

If You Ain't Got the Money

a story by Gib Singleton

Singleton



Growing up poor shaped Gib's life and career in a number of important ways, not least in the way the lack of resources taught him to innovate and adapt. "If you ain't got the money," he says, "you gotta make it. If it's necessary, it can be done."

Examples of that attitude are present throughout his career. When he was a boy, Gib made sculptures out of mud, drew with sticks in the dirt, then with pencils on paper bags. In fact, the first formal recognition of his artistic ability was a blue ribbon at the county fair for a drawing on just such a paper sack. His first attempt at sculpture was on a "recycled" granite tombstone.

"I wanted to try working with granite," Gib says, "but the stuff was expensive. So my brother Jerry and I went out to East St Louis, to this old cemetery from the 1800s, and found an old tombstone with the name and dates pretty much weathered off. We figured no one would miss it, so we just kind of levered it up into the trunk, and took off."

When Gib decided he wanted to work in bronze, the same creative edge was required. "I built my first foundry I guess when I was maybe 15 or 16," he says. "There are three basic elements you have to have. A furnace, a dewaxing system and a pouring system. The furnace you can make out of anything. I made mine from an old 55 gallon drum."

That was almost the end of him. "I wanted a really thick drum to handle the heat and weight," Gib says. "Only

problem was, the one we found had been full of nitrocellulose – an explosive. We washed it out a few times, figured that was good, and cut it in half. Then to be extra sure, we tossed a match into it, and Whoomp! The sucker goes off. It's a miracle it didn't go off when I cut into it with the torch. If it had, with that thick steel to tamp the explosion, it would have taken down a building.



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"Once we got past that, I lined it with fire brick up on the inside, and poured some castable refractory, which is like brick mixed up with water. It sets up and you smooth it into the cracks around the fire brick to seal it.

"I made the lid out of the cut off part of the drum. Just trimmed it down, left a little hole and filled it with the castable refractory. I made a hole a little off center in the drum, welded up a little box around that and filled it with refractory. Then I built a stand for the whole thing. I made this all out of junk, because I couldn't afford to buy anything.

"Then I made a blower out of an old Electrolux vacuum cleaner. I reversed

it so it blew out forced air. And I ran a gas pipe in and added a little valve so I could regulate the flow of the gas. You adjust it like an acetylene torch out on the end. And that would go in and circle around the crucible which is holding the metal.

"You turn on the air, turn on the gas and light her up." In a modern foundry, workers use a pyrometer to determine when the bronze reaches the appropriate temperature. But those things cost money, Gib explains, "So I learned to tell by the color."

Over his lifetime, Gib built several foundries, including one in the garage behind his "Left Bank Gallery" in Granite City, Illinois, one at his Westport, Connecticut studio and one at his alma mater, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

The last he not only created, but also temporarily destroyed.

"We were pouring one day and the crucible broke," Gib says. "That whole 90 pounds of molten bronze came out. It hit the floor and everybody just started running. It goes down the drain in the floor and there's a pool of water down in the sump. Well, hot metal and water just don't mix. Man, that SOB blew and took the whole floor out of the building!"

Did that experience instill an affinity for safety in his foundries? "Hell, yes," Gib says. "I got all the gear – bunker coats, heat shields, vapor masks – and wore them to pour. Except when I was in a hurry," he laughs. "Then I'd pour in a pair of shorts and tennis shoes."