

## I'M NOT ONLY AN ATTORNEY, I'M A FOURTH-GENERATION "PRODUCE PEDDLER"

**M**y family has been a part of the produce industry for four generations. These familial ties continue to this day and are my proud heritage. My family is at the core of my understanding and knowledge of the produce in-



*Pietro DeLisi and Rosaria (Badali) DeLisi  
(Grandpa Tony's Parents)  
Termini Imerese, Sicily*

dustry and I am extremely gratified by this legacy and the contributions my family has made for more than 100 years. I, myself, am the fourth generation. Before becoming a lawyer and hanging my shingle, I worked my entire early life in the family produce business learning firsthand, and from the ground up. For those of you who also have a family saga and can relate, and for those of you who are hardworking members of this vital industry, this is an abbreviated history of my family's personal journey.

This story, and inevitably mine, is of two Sicilian families, the DeLisis and Piazzas, who immigrated from Termini Imerese, Sicily, to Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota with an entrepreneurial spirit, willing to face the hard work, risks, rewards and failures of starting their own businesses to provide for their families and search for the American dream.

Among the first of my mother's ancestral relatives to arrive in America was her

maternal grandfather, Agostino Piazza Palotta, who migrated to America, with several great-uncles, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, seeking their fortune and a better life. As with so many Sicilian immigrants, they brought with them an intrinsic knowledge of growing and peddling produce. Agostino eventually settled in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and several of my mother's great-uncles established themselves similarly in Chicago. Agostino (who dropped the additional surname of Palotto during immigration) continued to grow vegetables here, his gardens also including a small vineyard, and he is reported to have been a prolific winemaker. At that time, the prevailing means of marketing fruits and vegetables was to peddle the produce by horse-drawn wagon through the quaint Victorian neighborhoods of Minneapolis, and in this way, my great grandfather established his clientele and helped set the family on its future path through time. After creating a life for himself, Agostino sent for his wife, Rosaria Badali, and their seven-year-old son, Leonardo. Agostino was shocked to find that his seven-year-old son was smoking cigarettes and exhibiting the brash self reliance and colorful language that would later make him a legend. My grandmother, Maria "Mary" Piazza was their first child born here in the United States and, over time, three more children were born to them.

