The postcards arrived from all points of the globe -- Trinidad, England, Poland. They came from small cities in the United States that she had never heard of -- Scranton, Holyoke, Worcester, Bushkill. But they always came. Since Maureen Gavin was young, her father had been sending her postcards. The message was always the same. He missed her and even though he was out of town, she was in his thoughts.

Maureen's father was Al Gavin, a boxing cutman who traveled the world with his fighters. He climbed up the steps with as many chumps as he did champs but he watched over each one as if the heavyweight title was at stake. And all those times he couldn't be with his family, his thoughts were with them.

"My other children were older, they understood I had to travel," Gavin told me. "Maureen was young, still growing up. She didn't know where I was going all the time. So whenever I wasn't in the house, I would write her a postcard.''

On July 8, 2004, Al Gavin, 69, died at Long Island's Winthrop Hospital from complications following a stroke. He left behind his wife of 51 years, Joyce, and his children, Barbara, Allan Jr. and Maureen.

But Al Gavin's family included the entire boxing community. His longtime partner and friend was trainer Bob Jackson. His company was welcomed by managers, promoters, trainers and the media. He was adored by his fighters, who simply called him, "Uncle Al."

There was a period of time in the mid-1990s during which I had the opportunity to accompany Al Gavin on the road. My father was a former light heavyweight contender who was prone to cuts. At various times throughout his career, "Irish" Bobby Cassidy trusted Gavin to stop the bleeding. When my father became a trainer, he trusted Gavin to watch over his fighters. I was lucky enough to go along for the ride. In between the fights, we sat in traffic jams, coffee shops and dressing rooms. It was during those moments that Al helped me understand the art of stopping cuts and the business of boxing.

These are my postcards, from my days and nights with Uncle Al. His spirit remains palpable in boxing corners everywhere and it lives within the fighters who loved him dearly. Therefore, this is written in the presence tense, adding a voice to that spirit.

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Worcester, Massachusetts, December 9, 1994: Winter has bitten New England. The blustering wind abbreviates Gavin's morning foray into the city.

When Gavin is out of town - be it Worcester or Vegas - he follows a routine. He wakes up by 8: 00 a.m.

and checks the equipment in his duffel bag. He goes out for breakfast, purchases a lotto ticket and some postcards. By now, he knows where to get items like gauze pads, athletic tape and Vaseline in many small cities across the land. He spends the rest of the day walking or writing postcards until the fighter and the rest of the team departs for the arena. In this case, the arena is a church gymnasium.

Gavin has traveled four hours from New York to work with junior middleweight contender, Godfrey Nyakana, of Uganda. Gavin thinks Nyakana has what it takes to become champion so it is worth the trip even if the fight at the Mt. Carmel Rec Center is scheduled for eight rounds. After the weigh-in, where Gavin is recruited to work two more corners, including that of main event fighter Jose Rivera, he retreats back to the hotel. Gavin is talking with a reporter and a trainer when someone knocks on the door. The reporter answers and, after a brief, awkward silence, Genaro Andujar, asks, "Is this Al Gavin's room?''

He is invited into the room and exchanges a huge smile with Gavin as they shake hands. Andujar is scheduled to fight Rivera, lured into Worcester for a payday Originally from the Bronx, Andujar now lives in Lewiston, Maine. He asks Gavin to work his corner but the cutman informs him he was already working Rivera's corner.

The first time Gavin worked Andujar's corner was in 1992 when they had bouts at Gleason's Gym. Then, as now, Andujar didn't have a cutman. He suffered a terrible cut in the first round of a six-rounder. Someone from Andujar's corner told a fan, "Quick, see if Al Gavin is in his office."

Gavin was sitting at his desk reading the paper. He emerged with a cotton swab, adrenaline and gauze. He stepped onto the ring apron as the ringside physician was examining Andujar. "Don't worry Doc, I'll take care of it," said Gavin. He did and Andujar won the fight.

It is not likely Andujar will beat Rivera, a fact that everyone but Andujar seems to acknowledge. Gavin, concerned for the kid's safety, begins to ask questions.

"Who is working your corner?''

"A friend who got me a job as a carpenter.''

"Did you train for this fight, Genaro?"

"Not really," he answers, breaking eye contact.

"Why did you take the fight," Gavin asks, his voice rising slightly.

"I needed the money. Christmas is coming."

