

Frank Charry (1888–1943)

The confectionary business of Frank Charry developed just outside the Coal Docks on Simpson Street approximately one kilometer west of Buset's grocery and was recognized as much as a meeting place as a store that offered the sale of specific Italian foods and tobacco products to its customers. Moreover, Frank Charry used his store as a place to launch a career in public service. Born in Francavilla al Mare, Province of Chieti, Abruzzo region, Italy on 5 August 1888, Francesco Cerra immigrated to Canada in 1910.¹ The following year, he was one of eight single boarders residing at 528 McLaughlin Street. He returned to Italy in 1919 to marry Annunziata Cascini² and they had two children, Rocci (b. 1922) and Dora (b. 1923). He was employed by the CPR, worked on several construction projects in and around Fort William, and briefly partnered with a Pasquale Demeo in real estate. In 1921 he was granted a license by the Ontario Board of Liquor Commissioners to operate a winery but unlike Pietro Belluz, he did not use the license to develop a business along these lines. Instead, in 1925 he and his wife opened a fruit store in rented quarters at 700 Simpson Street.³ Shortly thereafter, they moved their business across the street and opened a confectionary at 647 Simpson Street. Here it occupied a strategic location at the corner of Simpson and Rowand Streets and Charry's Corner quickly became a dynamic centre and a landmark in Fort William's East End. The store was located where McTavish Street opened on to Simpson Street and where Simpson turned north to the Fort William – Port Arthur boundary. At that corner, the Fort William Street railway stopped to pick up Coal Dock residents crossing the CPR tracks at McTavish Street. Often, passing CPR freight trains prevented pedestrian movement in and out of the Coal Docks and Charry's store became a place to wait, to meet, and to purchase tobacco products, soft drinks, candy, pastas, rice, and sundries. For a time, he became the local agent for P. Pastena and Company of Montreal and Marco Gallo cigars. As a business owner, he was mild-mannered, kind, and soft spoken and gave children a plentiful selection of candy for the five or ten cents they spent in his store.⁴ When and why he anglicized his name from Cerra to Charry is not clear and perhaps not important, but his engaging personality and his frequent



Frank Charry, 1935. Frank Charry was a City of Fort William alderman from 1933 to 1943 and President of the Societa Italiana di Benevolenza Principe di Piemonte from 1932 to 1943. In 1975, a City of Thunder Bay park (formerly East End Park) was named in his honour. (Photo courtesy City of Thunder Bay Archives, 4871)

contact with East End residents served him well as he aspired to enter the arena of local politics.

Frank Charry's public career was noteworthy not only for its longevity but also because it was identified with initiatives which directly benefited those he represented. He vied for a seat on Fort William City Council for a decade beginning in 1931. Prior to 1933 only three non-British individuals had been elected councillors – John Palleck (1869–1952), a Slovak (1911), Emilio Marino (1878–1949), an Italian (1918, 1922), and Joachim Kardinal (1889–1960), a Ukrainian (1932–1933). From 1892 to the early 1930s, the vast majority of Fort William Mayors and Councillors were Canadian or British born.⁵ That he was a businessman and President of the Società Italiana di Benevolenza Principe di Piemonte, however, were assets as he courted the support of voters. One could not find a more challenging time in which to engage in public service. He assumed his role as

a novice alderman at the height of the Great Depression and continued to seek re-election during World War II when the country of his birth was allied with Nazi Germany against Great Britain and Canada.

For local politicians during the 1930s, elections were frequent and results unpredictable. Until 1938, elections were held annually for all candidates contesting aldermanic or mayoralty positions. Beginning in 1939, however, aldermen were elected at large for two year terms with half retiring each year to seek re-election.⁶ Not unexpectedly, Charry's strongest support came from subdivisions one and two in Ward I (the Coal Docks) where the heaviest concentration of Italian immigrant voters resided. In 1931 and 1932 he finished in the bottom half of a field of five to eight candidates respectively.⁷ Although no candidate could match his popularity in the Coal Docks, his political support west of the CPR tracks was weak. How he increased his support in that part of Ward 1 is not clear but by the January 1933 election, he garnered enough votes to finish as runner-up behind the three successful candidates. When Alexander Cruickshanks, first place finisher in the ward resigned half way through the term, Frank Charry was appointed by Council and sworn in as a Fort William alderman on 13 July 1933.⁸ In four subsequent elections from 1934 to 1937, he ranked first in Ward I with the exception of 1935 when he placed second. In 1938, the first year in which aldermen were elected "at large", Charry was unsuccessful with just forty-five votes shy of securing the twelfth position on council.⁹ The following year, however, he regained his seat for a two-year term ending 31 December 1941.¹⁰ His last election in 1941 was perhaps his most difficult. Of the six successful candidates seeking office, Charry finished last and won over John Curry – a candidate sponsored by the Fort William Trades and Labour Council – by a mere fourteen votes.¹¹ It was in this election that his name was listed for the first time on the ballot as "Frank (Cerra) Charry" perhaps to remind all Italian immigrant voters in the city of his own identity as an Italian immigrant. Although the Fascist government of Benito Mussolini had declared war on France and Great Britain on 10 June 1940, there is no evidence that this had any effect on voters support for the two Italian born aldermen – Umberto (Hubert) Badanai (1895-1986)¹² and Frank Charry. Badanai resided in Ward 3 of the city which was dominated by middle and upper middle class Canadian and British residents and which had the highest voter turnout (56.6 %) of all wards in the 1941 municipal