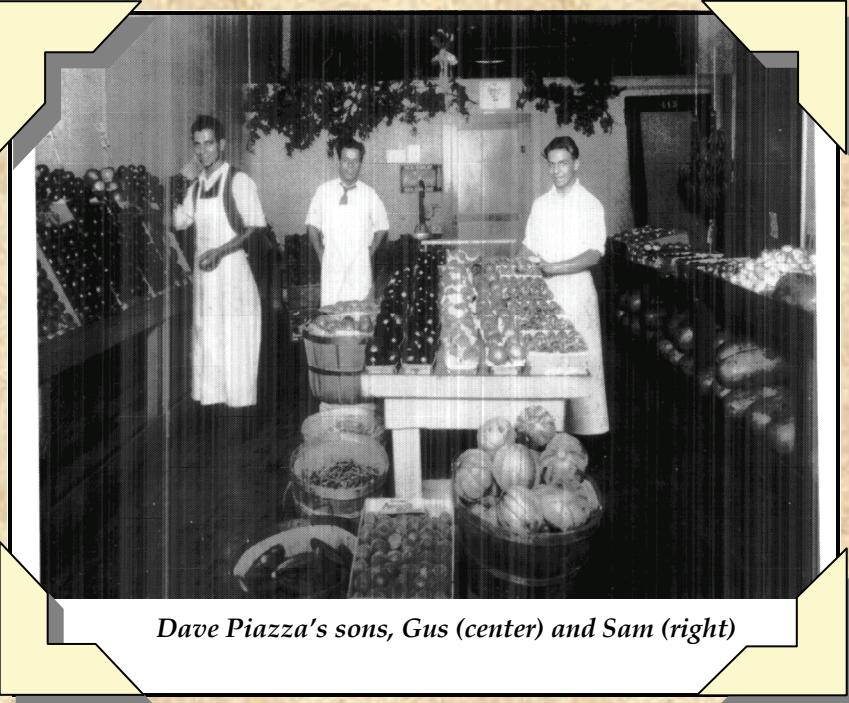


*Leonardo "Dave" Piazza's L. Piazza & Co.*

As was so often the custom in those days, Leonardo Americanized his Italian first name and, imitating his cousin in Chicago of the same name, adopted the nickname "Dave." Dave, my great uncle, continued in the entrepreneurial spirit, and after marrying a Termini, Italy immigrant, Provvidenza "Provie" Badali, whom he had met in Winnipeg, Canada, while working on the railroad between Minneapolis and Winnipeg, embarked on a number of food related businesses. His most enduring company was the well-known Minneapolis landmark restaurant, Café di Napoli, and for the next sixty years it remained family owned and run by his sons and grandchildren.

Dave was a forward thinker, often ahead of his time, and started many other businesses including several fruit and vegetable retail stores, along with the D.L. Piazza Company, a produce brokerage business, which brought some of the first Chilean fruit into the United States. Dave's sons, Gus, Sam and Richard, followed their father into the produce businesses. Considering my chosen profession, I am especially proud that during those days, my Great Uncle Dave also acted as his own attorney in many PACA reparation cases, setting numerous precedents that are still used today.

My maternal grandfather, Antonio "Tony" DeLisi, also immigrated from Termini Imerese, Sicily. At the age of 17, he settled in Winnipeg, Canada, where he worked for relatives who owned the historic Marlborough Hotel. Grandpa Tony, who was the first



*Dave Piazza's sons, Gus (center) and Sam (right)*

cousin of Dave's wife Provie, eventually migrated south, relocating in Minneapolis, where he went to work for one of Dave's produce stores. Grandpa Tony soon married Dave's sister, Mary Piazza. Tony went on to establish several retail and wholesale produce companies with Dave Piazza, Charlie Fletch and, Tony's brother Gus DeLisi, the most prominent of which was DeLisi Fruit Company, in partnership with his brother, Gus. Tony's son, Clifford, and Gus's son, Joe, later joined their fathers in the business.



*Grandpa Tony while at the historic Marlborough Hotel in Winnipeg, Canada*

The late 1950's and early 1960's saw a dispersion of the Piazza and DeLisi produce businesses. D.L Piazza Company closed its doors, followed by Dave's son, Richard, opening a new brokerage company, Minnesota Produce. Richard was eventually succeeded by his son, Paul, who continued to forge ahead as times, methods of business, and relationships in the industry changed over the company's 50-year history.



