

# Getting a Piece of the American Pie



Sister Sky Products



Monominee Tribal Enterprises Forestry Program

## THE RISE OF INDIAN CAPITALISM

The greatest untold story in American business is the rise of Native American economies, led by private Indian entrepreneurs and tribal governments. With Indian nations the last segment of America's populace to take a seat at the business table, Indian-owned enterprises are making up for lost time, sprouting up at a remarkable pace. Although not all will flourish, many are quickly taking root in the United States' economic soil.

Using revenues provided by gaming, some tribes are purchasing existing businesses, such as the Seminole Tribe of Florida's acquisition of Hard Rock International. Others are launching new endeavors, such as the 12-acre retail shopping complex opened by the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians in Highland, California; and Totem Soil, the industrial-scale composting business undertaken by the Tlingit tribal village of Kake, Alaska, which recycles waste from the local forest and fishery industries to create an organic potting soil. Simultaneously, Indian capitalists are engaged in a flurry of private startups.

The range of Indian-owned businesses—estimated at more than 200,000—is astonishing. For example, in food service and restaurants, look at barbecue chain Famous Dave's, led by Dave Anderson (Choctaw/Chippewa); tea company Itchik Herbs of Montana's Crow Reservation; and Illinois-based Red Cloud Food Service, Inc. Many large construction companies are Indian owned, such as Flintco of Tulsa, Oklahoma, led by Robin Flint Ballenger (Cherokee), and the Oregon- and Washington-based Cherokee General, led by Rhonda Herschell (Cherokee). Financial management companies include Native American Management Services, founded by Patricia Parker (Choctaw), and Tribal Financial Advisors, led by Vice Chairman Daniel Lewis (Navajo).

Almost any kind of service you need can be provided by an Indian-owned business, from video production (Kingfish Worldwide in Pennsylvania, led by Shawnee member Mark Wasler) and direct mail/marketing (Lakota Express, led by Karlene Hunter of the Oglala Sioux) to environmental services (at Porter Scientific in North Carolina, president and CEO Dr. Freda Porter is one

of only a few American Indian women who have earned a doctorate in mathematical and computational sciences).

There are natural gas suppliers, like Tiger Natural Gas of Oklahoma, owned by Lori Nalley (Muscogee); office-supply companies, like Caddo Solutions of Denver, led by self-described "American Indianpreneur" Don Kelin (Caddo); and even non-profit businesses (like home builder Red Feather Development Group in Bozeman, Montana). Seeking fine chocolate? Try the Chickasaw-owned Bedré Fine Chocolates in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma. Want a vacation? Try one of the hundreds of top-notch tribal-owned resorts now operating coast to coast in the U.S. and Canada, and get there on Air Creebec or Air Inuit. Bottled water, banks, wild rice, fine arts and crafts, book publishers, products for the U.S. military, cheese production, auto electrical harnesses...the list is endless.

Join us now as we take a more detailed look at a handful of Indian enterprises and entrepreneurs reshaping the face of American business.

—Daniel Gibson

# INDIAN ENTREPRENEURS

BY VALERIE TALIMAN (NAVAJO)

Indian-owned and -operated businesses are as varied as the colors of the rainbow, from large corporations with income in the hundreds of millions of dollars to small mom-and-pop endeavors, and from sole proprietors to tribally owned operations. Here's a look at a handful that reflect this diversity.



## Sister Sky

Over the course of a decade, sisters Monica Simeon and Marina TurningRobe (Spokane) have created natural body-care products, a reservation-based manufacturing facility, jobs and training opportunities for tribal members.

Based on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington, Simeon and TurningRobe manufacture, market and distribute a complete line of natural bath and body-care products inspired by their grandmothers' knowledge and use of traditional medicines. "Our unique formulas are inspired by Native American herbal wisdom and contain nature's own healing herbs from the Earth," TurningRobe explains. "We tell the plant tradition stories on each product in a way that promotes cultural sharing and authenticity."

