



### Land of promise

This former chief negotiated a land claims deal for his people. Then he profited off it for 30 years

By Geoff LeoSep. 23, 2024

In early April, 10 people from the Piapot First Nation showed up at the Arm River Hutterite colony just north of Regina, demanding a meeting with the colony's farm manager, Paul Hofer.

Hofer says the group was led by Roland Crowe — a thin, feisty 81-year-old man with a shock of white hair and an air of authority.

“If you look somebody in the eyes, you know exactly what he’s up to,” said Hofer. “He was up to no good.”

Hofer had been expecting a confrontation with Crowe since late January, when the former chief of the Piapot First Nation began sending him a series of vaguely threatening emails, accusing the Arm River colony of trespassing on land that, Crowe claimed, belonged to him and his group.

Late last year, the Hutterite colony signed a five-year lease to farm 1,335 hectares (3,300 acres) from the Piapot First Nation lands department. But in an email to Hofer, Crowe and his associates claimed the lease is invalid.

“As Treaty Rights Holders, we did not relinquish (surrender) our interests in our homelands,” read the email, which added, cryptically: “The chief and council will have to call in the army!”

## **‘Over my dead body’**

Crowe’s group has been delivering that message to several farmers who have recently signed land leasing agreements with the Piapot First Nation. In an affidavit filed in the Court of King's Bench, farmer Jerry Rodgers said Crowe had sent multiple “threatening messages,” including a voicemail.

“There’s only one way that anybody will ever take my lands, and that’s over my dead body,” said an April 25 voicemail that CBC obtained. “And make no mistake, I will run you or anybody off that land that I spent my lifetime on.”

***LISTEN | A voicemail Roland Crowe left for a Saskatchewan farmer:***



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.6516082>

So when Crowe showed up with a convoy of 10 vehicles, Hofer was prepared. “I had a backup of 10 of our own people sitting in the same room,” he said.



Paul Hofer is the farm manager for the Arm River Hutterite Colony, located north of Regina. (Geoff Leo/CBC)

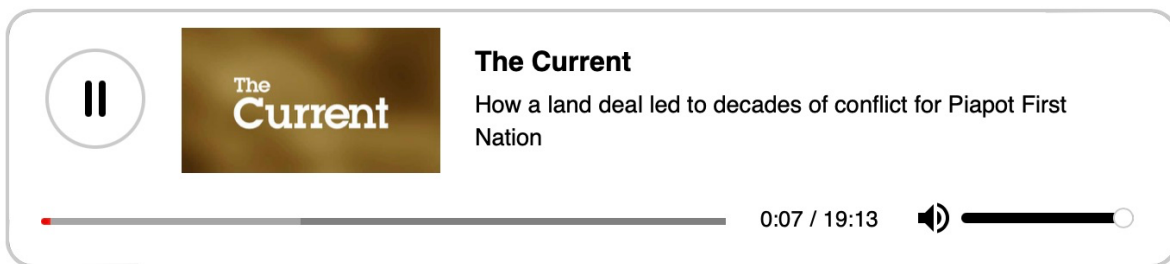
During that tense meeting, Crowe took the lead.

“It looks like Roland is their king,” said Hofer. “All [he] could tell me is, ‘It’s our land, our land, our land.’”

“Then I said, ‘OK, if it’s your land, I want to see some paperwork. I want to see some land titles.’”

Crowe was unable to provide that documentation, because the title is in the name of the Crown, held on behalf of the whole Piapot First Nation.

***LISTEN | Geoff Leo's radio documentary on Piapot First Nation's decades of conflict over land deal:***



## **‘Well over \$60 million lost’**

But for more than 30 years, Crowe and about 45 other private Piapot citizens have been leasing much of that land to non-Indigenous farmers — and personally pocketing the money.

Crowe defends his decision to profit from the land by claiming that income is, in effect, his pension plan — money he’s owed for his decades of political advocacy for Indigenous people.

“I left a pensionable job to fight for Indians,” Crowe told CBC in an interview earlier this year.

But Piapot’s lands manager, Deverell Crowe, says this has been devastating for a community that has struggled financially for decades.

“Well over \$60 million in that 30 years — lost,” she said. “Not only the lost opportunity, but the wealth that could have been generated from those opportunities is also gone.”

Now, Piapot's chief and council are trying to wrestle control of the land away from Crowe and the others.

This has led to dangerous confrontations, threats, court cases and criminal charges as Piapot fights over the land that was supposed to be its ticket to prosperity.



For decades, a handful of Piapot band members have been renting out thousands of acres of band owned land to non-Indigenous farmers and pocketing the profits. (Kirk Fraser/CBC)

### **'The beginning of a different world'**

Back in 1992, Piapot was one of 25 Saskatchewan First Nations that signed a Treaty Land Entitlement Agreement with the federal and provincial governments to settle a longstanding dispute over land owed to them through treaty obligations.

Roland Crowe, as chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), negotiated that deal with then-prime minister Brian Mulroney and Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow at the signing ceremony.

