CHAPTER 15: KING COUNTY'S BUSINESS COMMUNITY

MOREL FOUNDRY

Some people say that foundry casting is the world's second oldest profession. In fact, ornamental and artistic casting dates back more than 5,000 years to Egypt in 3200 B.C.

Leon Morel brought that ancient tradition to Seattle when he arrived here in 1906. Morel was born in France in 1881. As a foundry apprentice in Paris, he had worked with the company that cast Rodin's bronze sculptures. Leon frequently visited the artist's studio, and recalled many times the vivid memories of seeing the great sculptor at work. This experience imbued in him the artistic temperament that he would have all his life and led him to become friends with some of the leading artists of his day.

Morel was an independent man and an intellectual, in spite of his limited education. He had fled France to avoid military conscription, and after working in several countries immigrated to the United States. After living in several American cities, he settled in San Francisco. But, on a visit to Seattle, he received news that everything he owned had been destroyed in the 1906 earthquake.

The following year, he went to work in Seattle for the Cascade Fixture Company as a foundry artisan, working on both industrial and artistic castings. This first shop was at Pigeon Point, on the Duwamish River. From 1914 to 1917 he had his own shop, and in 1917 he became associated with another foundry, NePage McKinney. In 1924 this company was incorporated as Morel Foundry Corporation, with Morel as president.

For the next 35 years, while the firm operated out of an office at 533 West Spokane Street, Morel's reputation as an artist continued to grow. He developed great skill in working hand in hand with sculptors to create beautiful works of art.

Although much of his work was destroyed when buildings were torn down, some remain, providing a glimpse of the skill of this great artisan: the Chief Seattle fountain, the facade of the Seattle Art Museum, the old Harding Memorial in Woodland Park, the lighting fixtures on Third Avenue (although many have been modified over the years), many bank toiler cages, elevators, and marquees, and countless statues, all over the city.

Morel always considered himself politically aware and active, and a friend of the working man. His firm was the first foundry in the city to unionize and the first to institute the 8-hour day.

In 1962, as demand dropped, the firm was forced to abandon the ornamental and artistic side of its business and concentrate on highly sophisticated aluminum castings for industrial purposes. Today, it is constantly seeking out new alloys and methods to provide greater strengths in cast materials.

Leon Morel died in 1979 at the age of 98. His son, Leon Morel, Jr., who operated the firm for a number of years, is now president. He is assisted by his three sons, Paul, Steve, and Mark. Their office is in West Seattle in a new 25,000-square-foot facility.

Morel Foundry crew with bronze Chief Seattle bust, circa 1910.

Founder Leon Morel with his last casting, circa 1950.