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By Mike Adams

Banking on Indian identity

Gambling: In Connecticut, a little heritage is parlayed into a multimillion-dollar casino. Or two.

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LEBANON, Conn. - In an annual spring rite, Frank Cook dresses in Indian garb, with a turkey-feather headdress, and dances to the boom of a drum at his tribe's annual powwow.

Cook, 60, traces his heritage to Uncas, the legendary chief who broke away from the Pequots in the early 1600s and formed the Mohegan tribe. But because of another tribal schism almost four centuries later, the retired electrical engineer is not legally recognized as an Indian, nor does he earn a penny from the Mohegan Sun, one of the world's largest and most profitable hotel-casinos, with annual profits exceeding \$1 billion.

Shimmering like a huge mirror on the banks of the Thames River, about 15 miles south of the powwow site, the casino is owned by the rival Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut.

In 1994, the federal government declared that the casino Mohegans, who now have 1,600 members on their rolls, were the true tribe. That gave them the quasi-sovereign status necessary to conduct gambling on tribal land.

Cook's group, known as the Native American Mohegans, with 600 members, was left out in the cold. He blames "power and greed" for the exclusion.

Since 1988, when Congress first enacted legislation to regulate Indian casinos, tribal gambling has grown into a \$15 billion-a-year industry, with 330 facilities in 29 states. The exploding profits have caused high-stakes fights over tribal membership across the country.

In California, with more than 50 tribal casinos, more than 1,000 people in 14 tribes are locked in disputes over tribal enrollment. In Minnesota, members of the Shakopee Mdewakanton Dakota are fighting over stipends that pay individual tribal members about \$1 million annually from the tribe's Mystic Lake casino.

The casino Mohegans were savvy and fortunate enough to gain the backing of wealthy non-Indian investors - foremost Solomon Kerzner, a South African gambling czar, whose business group spent \$9 million on lobbyists and political donations to secure all-important tribal recognition in 1994 from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The casino opened in 1996.

Mark Brown, the chairman of the casino Mohegans, says federal recognition "proves who we are and where we came from. ... The genealogy is a no-brainer. And if it's not there, it's not there - time to move on."

"We see them as cousins," Cook says of the casino Mohegans. "But their leadership does not acknowledge us."

Nowhere is the boom in Indian casinos more evident than in southeast Connecticut, between New York and Boston.

About 10 miles south of the Mohegan Sun casino in Uncasville - named for the tribe's founding chief, whose identity was appropriated by the misleadingly titled novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* - the Grand Pequot Tower soars 534 feet above the opulent Foxwoods hotel and casino complex in Ledyard. Owned by the Mashantucket Pequot tribe, Foxwoods brings in an estimated \$1.3 billion annually and is widely acknowledged as the world's most profitable gambling operation.

The Mashantuckets got federal recognition in 1983, when President Ronald Reagan signed a bill settling a land claim filed by the tribe in 1976.

Last year, Connecticut received nearly \$400 million through revenue-sharing agreements that give the state 25 percent of the gross slot machine revenue from the casinos in return for permitting both tribes to operate slot machines. The casinos are credited with creating more than 20,000 jobs.

Yet, the state is also home to one of the nation's strongest anti-casino movements, led by Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat who was elected to a fourth term in 2002, and author Jeff Benedict.

Both are concerned because tribal land is exempt from most state and local laws, including land use and environmental regulations. And both are determined to prevent the construction of new casinos by two recently recognized tribes.

In June 2002, the BIA recognized the Eastern Pequot tribe. In January, after more than two decades, it approved the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation. But Blumenthal is appealing the Eastern Pequot decision and plans to go to court over the Schaghticoke, hampering any casino construction for years.

Cook laments that Connecticut's anti-casino movement has scared off potential financial backers for his tribe, who would have to gamble millions of dollars to pay for the Washington lobbyists and genealogical research necessary for the tribe's recognition petition, filed in 2002, to succeed.

Steven L. Austin, a cultural anthropologist and former BIA staffer who helped to evaluate the petition filed by Cook's group, says some members have a legitimate claim to membership in the tribe that owns the Mohegan Sun. Others, including the tribe's leader, Eleanor Fortin, also known as Princess Rippling Waters, are not Indians because they were adopted into the tribe, Austin says.

"Eleanor Fortin ... is no more Indian than I am," says Austin.

During the BIA's evaluation of Mohegans' federal recognition petition, it recommended purging tribal rolls of people with dubious tribal ancestry. The tribe removed 118 names in 1990.

"About 15 percent of the members were taken off, and that's what Eleanor Fortin's group is comprised

of," says Austin.

Edwin Jessiman, the tribe's historian and a retired University of Maine social sciences professor, says Fortin can trace her Indian heritage through two Mohegan family lines. "If anybody says Eleanor is not a Mohegan, they'll have a real problem," he says.

Connecticut's anti-casino movement is led by Benedict, the author of *Without Reservation*, which focuses on the state's other Indian gaming tribe, the Mashantucket Pequots. He alleges that they are imposters, the brainchild of Richard A. "Skip" Hayward, who he says is at best 1/16th American Indian, and a group of lawyers who had one goal: to create a tribal casino.

Hayward and members of his family avoided genealogical scrutiny when the tribe bypassed the time-consuming BIA process and received recognition through a congressional act in 1983. Three years later, the tribe opened a bingo hall, then found a Malaysian billionaire, Lim Goh Tong, to bankroll Foxwoods, which opened in 1992.

Hayward, who was ousted as the tribe's leader in 1998, could not be reached for comment. But his successor, Kenneth Reels, whose mixed ancestry includes Narragansett and Pequot blood, says the charges made in Benedict's book are spurious. He has released a genealogical study he says proves his Indian roots.

"Check to see if Jeff Benedict lost any money, or anybody in his family at Foxwoods," Reels said. "What if he's a bigot?"

Benedict said he has not lost money at Foxwoods, and neither have any members of his family. A devout Mormon, Benedict says he simply has a strong aversion to gambling, believing it fosters corruption.

Opposition to Indian gaming reached a tipping point in Connecticut in 2002, when a dozen would-be tribes were seeking recognition from the BIA. Some of them had funding from deep-pocketed backers, including Donald Trump, who had plans for building casinos.

At that point, Benedict helped found the Connecticut Alliance Against Casino Expansion, and the group got the legislature to repeal a law permitting Las Vegas Nights, which had allowed charities to raise money through gambling. Foxwoods and the Mohegan Sun, as established casinos with "grandfather" status, are not affected by the repeal.

But repealing the Connecticut law created another hurdle for new tribes seeking gambling because federal law restricts tribal casinos to states where some form of gambling is legal.

"This state is fed up with being beholden to gambling interests," says Benedict. "We have the two biggest casinos on the planet; we don't need another one. Enough is enough."

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