

Elouise Cobell

Board Member and Founder

Blackfeet Community Foundation and Blackfeet Reservation Development Fund

Elouise Cobell, the lead plaintiff and prime mover of *Cobell v. Babbitt*, is a member of the Blackfeet Nation, founder of the Native American National Bank-Blackfeet (formerly called the Blackfeet National Bank), and a proponent of economic development as a path to financial independence for Native Americans. She currently serves as the director of the Native American Community Development Corporation.

As recounted by *The Wall Street Journal*, Ms. Cobell remembered as a little girl hearing her relatives grumble about Indian trust accounts poorly maintained by the U.S. government. Years later, as treasurer of the Blackfeet nation, she questioned Bureau of Indian Affairs officials about the chaotic state of the accounts. "They said, 'Oh, you don't know how to read the reports,' and I sat down," she said. "I think they were trying to embarrass me, but it did the opposite - it made me mad."

In 1996, Ms. Cobell filed what has become the largest lawsuit ever by American Indians against the federal government, a class action that represents an estimated 500,000 individuals and has exposed gross mismanagement by the Interior and Treasury Departments. "I got fed up," Ms. Cobell said. "It was the only way to get the government's attention."

Along the way, the secretaries of Interior and Treasury and the assistant secretary of the Interior have been held in contempt by the U.S. district court judge presiding over the case. The suit could eventually lead to a class settlement somewhere between 10 and 40 billion dollars.

In 1997, Ms. Cobell's efforts were recognized by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which awarded her one of its "genius" grants. Along with other critical foundation support, the funds have been used to help finance the litigation.

Educated in accounting, Ms. Cobell served for 13 years as treasurer of the Blackfeet. She was instrumental in the formation of the Blackfeet National Bank, the first national bank located on an Indian reservation and owned by an Indian tribe. She is on the board of the Blackfeet Community Foundation, and the Blackfeet Reservation Development Fund, Inc., and oversees its Individual Indian Monies Trust Correction and Recovery Project.

Her professional and civic experience includes serving as a board member of First Interstate Bank, executive board member of the Montana Community Foundation, former chair of the Rural Development and Finance Corporation, trustee of the Smithsonian Institution's new National Museum of the American Indian, and board member of two other major foundations. She is currently working with other tribes in developing the Native American National Bank – which was launched in 2001.

With her husband, Ms. Cobell operates a working ranch in Browning, Montana, and is active in local agricultural and environmental issues. She is a graduate of Great Falls Business College and attended Montana State University, which awarded her an honorary doctorate in June 2002.