

# TOBIQUE FIRST NATION: SISTERS OF CHARITY AND THE JOHNVILLE PICNIC

BY ANDY NICHOLAS, Elder

One would wonder how there could be a connection between Tobique First Nation and the Johnville picnic. The common ingredients are the Maliseet Braves, Sisters of Charity, Johnville picnic, good food, mass, baseball game and dance. All of these suggest a good time for one and all.

The Tobique First Nation Sisters of Charity Convent/Hospital/Drop-in Centre was 50 or 60 yards of centerfield home baseball field of Maliseet Braves. The Sisters, and the students, had produced the uniforms for the baseball team. Part of the curriculum for our school besides reading, writing and all the regular subjects, the same as for any other provincial school, were weaving (with large looms), knitting, playing piano and learning how to dance. I always had a hard time for my dancing partner. I am a left-hander, but also had two left and uncooperative feet. But that's another story.

The Sisters watched every baseball game with passions and dedication. The game started about 2 p.m., after mass and lunch every Sunday.

The Sisters knew all the players because they either had treated them in the hospital or had taught them in school. The Sisters watched from their spacious veranda facing centerfield. They thoroughly liked watching our baseball games. After the game was over, they shared their ideas about certain plays, strategies (or lack of them) and gave their "arm-chair" ideas about changes that needed to be worked on.

Just prior to most of the games, there was this pre-game, more or less spontaneous but predictable, warm-up. It was kind of really well-thought out or a bumbling incident. The jury is still out on that. The main and only role for this pre-game exhibition was a real community character. This actor could be

perfectly sober or he might have had a couple of drinks. It really didn't matter because the exhibition turned out the same from the Sunday before.

It started off kind of innocent. A man walks out to the pitcher's mound. He is dressed plainly. He does not wear the Maliseet Braves' uniform. No baseball glove. He doesn't even have a baseball. When he gets to the pitcher's mound, he stares at home plate for a few minutes, looks out at the fans and smiles. Then he has a very serious look on his face looking towards home plate. His game is on!

He looks to an imaginary catcher waiting for the signal. Sometimes he shakes it off. But when he gets the right one, his wind-up is a sight to behold. He's all arms and legs. He has the mightiest wind-up you have ever seen. What is not predictable is what he pitches. It might be a drop, straight-from-the-heels-sidewinder, submarine pitch or the fastest pitch you never saw. This might sound crazy, but everybody is watching him. They are wondering what he's going to do next.

Now, he does this every week for the past 10 Sundays, but you just never know his strategy. It just clicks in his character's mind what's going to happen. It also depended what the imaginary umpire calls. If it's a bad call, the pitcher throws his imaginary hat on the ground and starts jumping on it. He stomps until he gets over his frustration at the ump. He has hollered at the ump several references about his eyesight or lack of it; could be something about the question of the ump's father, and the ump's lack of knowledge about First Nation baseball rules or protocol.

Now, the real umpire is on the sidelines getting ready for the real baseball game. He is also interested in what this character is doing and saying, especially the part of hollering unflattering remarks about the ump.

The other thing that may have happened is that the imaginary batter has hit the imaginary ball. When that happened, there was heightened excitement from the crowd and the real ump. The pitcher would make a loud whack noise like the bat making tremendous contact. Suddenly, a neighbour's dog, Kreuger, would take off from home plate and proceed to run all the bases. A home run! Amazing! The dog hits the ninth inning game-winner! Even the pitcher is clapping and is very happy. Kreuger has saved the home team for another Sunday. Kreuger sometimes decides to do something unpredictable too. He'll run towards third base and runs the bases backwards. It was a sight to behold indeed and a sort of humble adoration from the fans and the real ump. By now, even the Sisters of Charity are on their feet, clapping and hollering.

As for Nick Nicholas, he is some kind of proud of his dog, Kreuger.

The Tobique Sisters of Charity call the Johnville Sisters of Charity and give them an inning-by-inning summary and the exciting pre-game exhibition. The Sisters give five stars for the whole event.

There are always variables for the Tobique games. The pitcher might have fallen to the ground, backwards or forward. The batter might have gotten hit or Kreuger decided it was lunch time and went home or stolen someone's hot dog. Never a dull moment or suspense in the pre-game ritual.

During one of the exchanges between the two community Sisters of Charity, there must have been the suggestion that a friendly game should be arranged by the nuns. The game between the Maliseet Braves and the Juniper Lumberjacks would be a fantastic draw for the picnic. Everyone from Knowlesville, Bath, Bristol, Hartland and Beechwood, and all the surrounding rural area would come for this historical baseball battle and occasion.

So it came to pass. I mean even Hugh John Flemming himself, the Bishop from Saint John, and the Anglican priest from Wicklow attended this crowd-

gathering event. The good food, more or less, added to the crowd's enthusiasm. Of course, Father Sam Côté, from Tobique First Nation, came to bless everything and everybody.

The logistics of taking Tobique fans to the game took place in a talking circle. Participants were the Sisters, Father Sam, some players, Fred Lachance (the important transporter), and, of course, the Chief. Who would go, who must go and some rough sense of strategy.

Now, on Tobique First Nation, at that time, there were only two cars. Father Sam had a great bit Packard. This could hold the Mother Superior and the cheering section nuns. Louie Sappier had the first Chevy that was ever built and could fit his family. The rest of us packed Fred Lachance's International potato truck. Sixty of us. Players and their families, girlfriends, wives and, for sure, the local official musician, harmonica-playing Alexie Saulis, a tremendous mouth organ artist who actually danced to his own music. There could be Turkey in the Straw or Molly lo-law, different music for different moods and circumstances. It gave a whole new meaning to the seventh stretch.

When the Maliseet Braves, their fans and Fred Lachance finally did make it to Johnville, it was a sight to behold. Everyone just stared at each other. The thought process, on all sides, went something like this. That's what First Nations looked like. Definitely different. That's what farmers, country folks looked like. Kind of like bomoos is the First Nation description. Kind of funny looks from the Bristol boys. About 60 First Nation entourage got off the truck and everyone surveyed each other. Both Sisters of Charity from the respective communities made the introductions and designations, roles or responsibilities.

My good buddy Sandy Paul and I just wanted to see the ball field, the pretty Johnville blond girls and get ready for the pre-game exhibition. I acted as Kreuger. Sandy had the starring role. Everything went more or less according to

plan and quite eventful for the local folks, and, of course, Hugh John Flemming who owned the Juniper lumber mill.

I still can't remember who won the game and, in one sense, it didn't matter. It was the fun of the game, the hollering from the fans and a rousing social gathering for one and all. The one thing I do recall was the fantastic supper we had after the game. One of those pretty Johnville blond girls sang a beautiful hymn. Alexie played the Mouth of the Tobique and danced Dotoowasis. A crowd pleaser.

Sandy Paul was supposed to be with us but he was too busy talking to one of the pretty Bath blond girls (he later would refer to her as a Monquart girl).

Most certainly, like all the other baseball games we played that summer, it was memorable and a lot of fun. Percy Lafrance, with his mighty International truck, took us everywhere of course. Alexie always came along as the musical cheering section. We played the Grand Falls Cataracts, teams from Edmundston, Rivière Bleue, Québec, Woodstock, Fort Fairfield, etc. Every town or village that had a baseball diamond, we went to play. Never a dull moment. Never a dull game. Always exciting and a crowd pleaser. We had our harmonica player and our coach, none other than Father Samuel Côté! No one argued with him or the Sisters of Charity. Good times had by all!