Sister Sky products are sold through hotels, casino resorts and spas, and also are available through the company's Web site. They recently acquired an international distributor to increase sales after improving their business model to be more competitive. In 2010, Sister Sky is rolling out a new division, Blue Sky Hospitality, to provide workforce training to tribal members for careers in the hotel/lodging industry. The nationally accredited hospitality-training program can be customized to clients' needs.

"As Native American businesswomen, we hope to diversify the economy on our reservation with job creation and entrepreneurial inspiration," says Simeon. "Our greatest hope is to build an honorable company to pass on to the next generation that aspires to work hard, follow a dream and be successful."

888/742-0906 or [www.sistersky.com](http://www.sistersky.com)

## The Sequoia Team

In the world of business, it's still rare to find Native American financial advisors, especially young power couples who are handling securities and investments for tribes and affluent individuals. Meet Ben Linton and Jenna Aguilar, partners in the San Diego-based Sequoia Team, who have quickly risen to the position of "top producers" in the financial-services sector in California.

Linton, a member of the Iipay Nation of Santa Ysabel, is a financial-services broker; Aguilar, enrolled in the Pauma Band of Luiseño Indians, recently became a registered securities representative. The couple offers nationwide service and consultations to large and small clients, with a focus on Indian Country and individuals who want to get the most return on their income, including tax strategies for per-capita income. The firm offers an array of financial services, including 401(k) plans, tax-advantaged investments, health insurance for organizations, life insurance, employee retirement plan "rollovers" and advice on investments that grow at a generous rate of return.

"We've saved tribes thousands of dollars each month on benefits packages for their employees," says Linton. "It's as simple as working with an agent who honestly has your best interests in mind. One of my primary goals is to help teach Native people how money works and how they can grow their wealth and plan for a secure future."

760/504-3960 or [tdvben@yahoo.com](mailto:tdvben@yahoo.com)



## Thalden Boyd Emery Architects

Charles “Chief” Boyd, AIA, long recognized as a leading Cherokee architect, has a strong philosophy about success in business. “Focus on high-quality personnel,” Boyd advises. “Hire people with talent and focus that talent to meet the client’s needs. It’s not just a building. Buildings express a feeling and spirit, and when we are really successful in developing a building for a client, that building expresses the spirit and culture of that tribe.”

Since his first project in 1963, the Cherokee Heritage Cultural Center in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, Boyd and his firm have grown to be one of the largest hospitality design firms in the nation. They specialize in architecture, master planning, interior design, engineering, and theme hotels and casinos. With more than 400 hotels and 100-plus casinos under their belt, the firm has been the architects for more than \$2 billion in casino projects in the United States and Canada, and has worked with more than 50 tribes.

The firm has also been ahead of the curve in designing and building both passive-solar and fully solar-heated green buildings since 1976, and is a member of the U.S. Green Building Council. “Our entire approach is based on creating unique and exciting visions, and bringing those visions to life. Whatever our client chooses, we will work to bring the project to life. We change ordinary to extraordinary,” says Boyd.

800/886-2693 or [www.thaldenboyd.com](http://www.thaldenboyd.com)



## Horizon Engineering Services

Margo Gray-Proctor defines success quite differently today than she did two years ago. Her company, Horizon Engineering Services, based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, enjoyed a decade of growth and success before the recession hit. After the economy tanked, business dropped by 65 percent, leaving her with some tough choices. As other companies folded, “We trimmed budgets, skipped raises, took on extra work, and resolved that we would do anything to keep working,” says Gray-Proctor, who did not lay off a single employee.

Twelve years after Horizon was launched with business partner Carl Cannizzaro, the firm has earned a stellar reputation for civil engineering consulting, master planning and project management for hotels, hospitals, airports and gaming developments. Gray-Proctor’s determination and business acumen have led to national recognition and numerous awards. In 2009, the proud citizen of the Osage Nation became the first woman to chair the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, representing thousands of Native business owners.

A third-generation entrepreneur, Gray-Proctor encourages tribal governments and other businesses to “buy Native” and support each other to keep money circulating in local economies to help create jobs. Widely praised for her commitment to give back to Indian Country, she is known among her Osage friends as the “Indian Oprah.”

