One afternoon two summers ago, Kevin McBride's handlers had invited the media over to the South Boston Boxing Club to bear witness to his final sparring session before the Clones Colossus departed for Washington and the fight that would end Mike Tyson's career.

It was my first visit since the L Street premises had been remade into a state-of-the-art boxing facility, and while the television cameras busily recorded McBride as he skipped rope over in the corner, I was inspecting the wall décor. On a bulletin board, amid the usual boxing posters, was a black-and-white photo of an obviously young pair of amateurs in headgear, slugging it out al fresco in a ring surrounded by trees and curious onlookers. The memories came flooding back.

"Is that what I think it is?" I asked trainer Jimmy Gifford.

"You got it," grinned Gifford. "That was taken on the trip you guys took to Ireland back in what? 1989?"

Father Joe Young was at the time the parish priest in Southill, a poor ghetto in Limerick, which Ireland's then-nascent economic boom had bypassed entirely. Amid desperate poverty he worked for over two decades with the kids in the area. Since meeting Father Joe I'd made several trips to Limerick, and had even taken both of my children to him to be baptized.

A veritable pipeline had been established between Boston and Southill. In the mid-80s, we brought teams of young athletes over to Ireland for competition, and, largely through the work of South Boston businessman Billy Higgins, over a hundred Southill kids comprising a children's choir had flown to Boston to perform, living with local families on their visit.

Along with Kevin Haugh, the principal at St. Kieran's School, and Tony DeLoughery, who had won All-Ireland titles at three different weight classes, Father Joe had also helped form the Southill Boxing Club, and when the phone rang in the early spring of 1989 it was to announce that he had put together an international boxing tournament which would be held in conjunction with an outdoor fair on the sprawling grounds of Adare Manor outside Limerick.

Father Joe wanted to know if we could bring a few American kids over to compete in the tournament. And, oh, by the way, why don't you see if you can get Kevin Rooney to come over?

Thanks largely to his work with Mike Tyson, Rooney was at the time the most prominent rising star in American training circles. Father Joe's thinking was that Kevin could help put on a few boxing clinics at area clubs, and that his presence at the Adare tournament would ensure a bigger turnout.

Getting the boxers would be the easy part. I rang up Billy Higgins, who immediately set the wheels in motion. Eddie Kelly's PAL program in Southie had both boxing and basketball teams, and both Mayor Ray Flynn and the Police Commissioner, Mickey Roache, enthusiastically

supported the idea.

I then phoned Rooney, who immediately agreed, with one stipulation: He wanted to bring his girlfriend, whom he'd been promising to take to Ireland someday. I successfully negotiated this part of the deal, and we were set to head over a few months later.

Less than a week before we were to fly, Rooney rang me apologetically to say that Kelvin Prather, a middleweight he was training up in Catskill, had unexpectedly advanced to the Golden Gloves nationals, and that he wouldn't be able to make the trip after all.

When I relayed this news to Father Joe he was in a panic.

"But people are coming from all over the country for this," he said. "What about the clinics at the boxing clubs? What are we going to do?"

I didn't have a clue, but Father Joe had a suggestion.

"Would you ever ring Gerry Cooney?" he asked. "Maybe he'd do it."

Father Joe had met Cooney exactly once, when I'd taken him along to one of those breakfast-cum-press conferences to boost his fight for the 'linear' heavyweight championship against Michael Spinks a year earlier. Gerry had retired after being knocked out in that fight, but he was still the most visible Irish-American boxer in captivity, thanks to the residue of his 1982 title fight against Larry Holmes, in which he had led before succumbing in the 13th round when trainer Victor Valle jumped into the ring to rescue him from further punishment.

I rang Cooney to ask if he could possibly make the trip to Ireland.

"When?" he asked.

"Wednesday," I told him.

There was a long pause.

"Let me call you back in an hour," he said.

An hour later Cooney had enlisted in the project. Like Rooney, he'd asked if we could find an extra plane ticket, and, thanks to the defection of Kevin and his girlfriend, we had one.

Cooney's traveling companion was a large fellow named Big John, a Vietnam veteran and a former New York City cop. Since the Gardai Soichana – the Irish police force – were helping to sponsor the boxing tournament at Adare Manor, this actually provided a nice touch.

On the flight over I learned more about the nature of the relationship between Irish Gerry and Big John. Following his defeat by Spinks, Cooney had battled the temptations of drugs and alcohol, and had only recently completed a 12-step program. To all outward appearances Big

John was his “minder,” as the Irish would describe a bodyguard, but he was also his counselor and sobriety confidante, there to help keep him on the straight and narrow.

