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 Cloonahmore 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 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 Cloonahmore 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 quartet 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 a phone contact with his cousin who said, “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, John 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 Cloonahmore and Carenane as well as Mary Dunne and her family in Abbeyknockmoy and all the Creavans and the McHughes in Ballintieve were relations of this soldier,” says John Joe Higgins.

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.

“Watching the funeral service, complete with the ritual fanning of the flag, the gun salute that still starts 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 there.

“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.