

## Alaska joins Askeaton by hand

Who would have thought that a mummified hand and arm, found in an Alaskan glacier, in 1997, would lead investigators to the home of one Maurice Conway, of Morgans, Askeaton?

The story begins on a calm, frosty night, in March 1948. Twenty-four merchant seamen were happily on board Northwest Airlines Flight 4422, winging their way from Anchorage on the final leg of their journey back home to New York, after sailing a loaded oil tanker, the SS Sunset from Bahrain to Shanghai.

Shortly after leaving Anchorage, and despite clear weather conditions, the plane smashed into the side of an ancient 16,000 foot volcano, Mount Sanford, killing all merchant marines and six crew members on board (investigations would later reveal that its pilots were blinded by the Northern Lights). On impact, the plane plummeted 3000 feet into a crevice. Snow and ice quickly consigned the plane and all on board to what seemed an icy grave forever. But fate took a hand in matters, literally.

In 1994, two former US Air Force pilots (now both commercial pilots), Captain Kevin McGregor and Captain Marc Millican, began a mission of discovery for flight 4422. Their interest and passion was fuelled by the many stories they had heard about the crash as they flew over the area on long haul flight to Tokyo. Among these was a story of gold bullion on board – a supposed payoff to the passengers for delivering the oil cargo.

Kevin and Marc's many expeditions into the hostile terrain yielded little, other than the remains of a propeller, a piece of engine plate, with its vital serial number still visible, and a dinner knife bearing the Northwest Airlines insignia. Frustratingly, there was only two weeks in the year when it was possible to make the trip to the hostile terrain of the crash site.

Four years after their quest began; the two men planted 30 US flags at the site, one for each victim. They held a brief ceremony, as they had decided that this was going to be their last trip. As they descended a route they had never used before, there it was in front of them. They had discovered a frozen hand sticking up out of the ice, pointing to the heavens. It was a miracle! The hand was so lifelike that when the park service came to collect it a few days later, instead of picking it up, they excavated around the edges and then underneath it, thinking there might be a body attached to it under the snow.

Francis Joseph Van Zandt was one of the merchant seamen who perished on that fateful night. It was his hand that pointed the way to future years of research by forensic and genetic experts. Their goal – to find out which of the 30 victims did the hand belong to. Eventually, by a process of elimination, the hand was matched to Van Zandt (by the time they got to checking him out they had already eliminated 28 of the people on board - they never found family for the 30th, so it all hinged on him and a match being found for his DNA. He was literally their last chance of identifying the hand). The task of identifying the hand could never have been achieved without the use of cutting-edge fingerprint and DNA technology, as well as dogged determination and research by forensic genealogists. Eventually, the search would lead to Maurice Conway. But how? Why?

A living relative of the victim had to be found to match the DNA extracted from the hand, but not only that, it had to match DNA along a direct female line (known as mitochondrial DNA). Margaret Conway (Van Zandt's mother) was originally from Askeaton. She was born in 1871 and emigrated to America, along with many of her siblings. Her parents were John Conway and Ellen Drumm.

Dr. Colleen Fitzpatrick, forensic genealogist, set about establishing if there were any living relatives of this Margaret Conway in Ireland. Her initial focus centred on the Drumm's, as this is such a rare name. But she quickly gave up on the Drumm's (as there were apparently no more Drumm's in Co. Limerick) and switched her attentions to the Conway's instead.



Maurice is ex-directory, but she still managed to contact him through his sister-in-law, Mary. When Colleen heard from Maurice that his great-great grandmother was Drumm, she knew from that moment she was onto something very special.

For that reason, the research team decided, that of all the Conway's contacted, only a DNA kit would be sent to Maurice, such was their confidence in a match. Their hunch proved correct.

And thus began the mammoth task of researching family records for the Morgan's man, for not alone had the DNA to match, but Maurice's blood relationship with Frank Van Zandt had to be proved as well. Anybody who knows Maurice will know that when he takes on a task he doesn't take it on lightly. And so it was in this case.

Maurice established that his great-great grandmother, Elizabeth Drumm (1833-1935), was a sister of Francis Van Zandt's grandmother, Ellen Drumm. Elizabeth had a daughter Anne O'Shea (1856-1941), who had a daughter, Bridget Sheehy (1866-1960), who had a daughter, Catherine McNamee (1922-1986). The latter was Maurice's mother. Without a shadow of a doubt, that makes Maurice Conway a cousin, many times removed, of Francis Joseph Van Zandt.

Since the news broke, it has attracted worldwide media attention. Features on the extraordinary story of the hand and Maurice's connections with it have appeared on print, radio and TV. A large crowd packed into the Gatehouse, Area 79, last year, to hear Captain Kevin McGregor recount his amazing story. Dr. Colleen Fitzpatrick also gave a fascinating account of the world of DNA, and of course, Maurice Conway gave us an insight into his vital role in the research he had to undertake to establish his link with the hand frozen found in a remote corner of Alaska.

The 60 year old mystery of Northwest Airlines Flight 4422 has had some ray of light shed on it. It took the courage and bravery and passion of two pilots to start the ball rolling. Experts in fingerprint, DNA and forensic genealogy proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the hand belonged to Van Zandt. Maurice Conway proved beyond a shadow of a doubt too that he is a blood relative. One part of the jig-saw would have been useless without the other. Maurice Conway played a glorious role in researching every last detail to come up trumps. Now, not alone has he discovered a dead relative, but he has found a lot of living relatives too.

Maurice worked at our plant from 1986 to 1998. The hand is now in the possession of the US Armed Forces DNA Identification Lab for further research.



Pictured at the gathering in Area 79 last year, l-r: Liam Dundun, Captain Kevin McGregor, Dr. Colleen Fitzpatrick, Chris Lyon, Maurice Conway & Andy Yeiser