

Obama researcher traces war hero to Sylane

By TOM GILMORE

THE American Genealogy expert, Megan Smolenyak, who traced President Obama's roots to Moneygall, has also traced the roots of US soldier Thomas D Costello to Sylane, 92 years after he died fighting the Kaiser's army in World War I.

For over 88 years the remains of Private Costello, a native of Cloonaghmore near Sylane, lay in an unmarked grave in France. That was until a group of people, using metal detectors, found his skeleton and other World War I artifacts in a wooded area known as Bois de Bonvaux near Jaulny.

Private Costello's body was hastily buried in woods after he died in action but US Army personnel were unable to find his remains after the

war, and his death became almost a century-long mystery.

However, following painstaking DNA tests and the checking of dental records he was formally identified and were buried with military honours at Arlington National Cemetery last year.

In the St Patrick's Day issue of *The Huffington Post* on-line newspaper in the US Megan Smolenyak wrote about how a trip to Tuam led her to trace the long lost soldier's long lost Irish relations. These include his grand nephew, Tommie Costello, who still lives in the ancestral farm, his grand niece Mary Dunne in Abbeyknockmoy and distant cousin Mary Higgins (nee Creaven), wife of Corofin historian John Joe Higgins.

For a number of years



LONG LOST HERO: Sylane NS pupils Cian Higgins (11) points to a line recording the names of school pupils showing that his distant cousin, US Army Private Thomas D Costello, whose body was missing for almost 90 years, was a student of the school in the early 1900s. Also in the photo are Private Costello's cousin Tommie Costello and Cian's grandfather, Corofin historian John Joe Higgins.

after the discovery of Private Costello's skeleton, and those of two others, investigations continued to try and identify them. But it was only when Megan Smolenyak visited Tuam last year that she made contact with Tommie and his wife Nora in Cloonaghmore as well as John Joe Higgins.

Megan says that her Irish heritage is at least part of the reason why she traced Barack Obama's roots to Moneygall as well as tracing the ancestors of Annie Moore, the Irish girl who was the first emigrant to arrive at Ellis Island. She also established that the singer known to many as the Jewish Boy from Brooklyn, Barry Manilow, is a quarter Irish.

"With St. Patrick's Day looming, I have no choice but to surrender to my genetic urges and write of yet another link between our two countries, that of Private Thomas D. Costello," she wrote.

Last year she attended his funeral in Arlington Cemetery and then visited Tuam.

She went to Tuam Library and eventually made phone contact with his cousin.

"We got a phone call from her, but at that time I knew nothing about the great-uncle who had died in the First World War.

"Indeed my late uncle Joe,

who lived in New York for many years, never mentioned his uncle either, so it was a surprise to us when all this was discovered," says Tommie Costello.

It was through Tommie's sister, Mary Dunne in Abbeyknockmoy, that Megan was given the email address of John Joe Higgins.

"Once she contacted me I was delighted to be able to help out and to inform her that all the Costellos in Cloonaghmore and Carane as well as Mary Dunne and her family in Abbeyknockmoy and all the Creavans and the McHughs in Ballintleva were relations of this soldier," says John Joe.

He was delighted when Megan asked him to write a few lines for *The Huffington Post* to be used as part of her article for the newspaper on St Patrick's Day.

"They asked me for a resumé of Thomas D Costello's ancestors. I am delighted that now all his many relations in North Galway will also learn, when they read this, of his sacrifice in World War I as an Irish-born American hero," says John Joe.

In her article in the US newspaper Megan describes how John Joe helped her trace the soldier's relatives in the Tuam area.

boldic that around the same time that President Obama announced about his plans to visit Ireland the story of the brave Irish-American soldier Thomas D Costello is also published on both sides of the Atlantic, both in *The Huffington Post* and *The Tuam Herald*.

Last year when Thomas D Costello was laid to rest in Arlington Cemetery with full military honours only one of his relations could be found in the US to attend the funeral.

As a genealogist for the ongoing repatriation efforts of the US Army, Megan says she was requested to locate Private Costello's next of kin. "The case was challenging, partly because the soldier was an Irish emigrant. Born in Co Galway in 1892, he, a sister and two brothers had come to America, but only the sister married.

"She was swiftly widowed, so had only one child, who in turn, had only one child. It was this lean trail that I followed to Michael Frisbie, Private Costello's great grand nephew. Mr Frisbie, along with his wife and daughter, traveled from Maine to attend the ceremony for a relative he had never heard of until notification by the Army," says Megan.

During her visit here she says she was able to "zero in" on the soldier as a child in his hometown of Tuam.

"There were more siblings than I had been aware of, so I decided to see if I could locate any relatives remaining in Ireland. Before long I found myself cold calling Tom and Nora Costello who live remarkably close to where the soldier once did. They kindly indulged this intrusive Yank and steered me to local genealogy guru, John Joe Higgins," says Megan.

John Joe says it is sym-

did great things." He and others, including French Colonel Brice Houdet, offered their condolences, via Mr Frisbie, to the family.

It was on September 16, 1918, when as part of the 60th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division, Private Costello encountered heavy enemy artillery barrage and machine gun fire near Jaulny, France, in a wooded area known as Bois de Bonvaux. He was killed during the battle and his remains were buried there with two other soldiers.

Attempts to locate Private Costello's remains by US Army Graves Registration personnel following the war were unsuccessful.

It was only in September 2006 that a number of French people hunting for metal in the area found human remains and World War I artifacts.

Among other forensic identification tools and circumstantial evidence, scientists also used dental comparisons in the identification of the remains.

The remains of Thomas Costello had remained undiscovered for 88 years and it is only now, five years later, that his relations in Ireland are learning about his existence and his fate.

She added that at the funeral ceremony they listened as Chaplain Donald Rutherford described Private Costello, recorded as 5 feet 6 inches in his induction papers, as a "small man who

"Watching the funeral service, complete with the ritual folding of the flag, the gun salute that still startles even when you're expecting it, and the sorrowful wail of *Taps* I realized that no one present had been alive when Private Costello was killed more than nine decades ago. There's no statute of limitations on honoring those who make the ultimate sacrifice, and that's as it should be. RIP, Private Thomas D. Costello," says Megan Smolenyak.

"Perhaps if Megan visits Ireland with Barack Obama in May she might make the trip to Sylane," says John Joe Higgins as he proudly points to the Sylane NS roll book from the early 1900s which shows Thomas D Costello was a pupil back then.

"Our grandson Cian (11) is in fifth class at the school now and it is a nice linkage that he is related to this hero of World War I," says John Joe.

Tommie and Nora Costello will also be carrying on the tradition next September when one of their children starts school in the same building that Thomas D Costello attended before going to war for the US and meeting his sad fate in the fields of France a few years later.