

But the Indians never got what was owed them.

At one of the endless meetings she attended to try to rectify matters, Cobell actually heard a Treasury Department official admit that millions and millions of Indian dollars were being forwarded by the Department of the Interior with no instructions. "So we just put it in the general fund," said the official.

Cobell said she eventually discovered that the money apparently had been used, among other notable examples, to help bail out New York City during its 1975 fiscal crisis, to save the Chrysler Corporation from going under

isted," Cobell told me. "It gave me a chance to dream a little."

She went on to high school, which required a daily 50-mile round-trip by bus. Then Cobell made a daring move to the nearest city, Great Falls, to enroll in a two-year business college, where she specialized in accounting. "I wanted to learn more and to help out at home," she recalled. "My dream was to buy my mother a new dress."

Cobell cut short further studies at Montana State University in 1968 to return home and care for her mother, who had terminal cancer. Then her father died.

Because of her accounting back-

dren. I would tell my mother, and she'd say, 'Don't make waves.'"

Under the BIA's management of the so-called Individual Indian Money trust fund, Native Americans never were informed who had leased their land or for what purpose, how much the lease was for or how long the lease was to run. On occasion, the Treasury Department would mail checks to individuals for a pit-

tance, with no accounting or explanation of any kind. (In addition to the Individual Indian Money trust, the government manages a separate trust fund covering more than 300 tribes.)

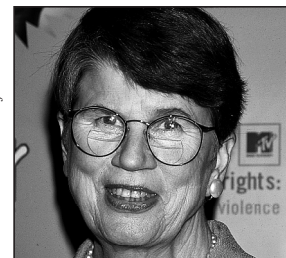
"As the tribe's treasurer," Cobell said, "I tried to get a handle on everything. I found that the BIA's investment of Blackfeet tribal trust funds was accruing negative interest. How could this be? Under the law, this money was only supposed to be invested in the safest government securities. But when I asked about this at a meeting with the BIA supervisor, he just stared at me and said, 'Why don't you learn how to read a statement?' It was so humiliating.

"Later—a lot later—I discovered what had happened. The BIA had taken a big chunk of money from the Blackfeet, loaned it to another tribe for whatever reason and forgot to replace it. After all, it was not their money, and we were just dumb Indians."

After getting nowhere at local and regional BIA offices, Cobell tried the Interior Department in Washington, D.C. And still got nowhere. "I did spreadsheets," she said, "and saw huge gaps where oil and gas companies that had leased out land weren't paying anything. There was no accounting system in place, so the Interior Department had no idea who was pay-



Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt was held in contempt.



Attorney General Janet Reno turned a deaf ear.

Federal officials continually blocked a full accounting of money owed the Indians. To Elouise Cobell, the only option was a lawsuit.

ing and who wasn't. They didn't care."

Then, in 1989, Rep. Mike Synar—an Oklahoma Democrat with a large Native American constituency—helped to arrange a meeting at the White House under the first Bush Administration with officials of the Office of Management and Budget. Cobell was invited, as well as some outside experts, including a prominent banking attorney named Dennis Gingold. Very little came out of it, except that Cobell remembered Gingold acidly saying at one point to the government men, "I'm amazed you guys haven't been sued."

In 1994, Synar got Congress to authorize the Presidential appointment of a special trustee to provide a full ac-

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Susie White Calf, 81, a Blackfeet Indian who lives near Browning, Mont., hopes to recover money owed her by the U.S. government. With her are her great-grandsons (l-r) Augustin Eagle Speaker, 10, Chasen Kipp, 2, Jaron Calf Robe, 7, and Jason Calf Robe, 8.

The leasing of Indian property, such as for timber or oil, required government approval. The U.S. would make the deals and send the income to each family. But the Indians never got what was owed them.

and even to reduce the national debt.

On assignment for PARADE, I recently visited Cobell. Along with her husband, she has a 320-acre allotment ranch with about 100 head of cattle in Glacier County, which encompasses much of the Blackfeet reservation and ranks as the 35th poorest county in the U.S. This is where she grew up in a house with no phone, electricity or running water and where she began her education in 1950 in a one-room grade school.

As it happened, Cobell's teacher subscribed to the Sunday *New York Times*, which she shared with her students. "It would arrive a month late, but it exposed me to a world I never knew ex-

ground, the Blackfeet Tribal Council appointed Cobell the tribe's treasurer in 1976. "I remembered, as a little girl," she said, "the elders would come to my father's house and wonder where the money was. You lived with it all the time. But they didn't know what to ask. They had no information, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs was something to be feared. You felt so powerless."

She already had seen the local office of the BIA in action in a college work-study program. "I saw people treated very badly," she recalled. "People sitting all day on hard benches, with no rest rooms. Some were begging for money, for food, for clothes for their chil-

The Cost of Betrayal

"Abusing the trust of American Indians" ranked No. 2 in the government's Top 10 Worst Examples of Mismanagement, compiled this spring by the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs. (No. 1 was the "Big Dig," a highway project in Boston.) This betrayal of trust includes:

- Untold billions in income from the use of Indian-owned land, held in trust by the U.S. but "lost" by the Interior and Treasury Departments.
- \$31 million in federal litigation costs, which Congress has started to question.
- \$625,000 in fines paid by the U.S. government for contempt-of-court citations in 1999.

For More Information

To get more background on her class-action suit against the U.S. government and its possible settlement, visit Elouise Cobell's Web site, www.indiantrust.com.