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The Sheep Ranch Rancheria, in the hills above San Andreas, is home to Yakima Dixie, who lives alone as the last of his tribe on the 1-acre reservation. In 1998, he adopted cousin Sylvia Burley, her two daughters and a granddaughter into the tribe.

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Tribe's legacy, riches at stake in battle over California Valley Miwok

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CALAVERAS COUNTY – There are more free-range sheep than people at Sheep Ranch, a ghost town lost in the hills above San Andreas.

The 18-cents-a-gallon gas pump still stands, but there is no gas. The post office, general store and Hearst gold mine shut down long ago.

But there's a new gold rush here potentially worth tens of millions of dollars centered around Yakima Dixie, the hereditary chief of the Sheep Ranch Me-Wuk Indians and the last Indian standing on the 1-acre reservation.

Dixie is enmeshed in a legal brawl with Silvia Burley, whom he adopted into the tribe, over control of the Sheep Ranch Me-Wuk, now called the California Valley Miwok.

Dixie claims Burley hijacked the tribe from him; Burley claims she saved it.

Who wins determines who's an official California Indian, who runs the tribe and who controls millions of dollars in potential casino revenue and federal Indian money.

Bitter intertribal disputes have erupted all over California with the flow of cash from casinos. In this case, representatives of Dixie have challenged Burley's status in state and federal court, holding up \$7 million in funds, while spotlighting the stakes of tribal membership.

The outcome could affect thousands of California Indians fighting for membership in this tribe and others considered sovereign Indian nations.

Dixie, 70, now gets by on \$700 a month Social Security, enough to pay his grocery bill.

"I don't need any more – money is the evilest thing in the world," he said. "You kill your own people, your own mother for money."

But in a few weeks, he could get the \$7 million if the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the courts decide in his favor.

Dixie, a convicted murderer, lives with his German shepherd, Buddy, in a one-bedroom, sky-blue cottage facing snow-capped Blue Mountain. He smokes hand-rolled Bugle Boy Turkish-blend tobacco under his pear and acorn trees, and meditates. His few visitors include casino developers and Indians who want to join his tribe.

About 60 miles away near Stockton lives Burley, 50. She claimed she's been chief for 12 years and lives in a 4,228- square-foot mansion bought with \$745,000 in tribal funds. The mansion was the tribal headquarters and is in foreclosure, Burley said.

Burley said she and her family subsist on government- issue soup and cheese while the California Gambling Control Commission withholds the \$7 million from the Revenue Sharing Trust Fund – money California's gambling tribes designate for poor Indian tribes.

The commission pays \$1.1 million a year in casino money to each of California's 71 poorer federal recognized tribes. It is holding the money for four tribes while internal disputes are resolved.

The \$7 million for the California Valley Miwok will be disbursed once the court battles are resolved and the BIA determines who constitutes the real tribe – the Burley tribe, with five people including Dixie, or the Dixie Tribe, including Burley's family and about 300 others.

Behind the case

Dixie's "deputy consul general" is Chadd Everone, a life extension researcher from Berkeley who runs the Foundation for Infinite Survival and wants to build a casino.

Everone – who with casino developer Bill Martin approached Dixie in 2003 to help him regain control of the tribe in court – also represents Velma Whitebear and about 400 other Indians and their children. They recognize Dixie as the chief and claim they're lineal descendants of the original Sheep Ranch Rancheria created in 1915.

Everone hired attorney Bob Uram and two retired California Gambling Control Commission attorneys – ex-chief counsel Pete Melnicoe and ex-chairman Arlo Smith, a former San Francisco district attorney.

"I've put together a development team with a highly reputable casino operator ready to go," Everone said.

Also at stake is about \$500,000 a year in tribal administrative funds from the BIA and millions of dollars in gambling revenue if the tribe establishes a casino.

Both sides want a casino.

If Whitebear and the others are admitted to the tribe, they say they'll continue restoring their ancient Miwok culture and language.

They'll also qualify for federal Indian health and education funds and their children will be eligible for protection under the Indian Child Welfare Act, which tries to place kids from broken homes with other Indian families.

The paths cross

Dixie said he's been in and out of the penitentiary for much of his life.

He said he killed his great-uncle Lennie Jeff in 1977 for insulting an Indian woman Dixie was living with. Jeff was Burley's great-uncle, she said.

Burley was born in San Andreas, her father Shawnee, her mother Miwok. She said she graduated from D-Q University and Evergreen college with degrees in tribal administration.

She remembers attending a state Big Time Powwow at Sheep Ranch as a girl. After the federal government tried to terminate the rancheria – and dozens of other reservations – in the 1960s, most of the tribe scattered.

"We stayed in a homeless shelter for two months in the 1990s," said Burley. She approached Dixie seeking membership so her family could qualify for federal Indian health care and education. In August 1998, Dixie enrolled Burley and her two daughters and a granddaughter into the tribe.

"I don't like to see tears, and she told me she'd been all over to each Miwok tribe and nobody wanted to accept her," Dixie said. "I said, 'Sure, I'll accept you – you're my cousin. Come in and get some coffee.' "

"I made a big mistake when I did that," he said. (Burley said the only tribe she approached was Dixie's.)

In September 1998, the now four-member tribe voted Dixie as chief, or chairperson. "He resigned April 20, 1999," Burley said, about the time the casino tribes began sharing revenue with poor tribes.

But Dixie said his resignation letter was a forgery.

Burley said she was elected chief and worked on the tribe's constitution, qualifying for a \$360,000 federal grant.

Over the next five years, Burley secured several million dollars from the Revenue Sharing Trust Fund. "None of it went to help anybody but Burley and her family," said Whitebear.

Burley said the money paid for the mansion because the tribe needed a headquarters and a place for homeless Indians.

"We have to keep putting money in to fight Everone and all his lawsuits," she said. "We have no problem with Yakima."

In 2005, the commission held up the Revenue Sharing Trust money because of Everone's lawsuits.

"The BIA has struggled with the appropriate resolution, who are the legal members," said Joe Dhillon, acting commission director.

Once the money's paid, there's no accountability – whoever gets the check can decide how to spend it. "There are no rules – they can do whatever they want with it," said Smith.

On April 1, Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Larry Echohawk reversed a Dec. 22, 2010, decision recognizing the Burley council and said he hopes to resolve "the longstanding problems within the tribe" in the coming weeks.

The BIA doesn't like to get involved in intertribal politics, preferring that sovereign nations determine their own citizenry. Other tribes caught in leadership disputes hope this case will lead to resolution, Whitebear said.

Whatever happens, Dixie has simple plans. "I feel safe right here," he said. "I'd like to buy the land next door, put in a dance area and put up a roundhouse so we can hold meetings."

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bstele

Tribal sovereignty in the United States is guaranteed by the US Constitution, so neither the BIA nor any other non-tribal governing entity, including non-tribal citizens, should get involved in the intertribal affairs of sovereign nations.

5 minutes ago

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Buddell

As John Stossel's "Freeloaders" demonstrates, tribes who live on our money fail to succeed in any logical measure. Those who refuse help from the government and get their acts together succeed in the grandest sense. Go figger!

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