Pittsburghers love the sizzle and sparkle of skyrocketing fireworks. Few know, however, that Western Pennsylvania has historically been a center of the American fireworks industry. At the turn of the 20th century, the Lawrence County community of New Castle became home to thousands of Italian immigrants in search of economic opportunity, several of whom brought with them experience in fireworks design and manufacture. Relying on strong bonds of family and community, Italian immigrants established a bustling new business that earned New Castle the nickname “Fireworks Capital of America.” Behind the booms and bangs of every local fireworks bonanza lies an equally explosive tale of hard work, family unity, and immigrant success.

Between 1880 and 1924, Italian immigrants settled in Western Pennsylvania by the thousands. Pushed from their native country by economic, political, and social upheaval, and drawn to the region by the prospects of industrial work, Italian immigrants flocked to urban areas like Pittsburgh and Johnstown, as well as coal patches and milltowns in Westmoreland, Washington, and Fayette counties. By 1920, Lawrence County had an Italian-born population of 5,570 — fifth among Western Pennsylvania counties. Although scattered through the county, most lived on New Castle’s South Side, in Mahoningtown just outside the city, or in the small quarrying community of Hillsville in the western reaches of the county near the Ohio border.

While most found work as unskilled laborers, some Italian immigrants in New Castle brought with them trades or skills. According to the New Castle City Directory of 1916, Italian immigrants living in the city worked as bakers, shoe repairmen, and tailors while others operated small, family-owned grocery stores. Others brought a more specialized skill—fireworks craftsmanship.

Fireworks originated in China, and arrived in the western world in the 13th century. Over the next six centuries, Italy emerged as the European leader of the fireworks industry. Fireworks craftsmen opened workshops in cities throughout the Italian peninsula and hosted grand displays for royal pageants, military victory celebrations, and other special events. Only German fireworks craftsmen came close to matching the skill and innovation of Italian pyrotechnicians.

As early as the 1830s, Pittsburgh newspapers documented the use of firecrackers and other small explosives to publicly celebrate holidays, but it wasn’t until the arrival of Italian
immigrants that the region became a center of America’s fireworks industry.

Leopoldo Fazzoni was one of the first immigrants to bring Italian fireworks traditions to Western Pennsylvania. After working in an Italian fireworks factory, Fazzoni immigrated to New Castle in 1886 and, like many of his fellow immigrants, found a job in a tin mill. By 1897, he had saved enough money to open his own fireworks manufacturing company. Fazzoni designed and manufactured fireworks in the tradition of the Old Country, selling his products to Italians and non-Italians alike and earning a reputation throughout the region for his masterful fireworks displays.

Another pioneer of the New Castle fireworks industry was Antonio Zambelli. Born in Caserta, near Naples, Zambelli settled in New Castle in 1893 because the climate and landscape reminded him of his home in southern Italy. His only possessions were the clothes on his back and a small notebook containing the family’s secret fireworks formulas, known in the business as “recipes.” Without financial means to open a fireworks company, Zambelli instead secured a job as a mill worker. Still, the young immigrant earned extra income by manufacturing shells in his home and choreographing fireworks displays for Italian immigrants residing in and around New Castle. From these modest beginnings, Antonio Zambelli and his descendants have built the operation into the country’s largest fireworks manufacturer: Zambelli Fireworks Internationale.

Peer and kinship networks were instrumental in the growth of the New Castle fireworks industry. Leopoldo Fazzoni commonly hired other Italian immigrants to work in his fireworks company, providing a welcome alternative to mill or quarry work. Paul Rozzi, Jacob Conti, and Constantino Vitale, important personalities in New Castle’s fireworks history, all worked in Fazzoni’s business prior to founding fireworks companies of their own. Once they had their own businesses, all three frequently employed immigrants.

Many of the Italian-owned fireworks companies in New Castle were formed as partnerships between blood relatives. Leopoldo Fazzoni brought several of his siblings into the family business and renamed the company Fazzoni Brothers Fireworks
Manufacturing Company. In 1926, Constantino Vitale formed a partnership with his sons in order to open Vitale Fireworks Manufacturing Company, the second-largest fireworks company in New Castle at the time. By utilizing relationships with both their family members and fellow countrymen, Italian immigrants succeeded in building a prosperous new industry in New Castle. By 1928, five different fireworks companies operated in the city. All were Italian owned.

Religion also contributed to the success of New Castle’s fireworks companies. In Western Pennsylvania, Italian immigrants maintained the Old World practice of holding religious festivals, or feste, in honor of Catholic saints and biblical figures. These annual pageants began with processions in which religious banners and statues were carried through the streets for all to admire and worship, ending with fireworks spectaculars. Hundreds of these religious festivals took place in Western Pennsylvania each year, giving Italian fireworks companies a ready market. Soon, Italian pyrotechnicians began marketing their fireworks to non-Italians in the region for holidays such as the Fourth of July and Christmas, county fairs, building dedication ceremonies, and sporting events.

Although New Castle became the center of the Italian-American fireworks industry, immigrants from Italy established similar businesses elsewhere. In the late 1800s, members of the Grucci family opened a fireworks factory on Long Island; Legion Fireworks and Alonzo Fireworks also opened in New York; and the American Fireworks Company was founded by Vincenzo Sorgi in Hudson, Ohio. Closer to home, the DeBlasio family founded the Keystone Fireworks Company in Fayette County in 1934; one of its first regular commissions was the annual Our Lady of Mount Carmel festival in Crabtree, Pa.

The history of fireworks in New Castle, then, reveals much about the collective experiences of Italian immigrants living in Western Pennsylvania. First, the business acumen demonstrated by New Castle’s pyrotechnicians dispels the common misconception that all Italian immigrants were unskilled laborers; many became capable businessmen and experienced substantial upward economic mobility. Furthermore, the role of peer and kinship networks in the growth of New Castle's fireworks companies reveals the tightly-knit, communal nature of Western Pennsylvania’s Italian communities.

Finally, the growth and development of Western Pennsylvania’s fireworks industry illustrates the gradual process of immigrant assimilation. In the early years, Italian immigrants manufactured fireworks in order to help their countrymen carry on Old World religious pageants and festivals, thereby preserving important elements of the Italian culture. In time, however, fireworks manufacturers increasingly marketed their goods and services to distinctly American holidays and pastimes.

Italian Americans continue to dominate the fireworks industry. Three companies that trace their roots to New Castle are among the largest and most respected fireworks companies in the world. Zambelli Fireworks Internationale, founded by Antonio Zambelli, and Pyrotecnico, the present name for the company operated by the Vitale family, still have their corporate headquarters in New Castle. Rozzi’s Famous Fireworks, though it now operates in Loveland, Ohio, near Cincinnati, was founded in New Castle. Kinship networks, important to the founding of these businesses, have proven instrumental in their continued success. Handed down from one generation to the next, the companies have become unique family traditions where close relationships between brothers and sisters, fathers and sons, grandparents and grandchildren are the key ingredient in the recipe for success.
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