“It’s the beginning of a different world. An environment where we can have a decent place for economic employment opportunities. A decent land base to raise our children,” Crowe told the crowd.

The First Nations were given \$500 million to purchase land they could then convert to Treaty status. Piapot used its share to purchase about 20,000 hectares (50,000 acres) of farmland in southern Saskatchewan.

Piapot’s current land manager, Deverell Crowe, says she remembers the excitement on reserve as the land was being assembled. She said there was a general belief “it was for the benefit of everyone.” The plan was that band members would farm it or it would be rented out to non-members to farm.



Deverell Crowe says Piapot lost millions of dollars in land rental fees because of 'buckshee' agreements. (CBC)

In 1994, Roland Crowe lost re-election as FSIN chief, but quickly pivoted to becoming chief of Piapot, where he implemented the land claims agreement he had just negotiated.

Rather than managing the land for the benefit of all Piapot citizens, Crowe decided to dole out the property to individual band members, including himself.

## **‘Buckshee’ agreements**

Of the 20,000 hectares Piapot purchased, just over 4,000 were actually being managed by the band. The other 16,000 hectares were being controlled by just 45 people. That’s fewer than two per cent of the band’s 2,700 members.

In 2005, anger was boiling over in the community about this. CBC News went to Piapot to hear from some who were speaking out.

“Certain people, certain families benefitted at the expense of others,” Robert Obey said.

April Major added, “That's not benefitting the whole band. That's benefitting that family and that family only.”

These informal arrangements, where private band members sign contracts with farmers to lease land owned by the First Nation, are called "buckshee" agreements.

## **2005 CBC TV documentary on Piapot First Nation**

2005 CBC TV documentary on Piapot First Nation



[https://youtu.be/1Nkxh\\_tQxfc](https://youtu.be/1Nkxh_tQxfc)

Courts have deemed such agreements illegal. In a 2024 court decision in a case involving a B.C. First Nation, Supreme Court of B.C. Justice Gareth Morley wrote that “it is well-established that buckshee leases are legally invalid and unenforceable.”

In that CBC documentary, Crowe said he handed out land to people he deemed to be ambitious.

“My theory is if you show initiative and you’re trying to do something, I think you do everything within your power, which I did, to give those people a chance at life.”

Piapot records provided to CBC say that Crowe claimed at least 900 hectares worth \$3 million for himself.

“People will say, ‘Yes, Roland Crowe has had a lot of opportunities.’ But let me tell you that I had no less, no more opportunities than many of our brothers and sisters on the reserve,” he told CBC in 2005.



In a 2005 interview with CBC-TV reporter Geoff Leo, Roland Crowe, right, defended his decision to hand out land to a few band members, including himself. (CBC)

He was baffled that some people criticized him for this decision.

“I think sometimes we circle the wagons and we shoot inside instead of shooting outside,” he said.

Current band councillor Crystal Crowe says that in the years since that documentary, people in the community have tried to end buckshee agreements.

“Every time it was attempted then ... some of the handful of land owners would get re-elected and put an end to it,” she said. “And that's why it's never moved forward.”



Crystal Crowe, a member of the Piapot First Nation's council, says she and other community leaders have been threatened after they decided to end buckshee agreements. (Kirk Fraser/CBC)

## **Piapot is not alone**

Cadmus Delorme, a former chief of Cowessess First Nation, says there is hope for communities like Piapot, because his nation and several others have gone through similar conflicts.

“It's one of the most uncomfortable conversations in almost any First Nation,” he told CBC.

When Delorme became chief in 2016, he found 23 people were renting out farmland that belonged to the whole community of 4,500 people. Delorme’s own father was one of the people renting out land through a buckshee agreement.

Ending those agreements led to a battle that, just like with Piapot, made its way through the court system. Eventually, chief and council were successful in eliminating buckshee agreements.



Cadmus Delorme, a former chief of Cowessess First Nation, says the issue of buckshee agreements is 'one of the most uncomfortable conversations in almost any First Nation.' (CBC)

All of that land revenue now flows into band coffers. He says some of the tenants who rent the land are Cowessess band members.

“Today, we farm over 8,000 acres [3,200 hectares] on Cowessess of our prime land,” said Delorme. “So not only do we get fair market value for our land, but we even farm our own land, which almost triples the return on investment of what we would get if we were to rent it out.”

He says Indigenous communities need to realize “we have our own reconciliation we have to address.”

“This isn't a Western Canadian issue. This is an Indigenous-to-Indigenous issue,” he said. “Every nation has to address it at some point.”

### **Band council takes action**

Mark Fox said when he was elected chief of Piapot in 2020, the new council, inspired by Cowessess, decided to make the buckshee issue a top priority. “Right away we started to talk about that — to bring all that land revenue back to the band,” he said. “No matter what repercussions come.”

They hired Deverell Crowe as the new lands manager. She said she was frustrated to discover there were no records of who was farming Piapot’s land. So she started posting "No Trespassing" signs on all of it. This prompted phone calls from concerned farmers.



