

BEACON TO THE CITY

by Robyn Jasko

STANDING PROUD AT FOUR STORIES

HIGH, THE SCULPTURE PLACED AT

SECOND AND PENN STREETS TITLED

THE RIVER SPEAKS IS READING'S

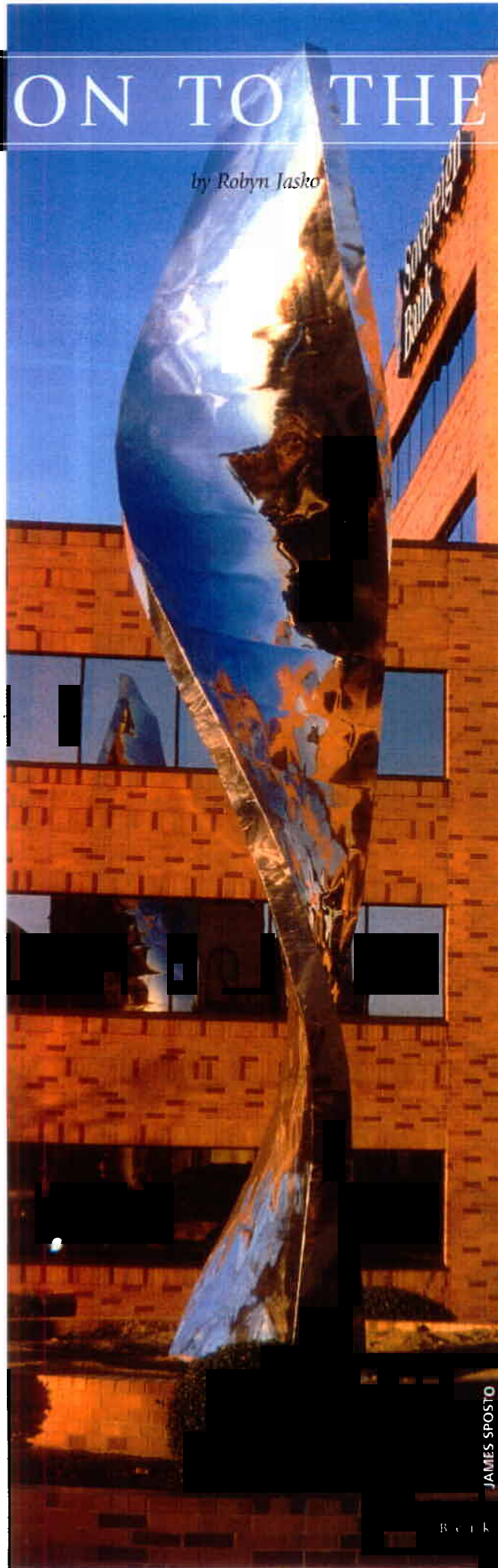
FIRST BEACON FOR VISITORS,

NEWCOMERS AND LONG-TIME

RESIDENTS ENTERING THIS CITY.

Made out of curved steel, the structure has a fluidness much like water and its reflective surface welcomes the many cars and passers-by crossing the bridge over the Schuylkill River that divides West Reading and Reading.

Like most abstract art, the meaning behind *The River Speaks* is as important as its beauty. But, some local self-appointed critics merely see this magnificent three-dimensional piece for its \$189,400.00 price tag. In common with much public art, this piece is not universally loved. Overheard criticisms often begin with "I'm no art expert, but..." That opening statement ought to be a warning beacon to the speaker to pipe down and let the experts do their thing, but when it comes to art, opinions are like noses—everybody has one. Indeed, everyone is entitled to an opinion, and the fact that a public piece elicits individual reviews pro or con is testament to its effectiveness and, some say, part of its mission—especially in an area sometimes criticized for lethargic public reaction.



JAMES SPOSTO

In April of 1998, the Reading Fine Arts board embarked on a three-and-a-half-year journey to find a sculpture that would embody the city's spirit and commemorate the 250th anniversary of Reading. After conducting an international search, one artist's proposal kept coming to mind—Theodore T. Clausen of Cambridge, Mass. Clausen's proposal was selected because he wanted to get back to the city's roots and celebrate Reading's rich history, starting with the Schuylkill River.

"The board chose *The River Speaks* on the premise that the city begins with the Schuylkill River. It provided food, employment and community to the indigenous people of the area," said board member Marilyn Fox. "We found that presenting the river through the art of sculpture was the best way to celebrate the city of Reading."

Clausen also wanted the sculpture to educate people on some little known facts about Reading by featuring historical text on 48 steel plates embedded on the encircling planter of *The River Speaks*. To do this, the artist studied Reading in depth and collaborated with local middle school students, The Berks County Historical Society, and the city to get a collection of quotes that date back to days when the Lenape Indians resided in the area.

Together, the luminous sculpture and historical text complement each other in a way that ties the city's past, present and future—fed by the flow of the Schuylkill River. ♦