

# ROOSTER TAILS

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*What happens when some astute community leaders, aware of the importance of their city's contribution to automotive and military history, decide to create a monument to that history right in the middle of downtown? Well, they find the best local talent there is, they appeal to their fellow citizens for funds, they do their homework, and they make it happen! This sturdy display looks every bit like the original Bantam Reconnaissance Pilot Car, but it is, in fact, made of steel several times thicker and heavier than the original. Why? So folks can climb in and out of it to get their pictures taken, so it will survive exposure to the elements, and so it will last for years and years as a testament to the men and women in Butler who conceived it, designed it, and built it, that's why. Read more about this remarkable project on pages 6-8.*

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# ROBUST AND ACCURATE BRC SCULPTURE GRACES DOWNTOWN BUTLER SQUARE

BY DAVID KANALLY, WITH PHOTOS BY JILL SARVER AND CLINT ZANG

Longtime ABS members Jill and Ron Sarver were in Butler, PA (Ron's hometown!) recently. They had come back east from their new home in Arizona for Ron's family reunion. On Saturday, July 13, they were downtown, in the downtown square and discovered a new piece of public art...a sculpture that looked every bit like the Bantam Reconnaissance Pilot Car, the original jeep. (During this time, they also heard the sirens of the first responders at the nearby Trump rally, where the assassination attempt had just taken place.)

Jill snapped several photos of the sculpture and sent them to the Arts and Culture editor here at Rooster Tails, who quickly began investigating the origins of the display.

The BRC sculpture idea was inspired by the Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival, which brings thousands of jeep enthusiasts to Butler each June. Project organizer Jeff Geibel says, "All those people have been coming to Butler for the past 13 years, and when they got here, there was really nothing permanent in Butler that celebrated the Bantam jeep."



Getting that hood right in regular gauge steel is tough enough...just ask Duncan Rolls. The heavy duty version will support a person's weight without damage. Jill Sarver photo.

Working with the Butler AM Rotary Club, of which he was then president, Geibel envisioned a public representation of what was arguably Butler's most significant contribution to automotive and military history, the Bantam Reconnaissance Car. Jeff knew of the public art work of local sculptor/welder Bill Secunda's work from the large steel sculptures he has on display outside his studio in the Butler area. Jeff contacted Bill about the feasibility of a BRC sculpture that would be visually accurate, but be stout enough to remain outdoors for years, with people climbing in, out and all over it. Although Secunda was accustomed to welding fanciful, giant animals, with dimensions and designs of his own choosing, he felt that the historical significance of the BRC warranted his best effort. So he took the commission. This was in June of 2023, and the most natural time to unveil the project would be during the Jeep Invasion of the 2024 Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival, when thousands of jeep enthusiasts would once again congregate in downtown Butler. "It's one thing to undertake such a project, and another thing to complete such a project in twelve months," says Geibel.



Jill Sarver snapped this photo, along with several others, and sent them to your Rooster Tails editor. Jill and Ron were visiting downtown Butler, PA the weekend of July 13, 2024 and, to their delight, discovered the new sculpture.

So, working in tandem with Butler Downtown, a 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to revitalizing and restoring Butler's Main Street corridor, Geibel and the Rotarians would begin raising the \$100,000 dollars it would take to have the sculpture made, prep the downtown display site, and properly promote the project. Geibel had previously led that group, too, and its then president, Audrianna Bly, had been the Rotary's immediate past president. "It was a good collaboration be-

Kids can actually turn the front wheels with the steering wheel. You can too, I suppose. Zang photo.



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its then president, Audrianna Bly, had been the Rotary's immediate past president. "It was a good collaboration be-

tween the two organizations," says Geibel. "We held some community events that got the fundraising off to a strong start. We were then joined by the Butler County Tourism and Convention Bureau and the Friends of the Bantam Jeep Association, as well as dozens of local businesses and individuals who contributed generously to raise enough money to get the job done."

Secunda was determined to get it right. The sculpture would be as close to the original as possible, with functional steering, but without a driveline or a glass windshield. But instead of the thin gauge sheet metal of the very light BRC, the sculpture would be built from 3/16"

and 1/8" steel. "I imagined 20 college kids standing on the thing all at once," recalls Secunda. Bill got in touch with local BRC expert, Bill Ringeisen, who helped Secunda throughout the build, and found the right axles and other components. Butler is Ringeisen's hometown, too, and he's a pretty serious jeep guy. He has a couple jeeps from the WWII and Korean eras, and has always wanted a Bantam. "They're too expensive now," Ringeisen says, "but I'd love to have one."



The BRC sculpture is prominently placed in a park in downtown Butler, so when the Jeep Heritage Festival Jeep Invasion happens, all the folks will be able to see how it all began. Zang photo.

Ringeisen would check in on Secunda during the build. "I'd go over and see how he was coming along, Ringeisen said, "I'd help him find the parts he needed, and I got him in touch with Terry Williams, who had all the proper dimensions from his own BRC Pilot Car."