Piapot Chief Mark Fox says he and the band council decided the land should be managed for the benefit of the entire community, and not just a few. (Kirk Fraser/CBC)

“It was kind of designed to be a shocker,” she said. “Now we know we're starting to gain some intelligence about what's happening on our lands.”

Deverell Crowe said she was infuriated to discover that some band members were renting out the land for as little as \$5 an acre when it should have been going for \$60 an acre.

In the fall of 2023, Piapot leadership ended all of the buckshee agreements with farmers and negotiated new deals.

Fox said most of the band members with buckshee agreements agreed to turn the property over to the band. Fox himself was one of them. He's still not sure why he ended up with that land.

“There was no system,” he said. “It was just handed out to whoever.” Ultimately, he said, “what's done is done. We're correcting it.”

But a handful of people — led by Roland Crowe, former chief Claude Friday and his sister Sheri Kaiswatum — have been aggressively trying to overturn the council's decision.

On April 29, Piapot's chief and council asked the Court of King's Bench for an injunction against those three. The justice immediately granted the request. Yet conflicts continued and escalated.

Piapot councillor Crystal Crowe said when council decided to take this issue on, it was expecting some pushback. But nothing like what it has experienced. “Chief and council have had threats, many threats, violent threats, slander on all of us. I've even had to move my family for safety reasons,” she said.

## **Confrontation on a field**

A few weeks after the impromptu meeting between the Hutterite colony and the Treaty Rights Holders group, the conflict came to a head.

According to an affidavit filed by Deverell Crowe in the Court of King's Bench on May 19, one of the people from the Treaty Rights Holders group, Carol Lavallee, showed up in a white pickup truck on land the Arm River Colony was renting from Piapot.

“Carol Lavallee was preventing the Arm River Colony from spraying a parcel under permit to them,” says the affidavit.

“She drove right crazy ... right beside the sprayer and all of the sudden she ducked in front of the sprayer. And our guy on the sprayer, he could not stop ... so he went into her,” Hofer said.



This image, taken from a court file, shows the condition of the pickup truck after the collision with the Hutterite colony's sprayer. (Court of King's Bench file)

Lavallee has been charged with operating a vehicle dangerously, with mischief for blocking Arm River's access to the land and with violating a court order that gave the colony legal access to the property. Roland Crowe and Sheri Kaiswatum were also both charged with mischief and disobeying a court order, also in relation to Arm River, for the same incident.

Hofer said after the incident, the colony decided to end its farming agreement with Piapot, "because of safety reasons."

"I did not want [my workers] to come out of that field in a stretcher," he said. The conflicts with farmers have allegedly taken an even darker turn.



Claude Friday, a former chief of the Piapot First Nation, has been charged with threatening farmers. (Kirk Fraser/CBC)

Claude Friday, who decades ago had about 320 hectares allocated to him, has been charged, along with Shari Kaiswatum, with blocking a farmer's access to other lands. They were also charged with unlawfully confining that farmer.

In addition, Friday is charged with assaulting a different farmer and threatening him with a pipe and a piece of wood.

### **‘Do I look like a dangerous guy?’**

When CBC reached out to Roland Crowe for an interview in May, he told us to drive toward Piapot until we saw a white pickup truck on the side of the road. We followed that truck down a winding road until we ended up at a one-room shack in a fenced-in compound. Inside, Crowe and the other Treaty Rights Holders were waiting.

Crowe's appearance had changed dramatically since that documentary interview 20 years ago, but his demeanor was familiar. He dismissed all allegations about intimidating or threatening behaviour.

"Do I look like a dangerous guy? Huh? Answer me honestly," he demanded, with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. "Have you ever known me to be a threatful person?"

**WATCH | Roland Crowe denies threatening anyone:**



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.6516066>

He defended his decision to personally collect rent on band-owned land for the past 30 years by saying this property has enabled him to be self-sufficient.

"I don't want to beg any government, whether it's federal, provincial or band government. I want to make it on my own," he said.

Crowe said he and his group need the income from this land because the chief and council discriminate against them — unfairly depriving them of services like road clearing and water delivery.

Piapot's chief denies the allegation.

## **New revenue pouring in**

According to Deverell Crowe, when the buckshee agreements were in place, the band took in around \$200,000 a year from land rental. Since signing the new leasing agreements last fall, it's now more than \$2 million.

Chief Mark Fox says "we're already putting it to good use."

"We're helping our elders out. We're helping our youth out. We're helping our housing program out," he said, noting the band will be able to build three additional houses this year.

Former Cowessess chief Cadmus Delorme says it's good to see communities take action.

"As Indigenous people, we are going to address it," he said. "It has to happen because it's foundational to us moving forward."

He says while he doesn't have any regrets about the changes he led as chief, he's well aware that his decisions caused others pain.

"When you address historical family dynamics, such as relationship to certain parcels of land.... there's some families that were really upset with that," he said.

"To this day, I still feel it a little bit. It never really goes away."

*Top image: CBC | Editing: Andre Mayer*



The last third of the show.

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/video/9.6517818>