

AGE OF BRONZE

The Welker Brothers' Statuesque Accomplishments

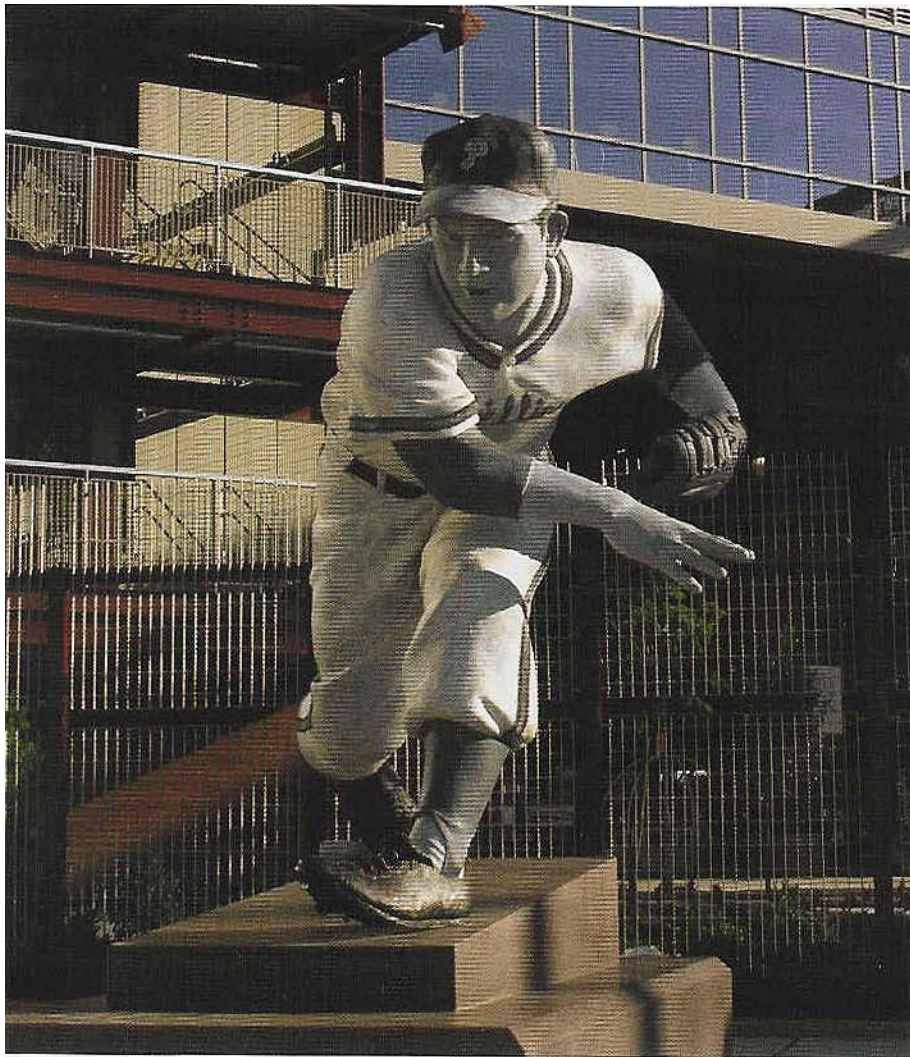
The city of Chester, Philadelphia's next-door neighbor to the south, is known locally as an area once populated by the prosperous and elite but now shows the effects of economic decline. Chester is the focus of many revitalization efforts and making great progress, but thanks to the artists at the Laran Bronze Foundry, stunning artwork is already flowing from the city limits to areas around the globe.



Laran Bronze Foundry — named for owners Larry and Randy Welker — has been operating in a large cavern of a building on East 6th Street for about 18 years. The two multi-talented brothers — Randy armed with an industrial engineering degree and Larry with one in fine arts — built their own equipment and studio with the goal of producing world-renowned art.

“We’re kind of a middle-sized foundry and family run and owned,” Randy explains.

“Our prime motivation is to produce the best artwork we can. Some foundries are strictly



Above, Hall of Fame pitcher, Robin Roberts, at the Phillies' Citizens Bank Park. Inside the foundry's East 6th Street studio, right.

concerned with production, turning out hundreds of the same thing. We're more of a job shop, creating individual art in maybe one or two pieces."

No matter what part of the country you are from, it is entirely possible that you have seen the fruits of this foundry's labors. The art created here is so varied and numerous that the list seems to go on forever, and both Randy and production supervisor Allen Ward list item after item after item. Most recently, the foundry finished up a two-year contract to provide some bronze pieces for the new World War II Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., including eight, 28-foot high eagles and 24 bas-relief panels. A few months ago, they deliv-

ered larger-than-life replicas of baseball stars Robin Roberts, Richie Ashburn, Steve Carlton and Mike Schmidt for the new home of the Philadelphia Phillies, Citizens Bank Park.

Locally, they have several items throughout Philadelphia, including eight six-foot figures of abstract females for Philadelphia's Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, a statue of Frank Rizzo and the boar at Strawbridge's. Worldwide, they've provided a few golfers at Augusta National Golf Course, a significant piece for 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games and a life-sized miner for a memorial in Pottstown, Pa. Besides large items like these, they have also shipped thousands of other projects,

such as busts, fountains and garden statues to places like Africa, Switzerland, Italy and Japan.

The foundry currently employs 18 artists who are allowed to use the facilities to create their own masterpieces on the side. The foundry's work comes from a list of sculptors



who have established relationships with the Welker brothers and who, after receiving a commission for a piece, often bring their work to the foundry to be brought to life. According to Randy, no advertising is needed to attract sculptors — the word spreads around the art commu-

nity about their unique family-run, art-focused enterprise.

While all forms of art have their challenges, working in bronze is certainly not for the faint of heart. In order to get a magnificent statue in the end, the process requires several steps along the way where the artwork is manipulated, destroyed, rebuilt, cut apart, thrown into a fire and reassembled. For most of the process, the actual object — such as an animal or a person's head — is unrecognizable to the untrained eye. The original artist depends on the knowledge and skill of the artists at the foundry, who at first glance may seem more like construction workers than fine art technicians. The positive side, however, is that bronze is highly durable and other than the patina wearing off, usually ensures a long, strong life for the final masterpiece.

One thing is for sure, the painstaking efforts of this community of artists in Chester provides endless enjoyment for thousands of others throughout the world. ★

—*Kim Graham*

WWW.BRANDYWINECOUNTRY.COM ★ II