We’d flown into Dublin, hoping to drum up interest in the Adare event with a press conference at Buswell’s Hotel. The hostelry was directly across the street from the Dial Eirann, the national parliament, and a chance meeting as we were leaving produced a photo op for a picture that ran on the front pages of every newspaper in Ireland the next morning: Cooney and then-Prime Minister Charles Haughey, each with his dukes up and apparently prepared to slug it out on the front steps of Buswells.

The next morning I went out for a game of golf with the Irish musician Finbar Furey, while Gerry and Big John took an escorted tour of Dublin with a taxi driver friend of ours, Brendan Freeman. At Finbar’s insistence, Brendan drove Cooney out to Kilcullen in County Kildare so he could see Dan Donnelly’s arm.

Donnelly had been a great bare-knuckle champion of the early 19th Century, with the Prince of Wales his primary patron. After his death in 1820 his body had been snatched by graverobbers, who in a common practice of the day sold his remains to the College of Surgeons in Edinburgh. When his friends learned what had happened they set sail for Scotland, but by the time they arrived the cadaver had been thoroughly dissected and all they could find was his right arm. They brought it back to Dublin, and, two centuries later, it sat, in a mummified state, in a place of honor behind a glass case in a Kilcullen pub called the Hideout. (Seventeen years later Donnelly’s arm flew to America in the cabin of an Aer Lingus jet, and currently represents the centerpiece of the “Fighting Irishmen” exhibit at the Irish Arts Center in New York.)

We rendezvoused in the town of Monasterevin, after which Finbar drove Gerry, Big John, and me to Limerick before proceeding to Galway, where the Furey Brothers band had a gig that night. By the time we got to Limerick Cooney had fallen thoroughly under the spell of the Prince of Pipers, and that night he decided that we should hire a car to drive us to Galway and back for Fureys’ concert.

The venue was noisy and the music lively, and even though the booze was flowing freely all around them Gerry and Big John enjoyed themselves immensely, and got a big round of applause when Finbar introduced them from the stage.

We were leaving the club after the show when one of those inevitable closing-time street fights broke out on the sidewalk. Gerry ordered the car to a halt and jumped out to play peacemaker. Insinuating himself between the would-be combatants, he tried to hold them at arm’s length until one of them got loose and delivered a fierce head-butt to the skull of the other. Blood was spouting out of the fellow’s forehead and his girlfriend sprang into action and leapt on the other guy’s back. The situation was getting hopelessly out of control, but Cooney was still convinced he could be Mother Teresa and bring peace to the streets of Salthill.

Toward that end he had grabbed the more aggressive guy in a bear hug. He was still holding him like that when the guy’s opponent picked up an empty Guinness barrel and brought it crashing down over the head of his immobilized opponent.

“Come on, Gerry, let’s get out of here,” I pleaded, and Cooney finally gave up.

“Did you see that head-butt?” he exclaimed on the way back to Limerick. “God, I hate the sight of blood.”

The next day in Limerick Father Joe trotted out the Children’s Choir for a special welcoming concert for Gerry and the South Boston kids. We spent the next couple of days visiting boxing clubs around the area, where Gerry put on clinics with the Irish coaches. Nights we tended to spend in the Brazen Head in downtown Limerick. Cooney wasn’t drinking, but there were lots of pretty young Limerick lasses about.

“What I need to do over here,” he said, “is find myself a wife.”

The Southill Boxing Club was coached by Tony DeLoughery, who had at various times won All-Ireland titles at middleweight, light-heavyweight, and heavyweight. Five years earlier, when he was the reigning Irish middleweight champion, he had visited the states with Father Joe, and I’d brought the two of them down to the Cape meet Marvelous Marvin Hagler the morning Marvin and I flew out of Hyannis to begin the promotional tour for his fight against Roberto Duran.

In addition to the contingents from Southie and Southill, there were visiting teams from England and France participating in the tournament. DeLoughery had commandeered an army vehicle to transport the ring to Adare, and set it up in a lush meadow in the shade of a large oak tree.

“Good idea,” I said when I saw the venue. “Were you thinking of the shade the tree would provide?”

“No,” replied Tony, “but it might help a bit if it rains.”

The American entry consisted of three boxers, Jamie Strong, Pat Mallard, and Jimmy LeBlanc. Only 15, Jimmy had no trouble making 106 pounds back then. Several years later he would turn pro, accumulating a career record of 11-10-4.

“We were over there for ten days, and stayed with Irish families,” recalled LeBlanc, who formed some lasting friendships on the trip. “I only had one fight in the tournament, against an Irish kid named Paul McGuigan, and I won.”

“We had a great time,” said Jamie Strong, then a 132 pound 16-year-old, now a successful South Boston attorney. “Jimmy and Pat were staying with a family in the city, but I stayed with an Irish couple who lived out in the country, and every morning when I got up there was this huge breakfast waiting for me. It was an experience I’ll never forget.”

Strong also had one bout at Adare.

