

Pietro Belluz (1879 - 1935)

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Pietro Belluz was the first of several Italian immigrants from the small town of Azzano Decimo to establish a successful enterprise in Fort William. Born in 1879, he left Italy in December 1896 at the age of 17 with his entire family to work in Minas Gerais, Brazil. From the scant evidence available, the Belluz family worked as contract labourers on a Brazilian plantation. Unwilling to tolerate the harsh working conditions, Pietro's parents and two of his brothers returned to Italy after a year but he and his two older brothers remained to finish out the terms of their contract and then emigrated to Canada in 1902. Pietro returned to Azzano Decimo in 1905 to marry Maria Luigia Zentil. Shortly thereafter he returned to Fort William with Luigia and by 1911 they had four children – Albert (b. 1907), Rose (b. 1908), William (b. 1909) and Vera (b. 1911). As a founding Italian family in Fort William's East End, they opened a bakery which evolved into a grocery store at 514 McTavish Street. How Peter Belluz financed this venture is not clear but the years 1907 to 1913 were ideal to engage in this business as hundreds of immigrant workers flooded into the East End needing the basic necessities of life. So successful was his business that in 1922 it was moved to larger quarters at the corner of McLaughlin and Christie Streets (536-538 McLaughlin) under the name Peter Belluz General Store.

The move may also have been necessary to accommodate a new commercial venture that was to be located at 514 McTavish Street. In 1918, Peter Belluz began a wine manufacturing business for which he was to become well-known throughout the twin cities of Fort William and Port Arthur. The Ontario Temperance Act which had become law on 27 April 1916 permitted native wines to be sold as the only legal alcoholic beverage in the province. The new Board of Liquor Commissioners, all prohibitionists, liberally granted licenses to individuals (mainly of Italian ancestry) to operate wineries. Peter Belluz was the first in northwestern Ontario to apply for and receive such a license. Initially, the Peter Belluz Wine Manufacturing Company (later the Twin City Wine Company) supplied sacramental wines to Roman Catholic Churches. After 1926, it manufactured and sold a wide selection of wines,



Pietro Belluz Family, 1915

L.-R: Albert, Pietro, William, Vera, Luigia, Rose.
(Courtesy Ron Belluz)

sherry, vermouth, and port by the bottle or gallon. These products were manufactured at 512-516 McTavish Street but were sold at the Belluz Twin City Wine Company store which opened in 1935 at 287 Bay Street, Port Arthur. According to his daughter Vera, Finnish bush workers who frequented business establishments in the Bay, Algoma, and Secord street area, were some of their best customers. The success of the Belluz winery may have prompted the closure of the family's grocery and dry goods store in 1928. Also, Peter Belluz had become a successful landlord in Fort William's East End by the late 1920s and some attention had to be given to the maintenance of several apartments above the winery and to homes on McTavish and McLaughlin Streets which were rented out to Italian immigrant families.

The financial records of Peter Belluz's business interests have not survived. What has survived is a fine collection of photographs organized and captioned in several



Pietro Belluz Family, 1924

Seated: Pietro and Luigia; Standing (L-R), Albert, William, Vera, Rose
(Courtesy Ron Belluz)

family albums by his second daughter Vera (Belluz) Carty. Individual portraits of family members, group portraits of the Belluz family, interior and exterior views of the grocery store and winery, and a wide array of candid images of the social life of the Belluz family during the 1920s and 1930s give a unique glimpse of what it was like for a family with means to live in Fort William's East End. The family of Peter Belluz was perhaps one of the few in this working-class district that could afford the luxury of recording family activities on film. These photographs also reveal the extent to which the business was a family affair. In several instances Pietro's eldest son

Albert is shown assisting his father first in the grocery business and later unloading truckloads of grapes at their winery on McTavish Street. At a relatively young age, Pietro's daughters Rose and Vera assisted in placing labels on wine bottles prior to their sale at the winery outlet on Bay Street. After Pietro's death in 1935, his two sons Albert and William carried on in the business until its sale to Bright's Wines in 1955.

Pietro Belluz's business interests did not prevent him from engaging in public service most of which related to the Italian immigrant population in Fort William's East End. When St



Peter Belluz General Store, 536-538 McLaughlin Street, c 1924.

Peter Belluz stands proudly at the entrance to his general store. His son Albert poses beside a horse-drawn delivery wagon. Once the Belluz Twin City Wine Company became well-established the general store was closed in 1928.

(Courtesy Ron Belluz)

Joseph's Italian Roman Catholic Parish was founded in 1912, he and his wife Luigia were one of the founding families that provided the financial support for the construction of the parish church. In one of the earliest photographs of the Italian parish, Peter Belluz stands proudly beside Fathers Francis Crociata and François Maynard, S.J. on the occasion of the first procession in the East End in honour of St Anthony. In addition to his responsibilities as President of the Società Italiana di Benevolenza Principe di Piemonte during and shortly after the First World War, he served on committees to raise funds from the East End's Italian community for the Italian Red Cross and for Italian refugees. Vera affectionately remembered her father as "...a jolly man. On his day – St Peter's Day – he'd treat all the kids in the neighbourhood to ice cream." This simple act of kindness and charity reflects the style of Peter Belluz as a community leader and as a businessman in Fort William's East End.