

## Bold In Bronze

■ Tribal member Billy Bobb gets his art habit underway with foundry business.

By Peta Tinda

Wildfire Bronze is the name Tribal member Billy Bobb gave his business, an apt title when you consider the molten metal and fiery temperatures involved in casting a bronze sculpture.

Bobb, who lives near Valley Junction, grew up in the Grand Ronde area and attended high school in Willamina, described himself as always interested in art and sculpture.

After graduation from high school Bobb left for Los Angeles where he was hired to build movie sets for such big-budget films as "Total Recall," "Hotshots" and "The Abyss" which won three Academy Awards in 1989 for best set direction, best cinematography and best visual effects.

He has also worked on sets for amusement park simulator rides and "countless commercials."

Bobb said that many of the skills he learned working building movie sets translate over to the foundry business.

"The mold material is almost identical," he said.

Bobb first got interested when he started doing sculpture of his own and began to look for places to have them cast in bronze.

"It was just too expensive" he said. "So I decided to do it myself. I built my own foundry, for my own stuff — the ironic thing is, I've been so busy with other things, I haven't had time to do my own pieces."

So far things have been working out well, he said. He has several pieces that he is casting for other artists, including one that was already sold to a New York gallery by Northwest artist Dora Natella.

"I can keep my prices competitive because I do all of the work myself,"

If he gets enough pieces on commission, he

# BOBB'S



Photos by Peta Tinda

**Ready For Business** — Tribal member Billy Bobb converted his garage into a lost wax bronze casting foundry. Billy is the son of Steve and Connie Bobb and the grandson of Wilson and Lena Bobb. He first honed his skills working on movies sets in Hollywood, before moving back to Valley Junction to start his business.

wants to eventually work full time, expanding beyond his garage, which serves as his workshop. He has high hopes for his undertaking.

"I haven't done any advertising, all of my business so far has been word of mouth," he said. He sees this as an encouraging sign.

Bobb said that it took him the better part of a year to get all of the equipment needed to run his foundry. He was working on a limited budget, so he built many of the parts he needed by himself and took classes at Chemeketa Community College to figure out the rest.

"I built my own blast furnace and kiln and just read a lot about the rest.

I also took lost wax classes at the college."

He said he likes working with his hands and likes the details involved.

"There's a lot of art involved, but you also have

to be half a construction worker," he said.

To cast a sculpture in bronze, Bobb first makes a flexible rubber mold around an original sculpture, which is then supported by a stronger plaster mold to give it rigidity. Wax is then poured into the mold, making an exact copy of the original, once the wax cools. Bobb then covers the wax copy with a concrete-like dip of slurry, followed by progressively finer grades of sand. When this dries, it makes hard, fire-resistant shell around the wax. The wax is melted out in a kiln, leaving a hollow mold to pour the molten bronze into.

Bronze heated to 2,000 degrees is poured into the red-hot molds and allowed to cool... and then the real work begins.

The bronze is then painstakingly chipped out of the hardened slurry and then sandblasted to remove any leftover bits. Rough spots or seam lines have to be filled in or removed with a grinder and the whole thing welded back together.

The piece is sandblasted again and heated with a propane torch so that the metal expands. A chemical patina is brushed or sprayed on while the metal is hot. When the metal cools, it traps the color inside. The sculpture is then given a coat of wax, a hand polishing and mounted on a base.

Only when all this is finished can Bobb step back and admire his handiwork.

"You get a chance to work on beautiful pieces," he said. "I like working with other people because it gives me new ideas."

Bobb also helped with the Tribal Veterans' Memorial when it was being installed in front of the Governance Center.

It was discovered that the granite columns that list the Veterans names did not reach all the way to the brick surface of the memorial because of the way it is sloped to allow rain runoff.

Bobb was given two weeks to cast a bronze trim before the opening ceremony. The average bronze piece takes two months to finish, so he was under considerable pressure. He took the measurements of the columns, and found that each one was slightly different, so he couldn't make just one mold. Undaunted, he went to work and finished on time, but only just.

Crowds were arriving for the Memorial Day ceremony as he finished putting in the last screws. "The pieces were still hot from the patina," he said. "Meeting deadlines is pretty important."

Bobb said that he wants to keep making art and eventually wants to get his own pieces into galleries.

He likes the thought of making something that will last for thousands of years, long after he is gone.

"I like the thought of making something permanent, which — until someone melts it down — is going to stay." ■



**Works of Art** — At left, Bobb points to one of the wax copies of an elk he sculpted. The wax sculptures will be covered in a high-temperature mold and the wax melted out, leaving a hollow impression of the elk to pour molten bronze into. This technique is called the "lost wax" casting process.

**Wild** — Flames leap from the blast furnace as Billy Bobb (below), owner of Wildfire Bronze, turns on the gas. Bobb built the furnace himself, which can reach temperatures of 2,000 degrees.