918/663-0870 or [www.horizoneng.com](http://www.horizoneng.com)





## Lamar Associates

After retiring from an admirable 25-year career in law enforcement and with the FBI, Walter Lamar (Blackfeet) founded a company dedicated to helping communities find solutions to crime and drug-abuse problems plaguing Indian Country. Lamar Associates trains police departments, housing authorities, communities and schools about gang awareness and drug-abuse prevention, safe-school planning, tribal housing security, emergency preparedness, and other tools designed to make Indian communities safer. The firm's staff has nearly 70 years of law enforcement and training experience. Collectively, they've trained more than 3,000 police officers and developed a national gang-prevention curriculum. Lamar is also adamant about hiring Native Americans and buying Native products and services.

With offices in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Washington, D.C.; Portland, Oregon; and Billings, Montana, Lamar Associates has trained more than 50 tribal entities with on-site courses offered as one-, two- and three-day sessions. They tailor courses to meet tribal clients' needs, and offer customized online training courses that are cost-effective for reaching entire programs and individual learners. "We know Indian Country because we grew up there, and we have lived and worked there," says Lamar. "I want tribal governments to view our company as a tool to empower themselves and their employees."

202/543-8181 or [www.lamarassociates.net](http://www.lamarassociates.net)

# Business RESOURCES

There are many resources available to assist businesses owned and operated by Native American individuals and tribal governments. Here's a brief summary of some of them.

### **U.S. Small Business Administration**

[www.sba.gov/aboutsba/sbaprograms/naa](http://www.sba.gov/aboutsba/sbaprograms/naa)

The SBA is a federal entity created just to assist small businesses. Within the past few years, the SBA launched the Office of Native American Affairs, a division devoted specifically to American Indian, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian enterprises. Clara Pratte (Navajo) was appointed its director in May 2009. Among other programs, the SBA now has a pool of funds, the America's Recovery Capital (ARC) loan program, to provide guaranteed loans at zero percent interest, and is actively seeking suitable businesses to provide these loans to. The program ends Sept. 20, 2010. It also offers free executive training, funding to nonprofits offering business services, and assistance with securing federal procurement and service contracts. Its impressive Web site features business success stories, a business locator, program descriptions and other resources.

### **U.S. Department of the Interior**

Jack R. Stevens, Chief, Division of Economic Development/Indian Energy  
Room 20C, S. Interior Bldg.  
1951 Constitution Ave. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20245  
[jackstevens@bia.gov](mailto:jackstevens@bia.gov)

The DOI's Bureau of Indian Affairs has divisions devoted to tribal and Indian economic development, small-business assistance and grants, energy development, etc. It operates an Indian business loan program that provides up to 90 percent of funding needed for specific projects, which allows startups to secure the additional 10 percent needed. The department also works with universities to produce business studies and plans for Native enterprises, and provides workforce training, Indian management training and many other services.

### **U.S. Department of Commerce**

[www.mbda.gov](http://www.mbda.gov)

The DOC's Minority Business Development Agency includes programs for low-interest loans, equity financing, venture capital and grants. It provides assistance with tax questions, startup tasks, management standards, risk management, employee relations, strategic planning, marketing and many other aspects of launching, sustaining and growing a business.

### **U.S. Department of Labor**

[www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)

The DOL has established an office devoted to job creation for Native Americans, the Special Assistant for Indian Affairs. It is being directed by Nicole Willis (Cayuse/Nez Perce/Yakama/Oglala). She can be contacted at 202/693-6453 or by e-mail at [willis.nicole@dol.gov](mailto:willis.nicole@dol.gov).