election. Charry's narrow victory in the 1941 election may be explained by the strong support of the working classes in Ward I for a labour candidate rather than any backlash from Italy's declaration of war against Great Britain.

During his ten years as a Fort William City Councillor (1933–1943) Charry became identified with initiatives intended to assist the poor, unemployed, aged, and infirm during the economic crisis of the 1930s. As he gained the confidence and respect of his colleagues on council he was elected chair of several high profile committees.¹³ Through these committees he recommended work projects which came to fruition such as the construction in the East End of a steel bridge on May Street over the Neebing River and plank sidewalks on Pacific and Southern Avenues as cash relief measures. To help finance such projects, he supported an initiative which recommended sending a delegation to Toronto to lobby the Mitch Hepburn government for funds to finance municipal relief projects. Moreover, he moved resolutions to have council explore the feasibility of creating a children's playground in the East End¹⁴ and the construction of a facility for the accommodation and care of the city's aged and infirm apart from McKellar Hospital. On controversial issues he was content to have the people decide through plebiscites whether the Fort William Street Railway should continue service despite falling revenues or whether the Public Welfare Board should be elected by the people or appointed by council. It is difficult to estimate the extent or manner in which Charry directly assisted unemployed East End residents in securing work on municipal relief projects or in guiding them through the red tape in order that they might obtain entitlements under the stringent municipal relief system. As an alderman he was easily accessible to his constituents as he minded his store on Simpson Street which regularly provided Italian immigrant men with a place to meet and to socialize. One might suggest that his popularity at the polls was in part due to his role as a link between the down-and-out in the East End and the city's relief department during the 1930s.

The primary source of Frank Charry's popularity however, was his membership in and president of the Società Italiana di Benevolenza Principe di Piemonte. He presided over this all-male mutual benefit society from 1932 until his death in August, 1943.¹⁵ Like many fraternal organizations of its kind throughout North America its constitution stressed brotherhood, fellowship,



Frank Charry and the Societa Italiana di Benevolenza Principe di Piemonte, 1937. Seated with Charry in the front row was the Society's executive. L.-R: Romildo Bragnalo, Mike Salatino, Saturno Marchiori, — , Frank Charry, Giovanni Vaccher, — , — , Enrico Piovesana. (Photo courtesy IISLU)

mutual assistance in times of sickness and death, and loyalty to the Canadian government. As President, he formalized the responsibilities of members on the death of a brother. The funeral ritual was characterized by a procession of members from the home of the deceased to St Dominic Italian Church, by an honourary guard at the church, and by a eulogy delivered by a member at the gravesite. The family of the deceased member would receive a modest financial death benefit. In times of sickness, members provided succour to their brothers in the form of hospital visitations and a voluntary financial contribution. When members required medical treatment in Toronto or at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota the Society often provided financial assistance to offset travel and medical expenses. As Antonio Pucci correctly

points out, the Society during Frank Charry's terms as president "helped to cushion both the real and psychological stress within the Italian 'colony' during the Great Depression. The financial aid helped to create a feeling of social interdependence among Italians."

Frank Charry's most significant imprint on the Società Italiana was his insistence that members convey an image of civility and gentlemanly behavior. This objective is reminiscent of Dante's admonition: "Consider your origins: you were not made to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge."¹⁶ As Italian immigrants and as members of the Italian Society he urged all to put their best foot forward. This exemplary behavior started at regular society meetings where smoking and profane language was prohibited. Interestingly,

even though the society had obtained a license to sell beer in its basement parlour, members were not permitted to enter the upstairs hall under the influence of alcohol. A visual demonstration of this civility is to be found in a society group portrait taken in June 1937. At that moment, ninety men dressed in fine attire, posed proudly and self-assuredly around their president against the rustic backdrop of the Italian Hall on McLaughlin Street. Frank Charry was the don of Fort William's Italian community; by his personal appearance and by his public conduct he was a role model for Italian immigrant men living in Fort William's East End.

