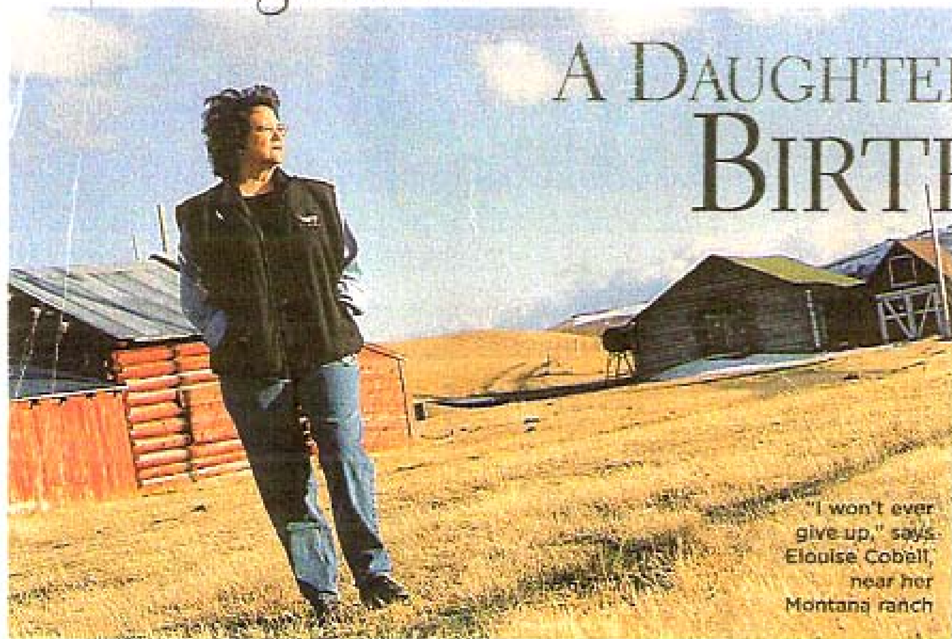
A Daughter's Birthright


"I won't ever give up," says Elouise Cobell, near her Montana ranch

Native American Elouise Cobell says the government owes billions of dollars to tribe members—and she has vowed not to rest until justice is done

BY LAWRENCE GOODMAN

When she was growing up on Montana's Blackfeet Indian reservation in the 1950s, Elouise Pepion Cobell would stand in her backyard and watch the white men who were doing business on her father's land. There were riggers pumping oil, cattlemen grazing herds and lumberjacks cutting down trees. Whatever money they were obviously making was not going to Cobell's family, however. She and her eight siblings lived in a small house without running water or electricity. Cobell, now 59, recalls: "My father used to say to us, 'Why am I not getting anything? It's *my* land.'"

Cobell, the great-granddaughter of Mountain Chief, one of the great warrior leaders of the Blackfeet Nation, has spent much of her adult life trying to get an answer. After years of writing letters to government officials, banging on doors, pleading for meetings–and getting nowhere–in 1996 Cobell filed a class-action lawsuit against the Department of the Interior, one of the largest such suits in U.S. history. The lawsuit, referred to in the press as "the Indian Enron," seeks reparations dating back generations that could total tens of billions of dollars for some 500,000 Native Americans from roughly 100 tribes, primarily in Montana, South Dakota, New Mexico, Arizona and Oklahoma.

"A horrible fraud was performed on the poorest people in the land," says Cobell. So far, courts seem to agree. "I've never seen more egregious misconduct by the federal government," the judge hearing the suit has said. Settlement talks have begun, but the case appears to be several years away from resolution.

Still, Cobell says, "I don't get discouraged." Her father, a rancher, feared retaliation too much to demand an accounting of the money owed him, she says. "I don't want Indian children to be like my parents' generation, frightened to challenge authority. I want them to ask *why*."

Cobell's own education and early work experience helped give her the confidence to push for justice. A business college graduate, she worked for several years as an accountant in Denver and Seattle; in the mid-1970s, she and her husband, Alvin, also a Blackfoot, and their son, Turk, returned to the reservation to start a ranch.

In 1978 Cobell was named the Blackfeet treasurer and began scrutinizing old financial statements sent to her tribe by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the federal agency that manages 56 million acres of land occupied by Native Americans. She didn't like what she saw. In 1887 the BIA had set up a trust fund to administer to Native Americans a large portion of the revenues generated by timber, oil, mining and grazing companies operating on their land. According to Cobell's investigation, very little of the money got to the people actually living on those tribal lands, whether through mismanagement or outright theft, she alleges. The Department of the Interior, which oversees the BIA, has conceded there were problems with the trust but denies accusations of theft or fraud.

Cobell's supporters, who include Senator John McCain of Arizona and Rep. Nick Rahall of West Virginia, are standing with her, no matter how long the struggle. Keith Harper, one of the lead attorneys on Cobell's case, says, "Any time you have a movement that seeks fundamental change for a longstanding injustice, there always has to be an iconic figure who leads the charge, the person who refuses to go to the back of the bus. That person is Elouise."