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Bureau of Indian Affairs Shiprock Agency  
built by Chuska Development Corporation

## Chuska Development Corporation

Laurence R. Manuelito was one of the first Navajo entrepreneurs to dream big in business. His Phoenix-based construction company, Chuska Development Corporation, has handled some \$100 million in projects on Indian reservations since 1977. With more than 30 years of experience in construction and construction management for residential, commercial and institutional facilities, Chuska has built sports pavilions, community centers, tribal colleges, retail centers and federal buildings throughout the Southwest. Loyal to his heritage, yet progressive in his thinking, planning and leadership, Manuelito brings respect and a unique working style to his business relationships with Native communities. His advice to budding entrepreneurs is to “work real hard and dream big.”

480/967-1977 or [www.chuskacorp.com](http://www.chuskacorp.com)



Tulip Resort Casino

## The Tulalip Tribes

Under the leadership of Chairman Mel Sheldon, the Tulalip Tribes’ business enterprises are flourishing on their 22,000-acre land base north of Seattle (see March/April 2003 issue). In addition to their lavish Tulip Resort Casino and new \$130 million luxury hotel and spa (see March/April 2009 issue), they also operate Quil Ceda Village, a business park that boasts more than 100 premium outlet stores, specialty shops and restaurants. The tribes’ enterprises also include Tulalip Amphitheatre, Tulalip Broadband, a smoke shop and liquor store, a new gas station, and an innovative renewable-energy facility (see p. ??). Sheldon’s vision for future development includes a four-year college on the reservation. He places a high priority on protecting the tribes’ land and resources. “Every day here at Tulalip, our legal team and scientists work to maintain treaty-guaranteed rights to off-reservation fishing and marine resources, and protection of our area environment.”

800/869-8287 or [www.tulaliptribes-nsn.gov](http://www.tulaliptribes-nsn.gov)



Trevor George-Fowler

## The Animal Agency

Trevor George-Fowler (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) grew up with lions and tigers and bears. As a child actor in the children’s television show *Critter Gitters*, he worked with a variety of exotic animals before pursuing a career as a professional animal trainer. Fowler now co-owns The Animal Agency, which raises and trains large carnivores, birds of prey and other rescued animals for the film industry. The company has more than 30 years of experience in supplying affection-trained animal actors, from exotics to domestics. From his mountain ranch in California, Fowler coordinates a busy schedule that keeps himself and his animal actors on the road working steadily. “You can’t live in fear, but you must always have respect for them,” he says of his “crew.”

505/603-4389 or [www.theanimalagency.com](http://www.theanimalagency.com)

## Menominee Tribal Enterprise Forestry Program

The treasured 220,000-acre Menominee forest in Wisconsin is “an island of green timber in an ocean of cleared land,” says Menominee Chief Forester Marshall Pecore. It comprises 12 distinctive forest habitats and more than 30 species of trees, including 200-year-old white pines. Eagles, osprey, hawks, deer, wolves and bears inhabit this shining example of 150 years of sustainable forestry and ecosystem management by the Menominee Tribe. Although its logging, milling and marketing of forest products slowed during the economic downturn, the tribe has been able to sustain jobs for its community. Climate change is now a major concern, with severe weather, pine beetle infestations and market disruptions affecting the timber industry. But Pecore notes, “We’ve practiced sustainable forestry for a long time, and we always manage to adapt.”

715/756-2311 or [www.mtewood.com](http://www.mtewood.com)

## Arrow-Magnolia International, Inc.

Arrow-Magnolia is a Native American- and woman-owned company that manufactures and sells industrial cleaning and maintenance chemicals. Based in Dallas, the company has been in existence for more than 80 years, specializing in serving construction, aviation, manufacturing, industrial plants, schools, golf courses, municipalities and other related markets. The company offers green, non-hazardous and biodegradable cleaning products for virtually any application.

Arrow has built a solid reputation for quality and reliability throughout the construction industry for developing industrial cleaners. The company has also held a leading position in products used by the telecommunications industry for cleaning, maintaining and refurbishing equipment. While Arrow’s management team has stayed focused on traditional markets, they anticipate working this year to increase sales to Native American businesses such as casinos, hotels, schools and administrative operations. They take pride in being on the leading edge of innovation and customer service.