Frank Charry died at age 55 on 17 August 1943. The funeral ritual for society members which he so painstakingly insisted upon as president came into play at the end of his own life. The Society's honour guard stretched from his residence at 647 Simpson Street to St Dominic's Church and the funeral cortege of one hundred vehicles from the church to St Patrick's cemetery was one of the largest ever seen in Fort William.¹⁷ At the gravesite, Americo Zuliani remarked that Charry worked selflessly for the advancement of the Italian society and that his memory would endure for as long as the society itself. His years as an alderman were recognized when a park, formerly known as East End Park, was renamed Frank Charry Park in an official ceremony sponsored by the City of Thunder Bay on Thursday, 14 August 1975.¹⁸ As an alderman in 1935 he advocated the creation of a children's playground in the East End, so it was fitting that a city park would be named in his honour. Located in the East End on the north side of Pacific Avenue between McBain and Hargrave Streets, the park had been the home turf of the East End Athletic Association and a neighbourhood meeting place for children of all ages to play hockey, baseball, basketball, and to enjoy a wide range of activities that the swings, slides, and wading pool provided. Today, Frank Charry Park stands as a tribute to an Italian immigrant who devoted much of his life to public service to create a better quality of life for those living in a neighbourhood for which he was so intimately associated.

Notes

¹ 1911 Census, Fort William, S.D. 23, p. 12.

² *Ancestry.com*, Border Crossings from Canada to the U.S., 1895-1956. Francesco Cerra, 31, was listed as arriving at Niagara Falls, New York on 24 October 1919 en route to Italy. See obituary *DTJ*, 18 August 1943 where his marriage on 13 December 1919 is given notice. St Dominic Parish, M8.12, *BR*, 16 August 1922.

³ *TBA* 460, *FWAR*, 30 September 1925, p. 33.

⁴ *IISLU*, Stan Dromisky interview with author, tape recording, 9 December 2009.

⁵ See Brent Scollie, *Thunder Bay Mayors & Councillors*, pp. 248-249.

⁶ *TBA* 5401, Record of Elections, 4 January 1937. In three plebiscites relating to the conduct of municipal elections, voters narrowly approved the abolition of the ward system (2788 to 2753) and the election of alderman for two-year terms – one-half retiring each year (2878 to 2608)

⁷ *TBA* 5401, Record of Elections, 1931, 1932.

⁸ *TBA* 32, Fort William City Council Minutes, 8 August 1933; See also Brent Scollie, *Thunder Bay Mayors & Councillors*, 1873-1945, p. 37; *DTJ*, 12 and 13 July 1933, p. 1, p. 3.

⁹ *TBA* 5401, City of Fort William Record of Elections, 5 December 1938.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4 December 1939.

¹¹ *DTJ*, 2 December 1941, p. 7. Umberto (Bert) Badanai placed fifth with 1700 votes and Frank Charry sixth with 1459 votes.

¹² Umberto (Hubert) Badanai was born in the northern Italian town of Azzano Decimo on 11 January 1895 and was a Fort William councilor from 1940 to 1948 and mayor 1949-1952, 1955-1958 and then Member of Parliament for Fort William, 1958-1972.

¹³ *TBA* 35, FW Council Minutes, 13 January 1936. Charry had been a member of the License and Relief Committee since 1934 and in 1936 he was elected its chair. The following year he became chair of the Fire, Water, and Light Committee and in 1938 he was elected chair of Council's Works Committee.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 April 1935, p. 24; 11 November 1937.

¹⁵ For a description of Francesco Cerra's role as president of the Società Italiana see Antonio Pucci, "The Italian

Community in Fort William's East End", pp. 232-254.

¹⁶ "Considerate la vostra semenza; fatti non foste a viver come bruti, ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza." *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, I, Inferno, Canto 26*, 1, 118, Edited and Translated by Robert M. Durling, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 399.

¹⁷ *DTJ*, 18 August 1943; Stan Dromisky interview, 9 December 2009.

¹⁸ *TBA* 56, Parks and Recreation Records, Marlene Stirrett, "Frank Charry Park", 30 August 1983.

from Roy Piovesana, *Italians of Fort William's East End, 1907–1969*. Thunder Bay: Institute of Italian Studies–Lakehead University, 2011. pp. 81-88.