

My ancestor assassinated the US president

Category: England, Stories, USA
written by Editor | 12 March 2025



It was just another question posed at the English village community centre quiz night: “How many presidents of the United States have been assassinated?” Then, as fingers around the team tables counted up the most likely answer, the quizmaster revealed a long-held family secret that shocked the quizzers. One of his ancestors had assassinated a US president.

By Terry Walker | Read time 9 minutes | AS010320

The American-born quizmaster Ken Haske detailed a

direct family connection: “A great-great uncle of mine shot President William McKinley.”

A gasp of surprise swept the hall at Frinton on Sea, North Essex, as the 20 teams strained to benefit from the clue and unsuspected local connection. The quizmaster revealed more details after the general knowledge round points had been totted up,

Ken Haske’s ancestor was the infamous anarchist Leon Frank Czolgosz (*pron. Cholgoss*), who shot President McKinley on 6 September 1901 in Buffalo, New York. The President died on 14 September after his wound became infected.



An anarchist named Leon Czolgosz shot President William McKinley on 3 September 1901.



Police mug shots of ancestor, Leon Czolgosz shot President William McKinley on 3 September 1901.



An anarchist named Leon Czolgosz shot President William McKinley on 3 September 1901.

Two shots into his body

Armed with a fully loaded pistol, the assassin took a 20-minute, one-nickel ride on a street car to the Pan-American Exhibition in Buffalo. The President was greeting visitors when Polish-born Czolgosz, 28, fired two shots into his body. He was readying to fire again when bodyguards and other visitors pinned him down.

In his signed confession, he wrote: " I shot once and then again. I did not

think one shot was enough. As soon as I fired a second shot, I was knocked down and tramped on. The gun was taken away from me. The gun was fully loaded. All I have told you I have said of my own free will.

“I made my plans three or four days ago to shoot the President. When I shot him, I intended to kill him. The reason for my killing was that I did not believe in presidents over us. I was willing to sacrifice myself and the President for the benefit of the country.

“I felt I had more courage than the average man in killing the president and was willing to put my own life at stake in order to do it”.

An important part of history

Czolgosz was arrested on the spot and put on trial for first-degree murder. He was convicted and sentenced to death on 23 September 1901. His trial lasted 8 hours and 26 minutes, from jury selection to verdict. He went to the electric chair on 29 September, witnessed by his brother Waldeck. His last words were: “I killed the President because he was the enemy of the good people – the working people.”

His parents, Paul Czolgosz and Mary Nowak, were first-generation Polish immigrants. They arrived in the USA in 1872 after the birth of their third son.

Leon was born the fourth of his parents’ ten children, following three elder brothers, Waldek, Frank and Joseph. Four younger brothers named Walter, Jacob, John, Michael and two younger sisters called Celia and Victoria. Additionally, he had two half-siblings, Charles and Antoine, from his father’s second marriage.

That extended first-generation family would result in generations of descendants that century. Some of them were probably unaware of the infamy resulting from the shocking murder.

Leon Czolgosz” ‘s descendant, Ken Haske, moved to Frinton on Sea on American Independence Day in 2023. He said: “I only discovered I had

an assassin for an ancestor when I was compiling a family tree. It was a shock at that time. Now I realise the assassination was an important part of history - and no one can change that now.”

Quiz answer:

The four assassinated presidents of America were:

Abraham Lincoln (12 February 1809 - 15 April 1865)

Shot in the head by John Wilkes Booth.

James Garfield (19 November 1831 - 19 September 1881)

Shot twice in the back by Charles Guiteau.

William McKinley (4 March 1897 - 14 September 1901)

Shot twice in the stomach by Leon Frank Czolgosz.

John F Kennedy (29 May 1917 - 22 November 1963)

Shot in the head by Lee Harvey Oswald.

Leon Czolgosz, the anarchist who assassinated American President William McKinley, was born to first-generation Polish immigrant parents and brought up in poverty. He had only five years of formal education and started working in his mid-teens. However, he was an intelligent boy who read a lot outside school. He first became interested in socialism when, at the age of 19, he lost his job due to the prevailing depression. Very soon, he concluded that it was the state machinery which made the rich richer at the cost of the poor.

On September 6, 1901, the President was scheduled to meet the general public for ten minutes at 4 p.m. at the Temple of Music, an auditorium at the Pan-American Exhibition exposition ground. Seizing his chance, Czolgosz stood in the queue. He was carrying his revolver wrapped in a handkerchief, and reached the President at 4:07 p.m.

As the President extended his hand, Czolgosz slapped it away and shot him in the abdomen twice. The first bullet hit a coat button and

ricocheted off. But the second hit his stomach, seriously wounding him. The President succumbed to his injury on 14 September 1901. SOURCE: The Famous People.

Leon Czolgosz is a central character in Stephen Sondheim's musical *Assassins*. The musical number "*The Ballad of Czolgosz*" depicts his assassination of McKinley.