*Grandpa Tony DeLisi  
(Front row, 3rd from left)*

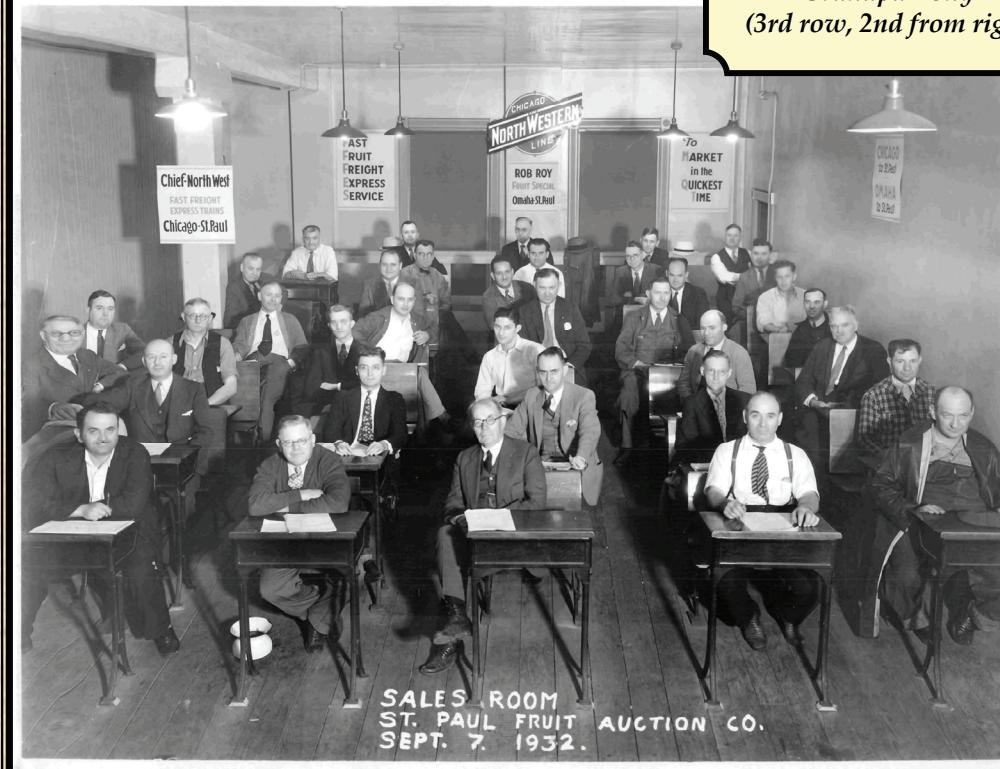


ST PAUL AND MINNEAPOLIS  
DELEGATION

OCT 13 1928

PHOTO BY  
Hillis Studio

*Grandpa Tony  
(3rd row, 2nd from right)*



CHICAGO  
NORTH WESTERN  
LINE  
ROB ROY  
Fruit Special  
Omaha St. Paul  
To MARKET in the  
QUICKEST TIME  
CHICAGO  
St. Paul  
To MARKET in the  
QUICKEST TIME  
SALES ROOM  
ST. PAUL FRUIT AUCTION CO.  
SEPT. 7 1932.

Dave's son, Salvador "Sammy" Piazza, headed west to California to continue the family's produce legacy. He too, became a legend in the industry, working for Arena Produce, Sun Treat and Sun Pacific Shippers, among others, during his long and distinguished produce sales career. I had the privilege of buying California oranges from Sammy when I was first on the sales desk of my parents' produce company. He taught me the "old-school" methods of the produce business. If there was a "Produce Sales Hall of Fame," Sammy would be one of the first inductees. Sammy's son, Michael, is an attorney in California and worked for our firm for several years.

Changes were also occurring in the late 50's and early 60's in the DeLisi family businesses. My father, the more well-known and legendary Larry Meuers, married Tony's youngest daughter, Virginia. Coming from German stock with a background in the farming and dairy business, he had no experience with produce or the Sicilian entrepreneurship. He soon found himself caught up in the innovative spirit and colorful stories told by Dave Piazza. My dad eventually joined my grandfather at DeLisi Fruit Company, beginning his education in the produce industry.



*Larry, Sr. and Virginia Meuers  
PMA Fresh Summit, October 2009*

Shortly thereafter, Gus DeLisi's son, Joe, left the family business and started his own company, Joe DeLisi Fruit Company. His father, Gus, also eventually joined him in the new business. Joe's son,

Dan, and his daughter Deborah's husband, Jim Hannigan, later joined the business, as well. Joe DeLisi Fruit Company closed its doors in the late 1970's. Dan DeLisi went on to work for several



*Dad and Brother Dan  
PMA Fresh Summit, October 2009*

produce companies in the Upper Midwest. Deborah (DeLisi) and Jim Hannigan founded J&J Distributing Co. in St. Paul, Minnesota, which has continued in operation as a full service wholesale distributor for all organic and conventional fruits and vegetables.

Now, to get back to my immediate family story, my dad was a quick study and immediately began to thrive in the produce industry. He grew the family business and was handling distribution to the major grocery chains and independents stores throughout Minnesota. Some of my earliest memories were stopping by the warehouse on Saturdays, and Sundays after church, to check on the banana rooms. Due to changing market conditions and the loss of one of its major chain-store accounts, the company closed in the late 1960's. My uncle, Clifford DeLisi, went on to work as a produce buyer for Sysco Corporation in Minneapolis.

Following established family tradition, my mother and father soon started their own produce packag-

