A Passion for Preserving Steel’s History

How a new museum is bringing life back to the steel industry’s forgotten treasures

by Amanda L. Blyth

In an unassuming building in New Castle, Pa., USA, Charles “Chip” Barletto has opened a museum and gallery dedicated to the art of steelmaking. A longtime collector of steel-related artifacts and artwork, Barletto has assembled photography, tools, books and equipment in the CB Gallery and Museum.

The gallery and museum officially opened on 18 May 2019, but Barletto has been collecting his treasures since he was a child.

Over the years, preserving the history of this proud industry has become his passion. And he’s not just a collector — he has been involved in industry his whole life, back to the days of working at the B&O railroad with his grandfather, who emigrated from Italy.

Barletto would save whatever he could get his hands on — often locks from the railroad or steam gauges.

“My interest was initially railroad, but then I went into the steel industry, and would save things from different jobs,” Barletto said.

“I looked at these things like they were pieces of art.”

Over his career, he has been involved in dismantling and installing new equipment in steel mills all over the country. He was part of the team that ran the first slab in Weirton Steel’s continuous caster in 1990. In 1994, he purchased Pennsylvania Engineering Corp., which he owned until 2007.

Walking through the museum, the history is palpable: it’s in the blueprints from the 1880s, the black-and-white aerial photography of U. S. Steel’s South Works (pictured on the next page, bottom right), the “Weirton Pride” steel beer can.

Using his wealth of steelmaking know-how, Barletto took extra care to display large photographs and paintings in their proper sequence within the steelmaking process.

Visitors to the museum often ask how much the artifacts and pieces of history are worth, to which Barletto says, “They’re priceless.”

According to Barletto, visiting the museum has inspired residents in the area to preserve their own pieces of steel history.

“I just visited a lady whose husband had passed away, and she was donating his things from J&L Steel in Aliquippa,” he explained. “I love meeting people … who would like to preserve their history. And that’s what we do here — we’ll preserve it and share it with the world.”

The gallery portion of the business features pieces from local artists and photographers. Weighty metal sculptures and paintings depicting the steelworkers of years past are on display throughout the exhibit and are available for sale, even some created by Barletto himself.

“I’m an artist. I started to take photographs when I was younger. I collect scrap pieces of metal that I’ll weld together and create metal sculptures,” he said.

A lover of the arts, Barletto even incorporates a little movie history into the exhibit. A portion of the lower level is dedicated to sports archives, local history and movies — notable among them is “Tiger Warsaw,” in which Barletto played a small on-screen role.

The CB Gallery and Museum is open by appointment. To see more photos of the exhibit or to schedule a visit, go to www.cbgalleryandmuseum.com.
Barletto with a photo of Pennsylvania Engineering Corp.