

Rain: "It's our grandkids' money."

(Continued from previous page)

"Ten per cent of the people are getting 80 per cent of the money," said Warrior Elroy Strawberry-Rain, a former rodeo bull rider who has become the most outspoken critic of the leadership. "What they're doing is wrong. It's disgusting. This isn't their money. And it isn't my money. It's our grandkids' money."

Mr. Strawberry-Rain compared the change in Samson's fortunes after the discovery of oil and gas on the reserve with that of the Clappett family in a 1960s TV series but with a difference: The wealth isn't shared.

"It's like The Beverly Hillbillies except Granny doesn't let anyone else swim in the pool...This place is all politics; it's all family against family. If you're inside, you get everything you need. If you're outside, forget it."

Exactly how much money has gone to the Samson leaders is known only to them--and they refuse to disclose their total compensation or comment on the documents obtained by *The Globe*.

Chief Florence Buffalo's listed salary is \$45,000, and the listed salary for the 12 councillors is \$40,000 each, figures very similar to those at the Stoney reserve. But as at Stoney, the official salaries are only a fraction of the actual compensation.

The amounts allocated to the chief and councillors are made up of a complex series of council fees, committee fees, meeting fees, per diems and allowances, spread through multiple departments.

For the fiscal year that ended March 31, the draft audit showed that the chief and councillors received \$1,198,221 in salaries, committee fees, employee benefits and travel benefits under the chief and council budgets. But \$368,792 more in committee fees was charged to the finance and executive-office departments. Also charged to the executive-office budget was \$373,129 for travel and \$1,291,460 under the "donations" item.

Ms. Okeymaw would not discuss what percentage of the expenses allocated to other budgets were actually paid to the chief and council. "I can't answer any more

of the specifics...The chief should do it and I don't think she's willing to discuss it."

Other sources of complaints are "meeting fees" that leaders receive on top of their salaries, and per diem allowances that they collect while travelling. Although band representatives would not comment budget documents indicate that meeting fees ranged from \$100 to \$200 per meeting. Former employees of the band office said travel allowances, which are paid in addition to billed expenses such as hotels, run from \$200 to as much as \$750 a day.

Band representatives refused to discuss these figures. Asked what her total compensation amounted to, Ms. Buffalo replied: "On that one, I choose to make no comment."

Another point of contention is the ground rules used in handing out low-interest loans and mortgages made with band funds.

According to the 1998 draft audit, \$43,531,839 was owed to Samson Cree by band members--and \$34,770,209 was listed as "doubtful accounts."

There is also controversy about the way housing funds are allocated. Band documents show there are 1,190 houses on the reserve--and 80 off the reserve. These houses are paid for and maintained with band funds.

One band member reportedly received band funds which were used to purchase a luxury home in the Drayton Valley, north of the reserve. Ms. Buffalo acknowledged that the band member owned the home, but said she didn't know about the financial arrangements.

"I can't comment on how it was handled," she said. "As far as I know, she's paying whatever she agreed to pay...Other than that You'll have to ask her yourself."

The band member did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.

Another troubling financial practice has been the use of band funds to give "salary advances" to select people. Exactly how much was lent this way is unknown, but the amounts again are said to be in the millions.

The issue of the salary advances was raised in a 1992 memo from then-chief Victor Buffalo to Ms

Okeymaw, the band administrator. In the memo, the chief expressed dismay that the practice of salary advances was still going on.

He demanded an accounting of all such advances, then took Ms. Okeymaw to task for taking an advance herself: "What was very regrettable to me was that you as administrator had indeed taken a salary advance in the amount of \$35,000."

Chief Buffalo said this kind of action "destroys any initiative we may have had in terms of fiscal management and fiscal responsibility."

Asked about the memo, Ms Okeymaw said, "I don't want to discuss anymore," but did say she had repaid the advance.

Ms. Okeymaw acknowledged that she has received other loans from band funds but said she has paid

them all back. Ms. Okeymaw defended the practice of lending band funds to reserve members, saying natives often have difficulty getting loans at banks.

"We try to give people a chance to get ahead," she said. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Dissidents say there is little or no effort to ensure that loans result in job creation.

In 1987, for example, band members Martin Lightning and a partner were lent \$2125,000 each at 2 per cent over 12 years to start a finance company named Action Finance Ltd.,. They later received \$250,000 more in band funds, for a total of \$500,000.

Action Finance specialized in small loans to band members, typically in the \$100-\$4,000 range. Mr. Lightning acknowledged that he business did little in the way of

job creation--but he said it opened his eyes to some of the goings-on at the reserve.

One potential client came to his company after receiving a substantial grant that was to be used for a job-creation program. The client offered Mr. Lightning and his partner \$20,000 to "launder" the grant through Action Finance. Asked whether the grant money was supposed to wind up in the potential clients' pockets, Mr. Lightning said: "That was the plan."

Mr. Lightning said he was "spooked" by the proposed transaction and later sold his interest in Action Finance. He said he didn't know what became of the money that was to have been used in the job-creation program' Mr.

(Continued on next page)