Here's another true family secret revealed

My wartime journey with a goat and two dogs

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The wartime journey began on the day Britain declared war against Hitler. From the Hebrides to the Cotswolds involved

rowing a mile to the Isle of Mull, driving to the mailboat port and a three-hour sea crossing to Oban. Here, teenager Deborah Mitford and her travelling companions, a nanny goat, a whippet and a Labrador, “refreshed”. Then, endured three separate train journeys and a taxi ride to the family home and wartime sanctuary.

In the 1930s, my parents bought a small island off the coast of the Isle of Mull in the Inner Hebrides. Inch Kenneth lies about a mile out to sea from the tiny Mull village of Gribun. To the west, there is no land until you reach America. My mother bought a goat to solve a milk supply problem on our island. She found a British Saanen of uncertain ancestry and gave it to me.

We called her Narny, a charming animal that everybody liked from the beginning. Narny was free to go wherever she wanted. She jumped on the retaining wall of a steep slope by the kitchen door to be milked—there never was fresher milk.

Aged 19, I was on Inch Kenneth when war was declared in September 1939 and I had to return to our home in Oxfordshire. Naturally, I could not leave my goat behind. So, together with a whippet and a labrador, we set out on a journey which, at that time, took 24 hours.

by Deborah Devonshire | Read time 8 minutes

Story continues after the IMAGE GALLERY



Mitford family home on Inch Kenneth island, start of wartime journey with a goat



Deborah Devonshire, (nee Mitford} rowed from Inch Kenneth to Mull to start her wartime journey.



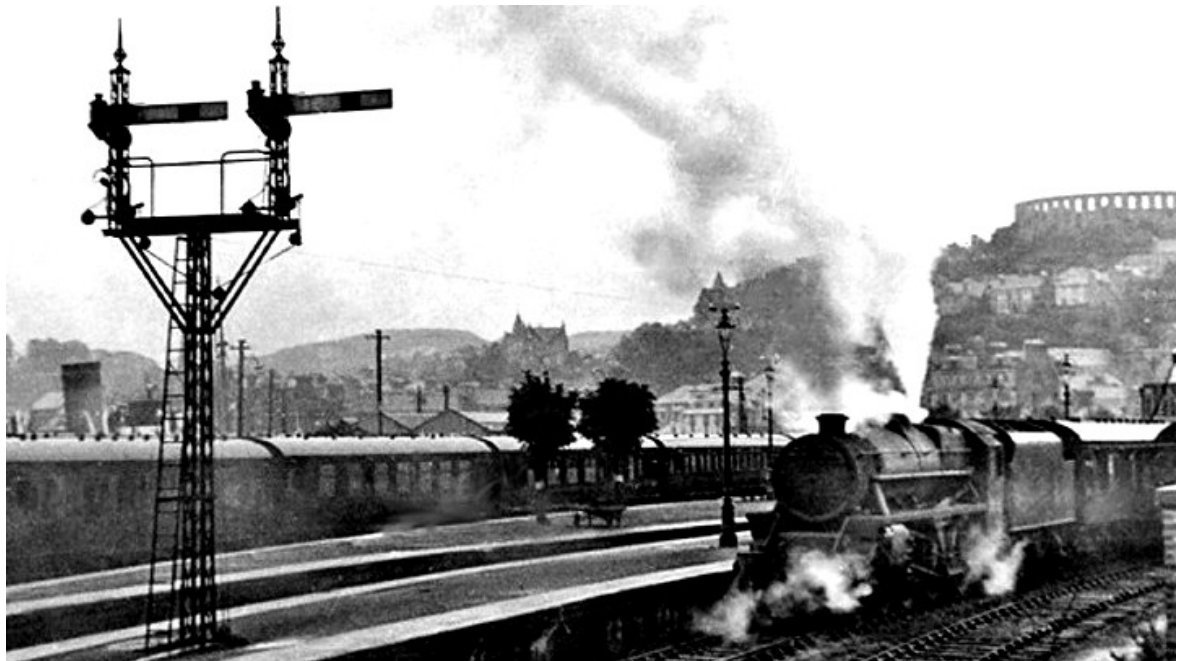
Narny, a British Saanen goat, travelled by ferryboat, trains and taxi to the Cotwolds.



The Mitford home on Inch Kenneth is one mile to the Isle of Mull by rowing boat.



Oban is a ferryboat port (left) for Hebrides islands and a rail terminus (right).



Steam train leaves Oban station.



Steam railways heritage in West Scotland.



Deborah Mitford arrived at Paddington Station, London it was filled with 1,000s of children being evacuated.



Goats and hens favourites of Deborah Vivian Cavendish née Freeman Mitford, Duchess of Devonshire.

Stuck for 24 hours

We left the island at 6:30 am in the dark. At low tide, there was a long walk over seaweed-covered rocks. Reaching the boat without stepping into a pool or slipping over was impossible. Then, there was another hazardous walk over the rocks on the coast of Mull to the tin hut where we kept the car. Sometimes, the vehicle was agonisingly stubborn about starting. There were no other means of transport and it was 11 miles across Mull to Salen, where the mailboat called only once a day to sail to Oban.

