have 1,024 direct ancestors, she says.

The result is that each of us is bound to have "millions of cousins — and a few of them are going to be famous," Smolenyak says.

The genealogist, who traced Obama's roots to the Emerald Isle, which the president visited amid fanfare last May, notes that socioeconomic and cultural factors contribute to the mind-boggling blood ties.

In her book, "Hey, America, Your Roots Are Showing," due out in February, Smolenyak notes that 200 years ago, few people lived in cities and transportation options were scant.

Absent an upheaval — such as war or famine — people probably descended from people who had resided in the area for generations, and knowingly or unknowingly, they married

cousins. The gene pool shrank even more from the old practice of people marrying the sibling of a deceased spouse, she said.

Smolenyak, from Hadonfield, N.J., says colonial times in North America are a "sweet spot" for famous cousins. How's that?

Two factors come into play. The period is distant enough for "genealogical math" to work its magic but recent enough for a paper trail.

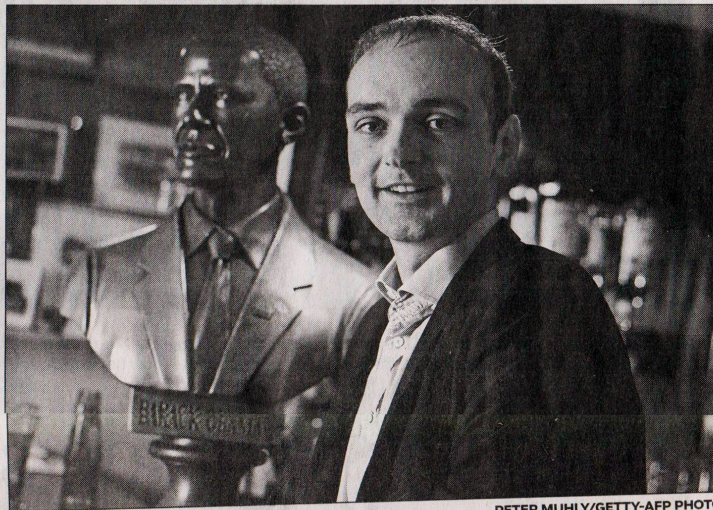
So much-touted cousins almost always involve a shared colonial American ancestor or a French-Canadian forebear, she says.

If your family tree has a single branch of early European "arrivers" to North America, your chances of having loads of documentable cousins, including a few famous ones, are high, Smolenyak says.

But celebrity cousins are rarely more closely related than seventh cousins and most often are eighth, ninth or 10th cousins, she says.

One chapter of her book is called "There's No One as Irish as Barack O'Bama," which borrows the name of a song by Ireland's Corrigan Brothers. It's more than a wee exaggeration, however, because, Smolenyak says, Obama is one-thirty-second Irish.

She names Fulmoth Kearney — Obama's maternal great-great-great-grandfather — as the presi-



PETER MUHLY/GETTY-AFP PHOTO

Henry Healy, an eighth cousin of President Barack Obama, poses with a bust of the president in Ollie Hayes Pub in Moneygall, Ireland. Obama is 1/32 Irish.

dent's most recent connection to the auld sod, and describes the detective work she used in 2007 to track down facts about Kearney, who left Ireland for New York in 1850.

A breakthrough: a tombstone in Ohio giving Moneygall as the birthplace of Joseph Kearney, Fulmoth Kearney's father, another immigrant. An Anglican priest in Ireland and a specialist in Irish genealogy helped with her research.

Smolenyak traveled to Ireland for Obama's celebrated visit to Moneygall, when he hoisted a Guinness, lamented the lost apostrophe in his surname and met with Henry Healy, an eighth cousin.

The genealogist, who traced Michelle Obama's heritage back four or five generations and gave her the findings in 2009, also features the first lady's roots in two chapters of the book.

Almost three years ago, Smolenyak began looking into the first lady's heritage for a story written by New York Times reporters. She

kept digging deeper for months after the initial story appeared in part because of the significance of Michelle Obama, her mother and daughters being the first descendants of slaves to live in the White House as members of a first family.

By now the saga of Melvina, a young, illiterate slave girl from South Carolina once valued at \$475, has become fairly well-known because of Smolenyak's findings. Melvina is Michelle Obama's great-great-great-grandmother.

In the book, the genealogist shines the light on branches of the first lady's family tree that were discovered about 260 miles from the White House in Virginia's Henry and Pittsylvania counties. One-quarter of Mrs. Obama's ancestry can be traced to the two counties along the border with North Carolina.

The genealogist also discloses that Mrs. Obama's Virginia ancestors included slaves set free before Emancipation. One relative by marriage was Margie

Jumper, who in 1946 was arrested in Roanoke for refusing to give up her seat on a bus when a white man boarded and she was asked to move, Smolenyak found.

It was almost a decade before Rosa Parks' arrest in Montgomery, Ala., in a similar instance set her on the path of becoming a civil-rights icon.

The Jumpers, by the way, have some Native American blood, meaning the first lady does, the genealogist said.

President Obama, with a father born in Kenya, a mother born in Kansas, a half-sister born in Indonesia, and bloodlines running to Ireland, England and Germany, has well-documented, far-flung roots.

Consider Mrs. Obama's heritage, and Smolenyak says Obama daughters Malia and Sasha bring to mind the song, "We Are the World."

"Those two girls are related to almost every ethnicity possible," she says, "especially if you include relatives by marriage."

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American Girl doll focused on reading

American Girl is promoting the Save the Children nonprofit organization with the release of its latest doll.

McKenna is the Middleton, Wis., company's Girl of the Year doll for 2012, to be released Sunday. In books about the character, McKenna is described as a fourth-grade gymnast in the Seattle area who has trouble with reading comprehension. A tutor helps her deal with the problem.

"One issue that came to our attention was something called the fourth-grade slump. ... It affects many children as the focus in the classroom switches from learning to read to reading to learn," said Julie Parks, American Girl spokeswoman. "This character is about focusing on your strengths and using your strengths to get over some difficult challenges."

The 18-inch McKenna doll comes with one book and costs \$105, up \$5 from the 2011 Girl of the Year doll, Kanani. An activity book and related accessories will also be sold, and a movie about McKenna will be released on DVD in mid-