“I thought I’d won, but the Irish kid got the decision,” he said. “I believe you wrote at the time that it could have gone either way.”

Billy Higgins had also arranged for a basketball team from Southie to fly to Limerick. The squad was a bit short on numbers, so the boxers filled in as substitutes, and acquitted themselves well.

“I think I scored four points in two games,” said Strong.”

Fortunately, none of the basketball players had to double as pugilists.

Being held in conjunction with the fair meant that the boxing tournament had a ready-made audience. Some stood rooted to their spots and watched fight after fight, while others strolled by, stopped to watch a bout or two, and moved on, but there were always at least a few hundred spectators for any given bout. Medieval knights in full battle costume rode by on horseback, passing within a few feet of the boxing ring. Across the expanse of green meadows, crumbling castle walls were visible in the background.

“It was almost surreal,” recalled Jamie Strong.

At the conclusion of the boxing event, Cooney climbed into the ring and helped present the trophies. Once it was over we repaired to the bar at the Dunraven Arms across the road from the manor. Many years later, the same hostelry would serve as the venue when Irish millionaire sportsman J. P. McManus hosted a dinner welcoming George Foreman to Ireland.

Before our 1989 trip Cooney’s Irish connections were somewhat nebulous. He fought under the nom de guerre “Irish Gerry” and wore a Donegal tweed cap to his weigh-ins, but in the early 1980s when the late Joe Flaherty asked Irish Gerry which county his people hailed from, Cooney smiled and replied “Suffolk.”

Through a bit of research he had learned that his ancestral home was a small village in County Mayo, and had actually made arrangements to visit there. Now, a day before he was to fly back to the states, time was getting short and he decided to postpone the visit.

When he reached some long-lost distant cousin to inform him that he wouldn’t be coming, the relative moaned “Ah, but Gerry, there’s hundreds of people waiting to meet you in the town square. They’ve organized a big reception for you.”

Now, Gerry realized, he had to go.

On such short notice the only way Cooney was going to make it to Mayo and back was to fly. He hastily chartered a helicopter at his own expense, and he and Big John jumped in.

The chopper got about 500 feet off the ground when Big John ripped off his seatbelt and, banging off the walls, began to howl like an animal. Fearful that he might wreck the helicopter, the pilot hastily descended and discharged him on the tarmac.

Big John had always been sketchy about the nature of his imprisonment and we’d all been too polite to press for details, but it turned out the way he got to be a POW in the first place is that

the Vietcong shot down the helicopter he was riding in. In the peaceful tranquility above County Clare he'd been seized by a flashback.

I learned all of this when I arrived at Shannon for my own return to the US that day. Cooney was off in Mayo, but Big John was planted in the airport bar. Remarkably, given the circumstances, he was drinking coffee.

Foreman's 1999 Limerick visit is still recalled as a magical interlude, one of the most memorable moments in the city's history, and it indirectly had its genesis at that long-ago boxing tournament at Adare Manor.

A few months after returning from Ireland, Gerry Cooney found himself inexorably drawn back to the ring, and in January of 1990 he made his comeback against Foreman. Gerry invited Father Joe to attend the fight as his guest, sent him a plane ticket, and even had a limo waiting in Newark to whisk him down to Atlantic City.

A few nights before the fight we ran into Foreman at Caesars. The two men of the cloth immediately took to one another. Big George confessed that he'd always wanted to go to Ireland and promised to come to Limerick someday.

That didn't happen for nearly a decade, and by the time it did, Foreman had shocked the world by regaining the heavyweight title at the age of 45, and had in the process become the most recognizable boxer on the planet. One day we were sitting on the front porch of his ranch in the East Texas hill country and when the conversation turned to Ireland. George announced to me that he was ready to make his pilgrimage.

"You make the arrangements," he told me. "Next spring we'll go to Ireland."

Foreman prepped for the Limerick trip by reading Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes," and before we left he asked me "is it still like that?"

"Not everywhere," I told him, "but in Southill it might be worse. Imagine the most desperate ghetto in Houston, give the kids blue eyes, and you've got it."

George spent the day touring Southill, and in the afternoon shared the pulpit with Father Joe at the Holy Family Church. That evening, far removed from the slums that were the priest's hardscrabble parish, George finished his dinner at McManus' banquet and then asked Father Joe to accompany him to his room. There, in privacy and away from the television, he asked the priest which three of his many projects could best be helped by funding.

Father Joe ticked off the names of the soccer team, the marching band, and the Southill Boxing Club. With that, Foreman unhesitatingly wrote out three checks of $20,000 apiece to those entities. God knows it was an uphill battle, but the money kept them going for a while. There's still a life-sized mural of Foreman adorning one of the walls at a since-abandoned Southill school. And just think: if Kelvin Prather had lost in the 1989 Gloves regionals none of it might have happened.