Williams added, "In June, 2023, at the recommendation of my friend, Bill Ringeisen, Bill Secunda called me about a project he was undertaking to make a mockup of the BRC Pilot Car. We talked about the venture, his expertise in doing metal work, and generally got to know each other.

A few days later we had an in-depth discussion starting with me supplying him the measurements of my BRC Pilot Car. I suggested the jeep be made a little wider and the seating area a little larger to accommodate visitors wanting to sit in it. The "hump" on the side panel was an access/egress problem. Toning it down was suggested. Making it as stout as possible was on both of our minds.

During the build,



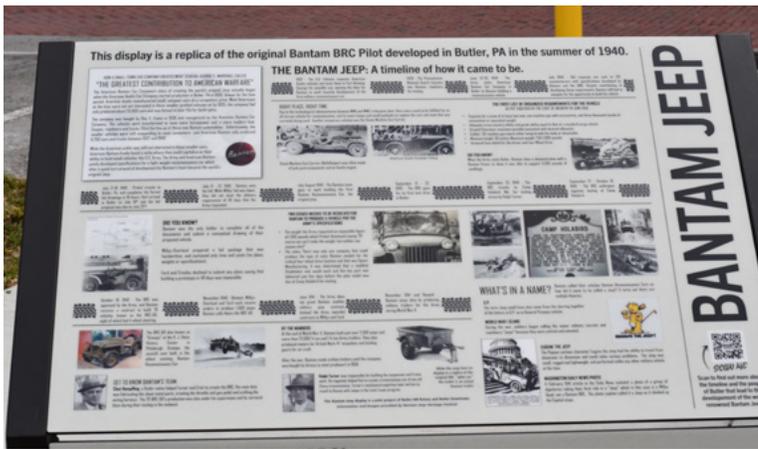
It's not likely that the pilot car ever towed a Bantam trailer, but the display documents the important role that the Bantam trailers played in the war. Zang photo.



The display is firmly chained to its concrete base to make sure no pranksters get any crazy ideas. Zang photo.



The places where the gauges go are covered in shiny metal. Actual gauges would be too fragile. Zang photo.



The plaque accompanying the sculpture tells the BRC story, and, on a lower section, lists the main sponsors of the display. Zang photo.

Bill would call for more measurements at times and email with updated photos. I mentioned that making the hood and fenders would be one of the biggest challenges.

But as you can see, he was more than up to the task. When I finally saw the finished product, I was blown away. Bill obviously is a master at his art. Having real axles and wheels was a definite plus. The Bantam trailer surprised me—a brilliant idea to complete the history of the Bantam Company during WW2.”

### The Art of Bill Secunda



Bill Secunda with a couple of his woodland friends. Both sculptures were acquired by Ripley’s Believe It or Not. Secunda Studio photo

Sculptor Bill Secunda is a welder by trade. As a young guy, he attended night school to learn the trade, and worked at Pullman Standard welding railroad cars. He later moved from Butler to Houston, and lived there for ten years. He enjoyed Houston, including its long warm season, during which he could practice his hobby of flying ultralight aircraft.

Following his time in Houston, he moved back to Butler and worked construction. On the side, he welded steel sculptures of giant bugs and offered them for sale. His friend and fellow artist David Henschel guided Bill to the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, where Bill put his bugs on display. A couple from Colorado bought them all and asked for more.

His art career was underway! During this period he learned to sell art through art shows and galleries, and was eventually able to become a full-time artist, and has done so successfully for thirty years!

“I once made a giant bear out of 40,000 nails. I could decide what it would look like and what its dimensions would be. Building a BRC to very specific dimensions out of thick sheets of steel was a very different challenge,” Bill says.

Bill’s life-like sculptures were installed at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, and over the years Bill has been invited to display at Disney’s Epcot. He also created two bear sculptures for The Saginaw Children’s Zoo in MI, large insect sculptures for the St. Louis Zoo, a pride of lions for The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens in CA. Over a dozen different sculptures prowl Barber Motorsports Park in Birmingham AL including a large 35’ diameter spider that distracts drivers as they approach turn four. Ripley’s Museum has purchased several

pieces for their US and international museums. Bill has created all the trophies for the Red Bull AMA US Rookies Cup. A life size TinMan is installed at Fountain Hills Public Library in AZ, and a fan favorite is his life size bear sculpture in downtown Aspen that has appeared in a couple of popular TV shows.



To this fanciful menagerie, now is added a very realistic Bantam Reconnaissance Car sculpture, gracing a downtown park in the BRC’s hometown, Butler, Pennsylvania, giving visitors and residents alike a look into Butler’s automotive and military past.



This lion is part of a pride (click picture) that was acquired by Donna McMillan Cargill and donated to the Living Desert Zoo and Gardens in Palm Desert, CA.