*Grandpa Tony behind the wheel*



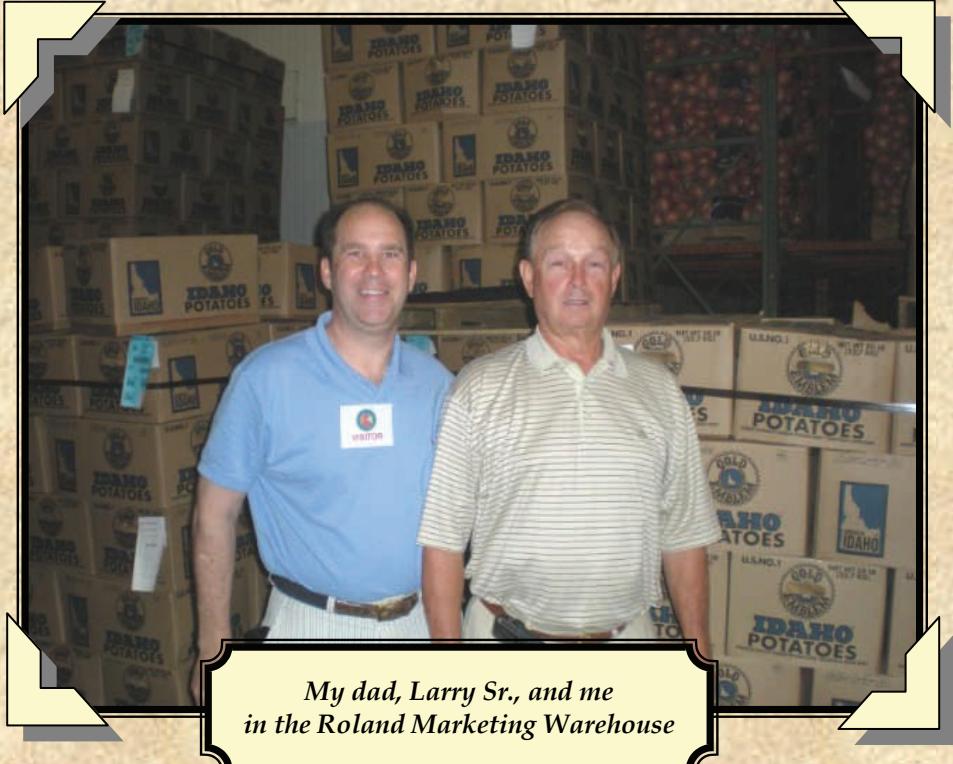
Sold by University Chevrolet Co.

N.W. Photo.  
#3983



*Great Grandmother Rosaria  
and  
Great Grandfather Agostino Piazza Polatta*

*JENE GARRETT  
STUDIO*



*My dad, Larry Sr., and me  
in the Roland Marketing Warehouse*

ing and distribution company, Metro Packaging Corporation, in the early 1970's. They later purchased Roland Marketing, Inc., a fledgling produce sales company. My father was an innovator and implemented many business practices that are taken for granted today. He learned a great deal while working for my grandfather's company and decided to move away from the wholesale produce business, selling produce as a commodity based on price. He focused on supplying chain stores and wholesale distributors with programs and services that would add value by helping to run more efficient and profitable produce departments. He also focused on logistics by consolidating loads at shipping point to save the customer on freight charges, reduce their number of deliveries and increase their inventory turns. Service was emphasized to the point that at one time all of the sales personnel drove station wagons so they could make a "special delivery" any time one of a customer's stores was out of product. Roland Marketing is currently run by my mother, father, and brother, Dan, and has recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. They package, sell and ship potatoes, onions, apples, grapes, raisins and other commodities throughout the United States.

As I've mentioned to some you, I grew up working in my family's produce of company. I worked on the packaging line, swept floors, and drove forklift at 12 years old. My favorite job was driving the 18 wheel tractor trailers delivering pro-

duce. After college, I worked in the office where I handled sales and managed operations for 5 years. During that time, I also attended law school in the evenings at William Mitchell College of Law. Having knowledge of the law and the produce industry was very beneficial to my family's company, and I was constantly asked for legal advice from suppliers and customers. In the tradition of the Piazza and DeLisi entrepreneurial spirit, in 1989 I established Meuers Law Firm, intending then, and continuing for more than 23 years now, to deliver legal services to the produce industry, based upon my extensive insider knowledge.

In truth, my family heritage stretches far beyond these four generations and I've been inspired by their pioneer spirit, dedication, and hard work. It was a motivating factor in my drive to own my own business. I appreciate the education my parents gave me as I grew up in the produce business, am thankful to them for maintaining family relationships, and for keeping these stories alive for me. I'm proud of the long line of entrepreneurs that forged the way before me, and in the end, I'm proud to be of service to the produce industry that has supported my extended family for over one hundred years.

