

## The Xavier Odjick Story

On September 12, 1918, the staff officers of the Canadian 4th Infantry Division compiled the division's casualty lists suffered in the fighting at the Hindenburg Line. Included were the complete casualty lists for the 75th Canadian Infantry Battalion. The divisional casualty lists were forwarded by cable to the War Department in Ottawa. From Ottawa, the soldiers' next of kin were notified by telegram. One of these telegrams was forwarded to the Indian Agent at Maniwaki. On September 17, 1918, the Indian Agent and the Oblate priest, Father Fafard, came to the door of Xavier Odjick's home. They were bearing the telegram informing Xavier that his last surviving son, Joseph, had been killed in action on September 2, 1918. Xavier was fifty-four years old then and already his health was failing even before he opened the door to the devastating news. Xavier Odjick was afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis, a crippling, degenerative disease of the joints, and he was finding it increasingly difficult to work. In those days, if a man didn't work, he didn't eat. That's why Joseph was sending home fifteen dollars of his monthly army pay to Xavier. Joseph's war had ended on September 2, 1918, but Xavier's battle with the Indian Agent was about to begin.

A letter from J.D. McLean, assistant Deputy and Secretary of the Department of Indian Affairs, to Indian Agent Ernest Gauthier at Maniwaki:

*April 3rd, 1919.*

*Sir,*

*Representations have been made to the Department that the father of the late Pte. Joseph Otjick is unable to earn his own living. The Department has been further advised that before enlisting, his son was practically his sole Support.*

*Will you be kind enough to let me know if the father received separation allowance and assigned pay? You might also report as to the father's physical condition, the amount he is able to earn and let me have a Doctor's certificate in case you would recommend application being made for pension.*

A letter from J.D. McLean of the Department of Affairs to the Canadian military authorities in

*April 4th, 1919.*

*Dear Sir,*

*Pte. Joseph Otjick, 135th Battalion, died Overseas and as his father is making application for pension will you be kind enough to advise me whether separation allowance or assigned pay was granted in this case.*

A letter from Agent Gauthier at Maniwaki in reply to J.D. McLean of the Department of Indian Affairs, dated April 9, 1919:

*Sir,*

*In reply to your letter of the 3'd, Instant, (no number quoted) enquiring about Xavier Otjick, father of late Joseph Otjick, killed at the Front, I beg to say that I have consulted the Medical Officer on this case and we both agree that the representations made to the Department are not correct, the boy was away for some time before enlisting and I do not think he ever supported his father, who is a man of about 50 or 55 years of age and of healthy appearance, I am almost certain that Xavier Otjick did not receive any assign pay or separation allowance.*

*I am not justified in recommending an application for a pension at present, but in order to do full justice to this man, I will try and ascertain if he got any assign pay from his son, also get him examined by the Medical Officer at the first opportunity.*

Xavier had been receiving fifteen dollars of his son's monthly pay from October 1, 1916, to September 30, 1918, the date on which Joseph Odjick's monthly pay assignment was terminated four weeks after his death in France. Agent Gauthier should have known this, because the alay forwarded the monthly assigned payments from the Algonquin soldiers overseas to the Department of Indian Affairs, at which point the cheques were sent to the Indian Agents posted at the various reserves and Indian settlements for distribution to the intended families. It would appear that Agent Gauthier's record-keeping concerning monthly pay assignments to the Algonquin beneficiaries was not up to par, since he could not recall if he ever distributed Joseph's monthly cheques to Xavier Odjick. Xavier wanted to know if he was entitled to Joseph's military pension. Agent Gauthier did not feel that Xavier was entitled to any such benefits, as seen in the following letter from the Indian Agent's Office at Maniwaki to J.D. McLean of the Department of Indian Affairs, dated April 17, 1919:

*Sir,*

*In further reference to your letter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> instant and my reply of the 9th, concerning Xavier Otjick, I beg to state that Otjick has informed me that he received assign pay from his son to the amount of \$15.00 monthly during all the time he as in the army until [sic] his death, but that his son had not given him anything from the time he left until [sic] he enlisted.*

*The Medical Officer has examined Xavier Otjick and he reports him in perfect health.*

On July 28, 1919, J.D. McLean informed Agent Gauthier by letter that the remaining monies in Joseph Odjick's pay account would be forwarded to Maniwaki for distribution to Xavier Odjick. It was a credit note for seventy-five dollars and ten cents. Enclosed with the monies were Joseph's surviving personal effects and a number of photographs that Joseph collected while he was in France. The portrait included with Joseph's profile in the previous chapter was one of

these photos. We know this because of the two "C75" lapel pins shown on the collars of Joseph's uniform. This picture was taken in France during one of the times the 75th Battalion was out of the front lines and resting in the rear areas, usually near French towns, where Canadian soldiers frequently sought out French photographers to take their portraits. After the letter of July 29, 1919, the paper trail is interrupted until April 8, 1921, when J.D. McLean writes to the Board of Pension Commissioners after being paid a visit in Ottawa by Xavier Odjick. The letter reads:

*Dear Sirs,*

*I wish to advise you that Xavier Odjick called at the Department the other day and explained that his son, Joseph Odjick, No. 805,655, 75th Construction Battalion, was killed at Arras in September, 1918, File H.Q. 649-0-2521. Xavier explains that his son assigned him \$15.00 per month and states, further, that his son was his only means of support.*

*Xavier is pretty badly crippled with rheumatism and is unable to do much, if any work. He is making application for pension and I shall be very glad, indeed, if you will take the case under consideration. Any further information may be obtained from Mr. E.S. Gauthier at Maniwaki, Que.*

It is obvious from this letter that J.D. McLean of Indian Affairs made a fairly reasonable, if not accurate, assessment of Xavier Odjick's physical condition. Rheumatoid arthritis is a merciless disease that destroys the cartilage and soft tissues of the joints, especially the joints of the fingers and hands, leaving the hands visibly deformed.

