

# Elouise Cobell



Elouise Pepion Cobell (“Yellow Bird Woman”) learned early in life that to get justice and the way to get ahead in the world was to follow the money. Wealth was flowing out of the Blackfoot Nation, but income was another matter. Cobell’s expertise helped right the wrongs.

She was born on Nov. 5, 1945, on the Blackfoot Reservation in Montana<sup>1</sup>. A great-great granddaughter of Mountain Chief, legendary for his refusal to compromise with the U.S. government<sup>1</sup>, she grew up without running water or electricity. Her father advocated for a schoolhouse to be built on the reservation, which she attended from age 4 until high school. Cobell studied accounting at Great Falls Commercial College, then went on to study business at the University of Montana. While at the university, she interned as a clerk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), where she saw time and again many applicants ask for loans—unsuccessfully. After graduating, she became the treasurer for Blackfoot Nation, where she found that the numbers did not add up. She confronted the government in meetings, and was stunned by the resistance. Government officials told her she did not know how to read an account statement despite the fact she studied both business and accounting. The only bank on the reservation had closed and other banks refused to open a branch on the reservation<sup>1</sup>. In 1987, Cobell helped found the Blackfoot National Bank, now known as the Native American Bank--the first bank in the country owned by a tribe. She eventually moved on to be director of the nonprofit affiliate, the Native American Community Development Corp. In 1997, she received a “Genius Grant” from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. In 2000, she received an Honorary Doctorate from Montana State University. In addition to attending government meetings to advocate for the tribe, she also went to court to demand accountability for the abuse of Native property. After multiple contentious lawsuits, the plaintiffs were awarded \$3.4 billion. The woman who was once accused of being unable to understand an account statement was vindicated at the highest levels of government. She died from cancer on Oct. 16, 2011. She was posthumously awarded the Medal of Freedom and the Elouise Cobell Land and Culture Institute at the University of Montana is named for her.

## Citations

1. Rothberg, Emma.

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