

An Eighteenth Century Quack in French Canada



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TORONTO



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AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY QUACK IN FRENCH CANADA.

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A lawsuit which took place a century and three quarters ago sheds an interesting sidelight on the state of medicine in French Canada in the eighteenth century. In 1737, Ives Phlem brought an action at Quebec against Madame Marie Turgeon, widow of Jean Bilodeau, based upon an agreement made between her late husband and the plaintiff Phlem; and the following are the facts:

Phlem was a bas Breton, born at Morlaix, some thirty-seven miles east northeast from Brest, France. When a lad he was taught to bleed and to dress wounds; he learned simple remedies for various ailments; and he acquired somewhat of a reputation among his townsmen. But every Breton is by nature a sailor and a wanderer; *naturam expellas furcâ, tamen usque recurret*, and the young Ives set sail from Jacques Cartier's port, St. Malo, for Canada. Arriving there, he was seized with a severe illness, which left him in a deplorable state.

He had the utmost difficulty in making a living; the art which he had in a sense acquired at home in France he could not exercise because he spoke only Breton, a Celtic language closely allied to Welsh and ancient Cornish, and as different from French (which with the exception of some Indian dialects was the only language spoken in Canada) as Gaelic is from English. This difficulty, however, was at length overcome; and he secured a fairly large list of patients who consulted him for different maladies; his reputation grew and he became well

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known throughout the colony for his treatment, especially of cancer.

In 1742, he settled in St. Anne de la Pérade, a village on the north side of the St. Lawrence, about fifty miles above Quebec, at the mouth of the river St. Anne; a village in what is now Champlain county, with a present population of about 1,500, and even then of some relative importance. He was held in great esteem by the people and his reputation as a surgeon increased and broadened.

In 1735, there came to consult him Jean Bilodeau, a farmer of the Parish of Cotte (*Côte*) St. Francis, on the Island of Orleans (*l'île d'Orléans* as the contemporary manuscript has it). Bilodeau was suffering from a cancer in an advanced stage; it had already eaten into the lower lip on the left side. He had been attended by a competent surgeon of St. Jean on the Island of Orleans, Jean Mauvide, who treated him for several months without success and gave an alarming prognosis. Bilodeau then went to Quebec and consulted *Sieur Berthier*, surgeon to the *Hôtel Dieu* and the Jesuit, *Boispineau*; they both told him that his case was hopeless and that the malady would cease only with his life.

The fame of Phlem came to his mind and he went to consult this cancer doctor, empiric as he was. Phlem gave him encouragement as is the wont of quacks, and promised to cure him, which is also the universal custom. Phlem kept a private hospital or boarding house for patients residing at a distance and requiring constant attention; and accordingly Bilodeau went to live with him, September 16, 1735. Phlem took no chances: he went with his new patient to the curé of the parish and had a written agreement drawn up and signed in presence of two parties. To make certain that the document could not be repudiated, the witnesses were of the highest station, the *Seigneur Longval de la Pérade* and *Joseph Gouin*, the captain of militia in the place.

The *soi disant* surgeon agreed to look after the patient in the best manner possible, for six months

commencing September 16, 1735, unless he should be sooner cured, to supply him with all necessary food and also fluid for dressing the wound, drink, washing, and all other necessaries of life—and to dress the wound with care twice a day. Bilodeau agreed to pay for the six months 500 livres (a little over \$100), 200 in dry goods, October 1, 1735; 150, October 1, 1736, and 150 in money, October 1, 1737. This agreement was duly entered in the books of the notary, Pollet.

After eight months' stay with Phlem, Bilodeau, in May, 1736, departed for a better world, *partit pour un monde meilleur*; his widow refused to pay and Phlem sued.

It was in vain that he pleaded the parable of the talents which impelled him not to hide in a napkin his one talent of healing—it was in vain that he urged the distance of his village from Quebec—in vain, too, that he produced the minutes officially and notarially certified of an enthusiastic mass meeting held at St. Anne de la Pérade, at which were present the curé, the seigneur, and *tous les habitants de la paroisse*, which declared confidence in "Doctor Phlem"—in vain he produced many sworn certificates from those whom he had cured of cancer, among them one Grenier, a novice whom the Jesuits were forced to reject because of a cancer of the jaw which Boispineau and the celebrated Doctor Sarrazin both declared incurable. Boispineau indeed had told him that if the cancer were opened, he would soon die, but if he let it alone he would live longer. Grenier left Quebec for Montreal, but hearing of Phlem he stopped at St. Anne, where he remained three months and left wholly cured; Phlem split the tumor and took out a portion of the jawbone.

The court dismissed the action so far as it was based upon services as a surgeon, but allowed for board and lodging for the eight months 125 livres (say \$27.25) and also for thirty livres paid by Phlem for Bilodeau; and ordered Phlem not to hold

himself out as a surgeon unless he received a license from Lajus, the deputy of the king's prime surgeon. Moreover, the curé, the seigneur, and the people of St. Anne were rebuked for holding such a meeting and forbidden to hold the like again without permission, while the notary who certified the proceedings was also warned not to certify such minutes.

It does not appear that Phlem ever took out a certificate to practise; but he certainly continued in his course, attending the sick and even receiving them into his private hospital; for in July, 1738, one Nicholas Marion died at his place; in 1738, Paul Desmarts died of dropsy under his care; and in 1742, Gabriel Desmaisons of the same disease.

Phlem died at St. Anne, and was buried there in September, 1749.

It is not to be wondered at that this empiric took cancer for his favorite field of labor; in all ages that has been the case, and in all ages there have been many marvelous cures of "cancer." Every benign tumor is liable to be denominated cancer and every cure of such a tumor heralded as a medical triumph. Accordingly, the percentage of cures by the cancer quack is very high, and it is no wonder that Phlem had a *réputation surtout pour les chancres où il a fait des cures considérables connues dans toute l'étendue de la colonie.*

Good John Wesley used tar water for cancer. He tells us: "A cancer under the eye was cured by drinking a quart of tar water daily, washing the same with it, and then applying a plaster of tar and mutton suet melted together. It was well in two months, though of twenty years' standing." Or if there is a cancer in the mouth, he recommends the ash of scarlet cloth blown into the mouth and throat. That, he tells us, "seldom fails." Another tried cure of his for cancer is this: "Take horse spurs (a kind of wart that grows on the inside of a horse's forelegs), dry them by the fire till they will beat to powder. Sift and infuse two drachms in two quarts

Riddell: An Eighteenth Century Quack in French Canada.

of ale; drink half a pint every six hours, new-milk-warm. It has cured many. Tried."

Samuel Thomson, the botanical physician, prescribes a poultice of boiled red clover heads. Some of his followers used blood root (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) made into a salve with beef's gall. All these are harmless, and if they did not cure they did no harm.

The notorious empiric, St. John Long, in the early part of the last century, used a "corrosive, inflammatory, and dangerous liquid" (apparently arsenous acid solution) as a wash; he cured many and killed some.

Less than fifty years ago a well known medical practitioner in this Province acquired fame by his arsenical plasters for cancer, and many others have advanced other remedies, equally efficacious or equally inefficacious. In a benign tumor, or where imagination can effect a cure, a cure is effected; elsewhere the effect is nil or worse.

It must be said that our quack Phlem displayed more judgment than the qualified surgeon Bois-pineau in opening up the tumor and removing the necrosed bone of Grenier's jaw rather than allow it to remain as Bois-pineau advised.

OSGOODE HALL.