The Board of Pension Commissioners replied to J.D. McLean on April 19, 1921, acknowledging that they received McLean's letter and informed him that they communicated with Agent Gauthier at Maniwaki concerning Xavier Odjick's request for Joseph's pension. When they received Agent Gauthier's report a month later, they forwarded a letter to J.D. McLean dated May 28, 1921:

*J. Odjick, #805655*

*Dear Sir,*

*1. With reference to your communication of April 8111, regarding an award of pension on behalf of the marginally noted, I beg to advise that Mr Odjick is not entitled to pension in respect of his deceased son at the present time as Medical Certificate accompanying his Application [sic] does not show that he is incapacitated either mentally or physically from providing for his own maintenance.*

*2. In the event of his becoming disabled at some future date the Board, upon receipt of notification to that effect, will be glad to reconsider his claim.*

J.D. McLean, to his credit, doubted the above report, as indicated in his reply to the Board of Pension Commissioners dated June 1, 1921:

Dear Sir,

*With reference to your letter of the 28th ultime, regarding pension on behalf of Pte. J. Odjick, No. 805655, your fyle [sic] No. 87011, I wish to state that I think this claim is a just one and I would ask you to please have the man reexamined.*

The Board of Pension Commissioners replied to J.D. McLean's letter on June 16, 1921:

Dear Sir:

*I beg to acknowledge receipt of your communication of the 1st, instant, regarding the marginally noted and in reply would inform you that this man was medically examined on April 27th. last [sic] such examination showed that he was not entirely incapacitated but able to earn considerable. The Board accordingly ruled that he was not entitled to pension at the present time.*

This letter admitted that Xavier was, indeed, incapacitated, but not entirely. This was the examination performed by a Medical doctor at Maniwaki under Agent Gauthier's discretion. The Board of Pension Commissioners had to make a ruling based upon a somewhat ambiguous recommendation as, *not entirely incapacitated but able to earn considerable*. J.D. McLean advised Agent Gauthier at Maniwaki to inform Xavier Odjick of the ruling. Nothing is heard from Xavier Odjick until nine years later. He was sixty-six years old at this point. Somewhere in those intervening years, A.F. MacKenzie replaced J.D. McLean as the assistant Deputy and Secretary of the Department of Indian Affairs. MacKenzie's letter to the Board of Pension Commissioners dated October 2, 1930, reads:

Dear Sir,

*I beg to draw to your attention the case of Xavier Odjick, father of the late Private Joseph Odjick, No.905655 [sic]. We have had some correspondence with you previously, your file No. BPC. 87911.*

*I may say that Mr. Odjick is now quite unable to earn his own living and a request has been made that he be granted a pension.*

*Would you be good enough to give this matter your earliest convenient attention and advise the Department as to what action is being taken.*

On November 18, 1930, the Board of Pension Commissioners replied to MacKenzie's letter:

*805655, Joseph Odjick*

*Dear Sir,*

*With reference to the Board's letter of the 9<sup>th</sup> ultimo, relative to the claim for pension on behalf of the father of the marginally deceased soldier, I am directed to inform you that, after further consideration of the case, the Board has ruled that pension shall be paid to Mr. Odjick in his present circumstances at the rate of \$15.00 a month with effect from the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1930 and he has been so advised."*

Finally, someone on the Board of Pension Commissioners developed a change of heart towards the plight of Xavier Odjick. A little bit of research on their part would have revealed that Xavier lost his wife and son in 1899. Joseph was all that he had left from his wife. Xavier could have stopped Joseph from going to war, all he had to do was inform the War Department that Joseph was the last of his family line. The War Department would have refused Joseph's enlistment based on this fact alone. Xavier had the right as a parent to do so and the War Department was obligated to respect this. Agent Gauthier was paid from the Algonquin Band funds a comfortable annual salary of one-thousand four hundred and forty dollars, or one hundred and twenty dollars a month, excluding travel expenses; yet he did not consider Xavier Odjick deserving of a meager pension and he resisted him as long as possible. Xavier Odjick lived on this monthly pension of fifteen dollars until his death thirty months later on April 23, 1933. He was dying of rheumatoid arthritis when he finally won his case, but it had only cost the government four hundred and fifty dollars to maintain him.

175 National Archives of Canada, RG10, Volume 6782, Reel C-8522, File 452-317 (Indian Affairs: Maniwaki Agency — The Late Private Joseph Odjick's Separation Allowance and Pension). All the correspondence featured here can be found in this RG10 file.

**Source** : Traduit de McGregor, Stephen, *Since Time Immemorial : «Our Story»*. *The Story of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinàbeg*, Kitigan Zibi Education Council, Kitigan Zibi, 2004, p. 244 à 247. With the permission du Kitigan Zibi Education Council.