

Gravestone solves 1948 air crash mystery

HEADSTONES from a graveyard in rural Co Limerick; church records; a census from the 1900s; and DNA samples deciphered by FBI forensic experts.

Fusing evidence old and new, a 60-year-old mystery involving a puzzling plane crash, a frozen hand and rumours of a gold bullion was finally laid to rest with the help of retired Limerickman Maurice Conway.

A complex and intriguing tale, the 58-year-old Borrigone man was instrumental in cracking the case.

He is, it transpired, after almost nine years of painstaking research, a distant cousin of Francis Joseph Van Zandt, the owner of a mummified hand recovered from the wreckage of a 1948 air disaster.

"I got a phone call from America last October from an FBI genealogist — a woman called Colleen Fitzpatrick," explained Mr Conway.

"She was looking for the Conway's of Askeaton, as she was trying to find a DNA match for the only human remains from the 1948 crash," he said.

"It was very confusing for me at first, but once I started looking into it, I realised I probably was related to the man."

One of the worst commercial airline crashes in Alaskan history, Northwest Airlines Flight 4422, carrying 24 merchant seamen, crashed inexplicably (an investigation would later reveal its pilots had been blinded by the northern lights) into Alaska's highest mountain, Mount Sanford.

"The plane crashed and fell 3,000ft into a crevice," said Mr Conway. "They were returning from Shanghai, and so rumours spread that it was loaded with gold."

With no survivors, the dangerous location of the ill-fated aircraft meant it lay untouched at the bottom of an icy ravine until 1994, when two adventurous pilots Marc Millican and Kevin McGregor undertook to find



Jennifer Hough unravels a mystery that connects a mummified hand, gold bullion and a retired Limerickman

the truth behind the crash. But several expeditions proved fruitless.

"There are only two weeks in the year when you can make the trip to the crash site," he said. "This went on for several years and they found nothing."

Finally, in 1998, the two men discovered part of the wreckage, a propeller and part of the engine. The following year, they decided, would be their last.

"They went up in 1999 and planted 30 US flags — one for each victim and held a brief ceremony. For some unknown reason they decided to descend a different way than they ever had before."

There, sticking out of the ice, the men saw an arm — fully preserved by the ice.

"It was in the hands of the state to identify who it belonged to," said Mr Conway. "Trying to get a DNA sample from it was difficult, but forensic experts managed to, using a brand new breakthrough technology. They rehydrated the hand and were able to



Maurice Conway, above; the plane crash victim, Francis Joseph Van Zandt, left; and his mummified hand, below. After DNA tests, research of his family tree, library records and the census, Mr Conway proved he was related to Mr Van Zandt with the discovery of a headstone in Askeaton.



take a thumb print." The hand became the oldest identification of fingerprints by postmortem remains.

By a process of elimination, it was eventually matched to Mr Van Zandt, a 36-year-old merchant marine from Roanoke, Virginia.

Next, genealogists set about tracing the Conways, as Van Zandt's mother had been a Margaret Conway from Askeaton, Co Limerick.

"Colleen asked if she could send

me a DNA kit," said Mr Conway.

"It was a match and when she rang to tell me, I said 'so that's it now'. She said 'no, now we have to prove the relationship'."

Months later, after painstaking research of his family tree, Mr Conway finally had the answer so many people were waiting for.

"I visited churches, spoke to the priests, got library records, the census, and after five months found the an-

swer on a headstone in Mount Pleasant cemetery in Askeaton — an inscription that proved the connection."

I copied all the birth and death certs and sent them off to America."

Mr Conway maintains the mystery would never have been solved were it not for genealogists Chriss Lyon, Odile Loreille — and Ms Fitzpatrick who visited the Conway grave in Askeaton last year.

"So many people worked on solving

this case. But they are the real unsung heroes of the story."

And as well as discovering a past relative, Mr Conway has found some living ones too. "I have the names and number of a John Conway and his sister who I am related to. I intend to give them a ring sometime, when all this has died down."

And what of his long lost cousin's hand? "I donated it to the US forensic team for scientific research."