So one could be stuck for 24 hours if the car did not cooperate. The goat travelled in the rickety old luggage trailer covered by a tarpaulin against the driving rain.

The mailboat was well-equipped for such passengers as my animals. At that time, it was the only means of transport for all farm livestock and humans. One could safely give anything from a bull to a book of stamps to the crew, and it would be delivered miraculously to the right person at the other end. It took three hours to get to Oban, with two stops on the way, through some of the most beautiful scenery in Scotland.

First Class milking

It was a long day in Oban as the London train did not leave until the evening. After a few weeks on the island, it was always exciting to see the shops again. The goat and the dogs dutifully followed me around. A greengrocer and a butcher provided their meals for the day.

It was dark again when the time came to go to the station at the other end of the harbour. Goat in the guard's van, dogs in the carriage, we settled down to one of those endless wartime journeys with a dim light and crowded train. In the middle of the night, we arrived in Stirling, where we had to change. We waited for an hour for the London train.

I milked the goat in the First Class waiting room, which I should not have done as I only had a Third Class ticket. Luckily, no one noticed. The dogs were delighted with their unexpected midnight drink of new milk. Relieved and refreshed, we boarded the London train.

Queue for taxis

There was a long queue for taxis at Euston, and I was apprehensive that the driver might not be willing to take on such a curious assortment of passengers. Luckily, he was one of those cheerful Cockneys who would not be put out by anything. The four of us arrived at my sister Nancy's house in perfect order - just 9d extra on the clock.

She lived in a house on Blomfield Road, Little Venice, which had quite a big garden where Nanny feasted on Nancy's roses. Enough pruning was done in two hours to last a long time - as all goat and garden owners will understand.

Paddington Station was within walking distance, but the hurrying London crowds did not notice the dishevelled girl, goat and dogs party. Nanny lived for a long time, produced twins every year and an enormous amount of milk. But I shall always remember her for her perfect behaviour on the journey from the Hebrides to Oxfordshire.

Nanny State thwarts repeat of the great goat journey

Hebrides to Cotswolds required two boat journeys of 33 miles, four ports of call, three train journeys and three road journeys. Plus, walkabouts in Oban and London. 500 miles in 24 hours saw the party reach London, with subsequent onward travel to Burford, Oxfordshire.

Deborah Devonshire's wartime journey would be impossible in today's woke "Nanny State" and its battery of **Animal Health Regulations, Animal Welfare (Transportation) Laws** and the post-Brexit retention of **EU Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 of 22 December 2004** on the protection of animals during transport and related operations and amending **Directives 64/432/EEC** and **93/119/EC** and **Regulation (EC) No 1255/97**.

A person requires a competence certificate to accompany animals on journeys over 65 km. A **BTECH Certification** course is available. A nanny goat on a train would likely offend **National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)** members. Perhaps leading to a ballot and all-out strike? London cabbies, known to refuse travel to assistance dogs, would turn up their noses at the prospect of a goatly passenger. However, **Uber's Pets Service** would throw down a welcome mat - to protect against goat "accidents".

UPDATE

Deborah Devonshire (1920-2014) was the youngest and last surviving of the six Mitford sisters who scandalised British society in the 1930s and 1940s. Two years after the goat journey, she married the aristocrat who became the 11th Duke of Devonshire and, in 1950, moved into Chatsworth House. She helped transform it into one of England's finest stately homes, mainly due to a 10-year conservation and restoration programme costing £32 million.

Over her 60 years at Chatsworth House, the Duchess of Devonshire became one of Britain's leading experts in conservation and preservation — “suddenly a hero for keeping the roof on,” as she said.

Deborah Devonshire met Hitler two years before the goat journey when she was invited for tea in Munich. At the time of the goat journey, her sister, Unity, tried to commit suicide in Munich, where it was rumoured she was Adolf Hitler's girlfriend. The bullet lodged in her brain, causing severe vertigo, brain damage and partial paralysis. The gun was given to her by Hitler.

Deborah Devonshire's next incredible wartime journey was to collect her sister, Unity, from a hospital in neutral Bern, Switzerland. She had been sent get-well messages and flowers by Hitler, Ribbentrop, Goebbels and leading gauleiters. Back home, surgeons at Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, agreed it was not possible to remove the bullet. They gave Unity 10 years to live. She died in Oban just two weeks short of that.

British Saanen is a white goat developed in the UK and influenced mainly by imported Swiss Saanen goats. The coat is short and delicate. They have longer legs than the original Saanen and are heavier. Generally, they have calm natures with high milk yields. **SOURCE:** *British Goat Society*.

Acknowledgements: Reproduced courtesy of *The British Goat Society*. This story was first published in the *British Goat Society Yearbook 1972*. It was included in *Counting My Chickens* by Deborah Devonshire, published in 2001 by Long Barn Books. “The book is a song to old-fashioned reliance and a reproach to this era of dependence”, says Tom Stoppard's foreword.

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More on the lives of scandalous **Mitford Sisters**