Later, Nyakana wins by 5th-round TKO. The trainer traveling with Gavin is hired at the last minute to assist the carpenter in Andujar's corner. Mercifully, he threw in the towel in the second round and put an end to Andujar's punishment.

When it's over, the carpenter looked at the trainer and asks, "What did you do that for?"

[Postcard Postscript: Jose Rivera currently holds a portion of the welterweight title. Andujar lost 12 of his next 13 fights. He remains active in Lewiston, with a career record of 11-28-2.]

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THE BUSINESS of blotting blood is fickle. If you stop the cut, you merely did your job. The only time a cutman really gets noticed is on the night he fails. While Gavin was penning his long-distance relationship with his children, he was also diligently building his reputation. A good cutman is an asset in any corner and Gavin's longevity is a testimony to his talent. "If you can't stop the flow, then you go," says Gavin, reciting the harsh perform or be fired reality of his craft.

As a career, closing cuts isn't a prime choice for those seeking fortunes. A 10-round fight is worth $100 and the fee descends by 20- or 30-dollar increments according to the amount of rounds the bout is scheduled, bottoming out with $20 for a four-rounder. It is a difficult way to make a living, which is why Gavin and the rest often hire themselves out to fighters who don't have the luxury of a traveling cutman.

The real money comes with a champion. In a title fight, the cutman receives two-percent of the purse or a fee agreed upon before the contest. Gavin toiled for years without a champ. He stayed in the business because he loves fighters. He stayed busy because he closes cuts and keeps his mouth shut. Often queried by reporters for inside info, he spits out his standard line: "I don't know nothing about that. I won't testify in court and you can't make me wear a wire."

Gavin won't talk because he is loyal to fighters and their handlers. In a sport where the only thing most participants know about loyalty is that it resides in the dictionary somewhere between liars and lunatics, it's smart business not to bite the hand that writes the checks.

Although they monitor and control swelling, the main priority of Gavin and his clot-forming brethren is to stop blood flow from the nose, mouth, cheeks, eyelids or scalp. It has to be stopped in the 60 seconds between rounds.

The second priority is to prolong a fight if it is winnable. A good cutman is also a good con man. Sometimes, negotiating the one-more-round plea can last five rounds. It's important to begin working a cut immediately and not just because time is short. A quick cutman can wipe excess blood from the area and get in the doctor's way before he can examine the fighter. It's all part of the con.

"A good cutman can save you a fight, save you a title, or even save your career," said former WBC light heavyweight champion Donny Lalonde. "He can minimize the damage done so you won't get cut the next time out or the time after that. And if you have a ref who is quick to stop a fight, a good cutman can be invaluable."

* * *

Bushkill, Pennsylvania, March 17, 1995: Gavin is back on the road with Nyakana. Fernwood's Resort, tucked away in the Poconos, has become somewhat of a boxing hotbed. Well, as hot as boxing can get in this rural part of Pennsylvania.

Top Rank, with TV time courtesy of ESPN, televises several cards a year from the resort. On this night, aging heavyweight Carl "The Truth" Williams headlines against young prospect Mevlin Foster.

A chill is still clutching Bushkill and once again, Gavin doesn't stray very far from Fernwood's. He doesn't have to, the postcards are available in the coffee shop.

Gavin is a familiar face here. He is greeted by the boxing cognescenti milling about the lobby. The fight crowd seems oddly out of place among the middle age couples on third honeymoons or the young ski bunnies who occupy the rooms with heartshaped tubs. Such a regular is Gavin here that he doesn't even get asked for a meal ticket when entering the dining room reserved for boxers.

Nyakana wins a 10-round decision on ESPN. He does not suffer a cut during the bout. But just as importantly, Joe Davone, the card's promoter and manager of heavyweight Bruce Seldon, asks Gavin to work Seldon's corner when he fights for the vacant WBA heavyweight title next month.

[Postcard Postscript: On April 8, 1995, Seldon stops Tony Tucker to win the WBA heavyweight title. Seldon purchases championship rings for his team and Gavin wears it proudly for the rest of his life. On August 29, 1997, Nyakana meets Verno Phillips in a junior middleweight title bout. Gavin is in his corner. Nyakana leads on points heading into the 11th round but is knocked out by Phillips. He returned to Uganda short time later and was recently elected to a seat on Kampala's city council.]

READ PART 2 of this series, as Robert Cassidy charts Al Gavin's rise from his days carrying a spit bucket for the PAL boxing team to working alongside world champions such as Lennox Lewis.