“It is good to get 2009 behind us,” says majority owner Tanya Tippeconnic Shaw (Comanche/Cherokee). “It was a very challenging year, as our major markets and customers were impacted negatively from the downturn in the economy. We adjusted our business by reducing expenses and maintaining a sharp focus on our markets. We sense that 2010 will be a better year, and we look forward to growing the business once again. We will be looking at some new markets and working to grow our staff of sales representatives.”

800/527-2101 or [www.arrowmagnolia.com](http://www.arrowmagnolia.com) 

*Valerie Taliman (Navajo) is a former newspaper editor, radio producer and magazine publisher based in Albuquerque who specializes in social and environmental justice issues. Her company, Three Sisters Media, provides public relations and advocacy services.*

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### National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development

953 E. Juanita Ave.  
Mesa, AZ 85204  
480/545-1298 or [www.ncaied.org](http://www.ncaied.org)

The mission of NCAIED, often referred to simply as “The National Center,” is to expand American Indian private-sector employment and positively impact reservation communities by establishing business relations between Indian enterprises and private industry. Within that framework, it conducts many programs and projects, offering technical services, resources and marketing tools to assist its members. Its professional staff can help create business plans, conduct financial analysis, and assist with certifications and marketing research. It also hosts the largest and oldest annual gathering of Indian businesses, federal government agencies and corporate parties: the Reservation Economic Summit & American Indian Business Trade Fair (RES). RES 2010 is being held at the Las Vegas Hilton Feb. 21–24. The nonprofit was launched in 1969 and has offices across the country. Over its 40 years, the group has worked with more than 25,000 Native businesses and helped arrange billions of dollars in contracts and financing for its clients. The executive director is Maria Dagmar; the board chair is Margo Gray-Proctor (Osage).

### American Indian Chamber of Commerce

Organized by states, the AICC has offices in New Mexico, Oklahoma, California, Arizona, Texas, Wisconsin and South Carolina, and regional offices including the Rocky Mountains and the western states. They stress summits, mixers and other opportunities for networking, as well as localized assistance, workshops and seminars. Each state has its own Web site (search online).

### First Nations Development Institute

703 Third Ave., Suite B  
Longmont, CO 80501  
303/774-7836, [www.firstnations.org](http://www.firstnations.org), [info@firstnations.org](mailto:info@firstnations.org)

The sole nationally oriented nonprofit devoted to “building Indigenous assets,” this award-winning organization focuses on assisting reservation-based profit, nonprofit and tribal endeavors. It offers education (on site as well as at conferences), analysis, consultation and limited financial resources to select programs and projects incorporating local, Native-oriented values and approaches.

### First Nations Oweesta Corp.

910 Fifth St., Ste. 101  
Rapid City, SD 57701  
605/342-3770 or [www.oweesta.org](http://www.oweesta.org)

This impressive organization, launched in 1986, works in the fields of financial education, enterprise and entrepreneurship development, lending and capitalization, and research and policy advocacy on a tribal or Indian community level. With its affiliate, the First Nations Development Institute, it provides grants for startup Native Community Development Financial Institutions. Oweesta and eight partner organizations were recently awarded a three-year, \$2 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to establish a national demonstration project fostering Native entrepreneurship in rural South Dakota and Wyoming. Tracey Fischer (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe) is the group’s president and CEO.

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### **Travois New Markets**

[www.travois.com](http://www.travois.com)

This nationally certified Community Development Entity based in Kansas City recently was awarded \$80 million from the U.S. Department of the Treasury to specifically stimulate job creation and economic activity in Indian Country through flexible financing of energy projects; water, waste water and communication infrastructure projects; and other endeavors.

### **Native American Business Alliance**

[www.native-american-bus.org](http://www.native-american-bus.org)

Launched in 1995, NABA stresses networking with large corporations at an annual procurement conference, helping Native companies become certified as minority-owned businesses, and hosting seminars and training sessions for its members. Its executive director is Jackie Gant (Oneida) and the board president is Lee Pepion (Blackfoot).

### **American Indian Economic Development Fund**

831 Como Ave.

St. Paul, MN 55103-1463

651/917-0819 or [www.aiedfloans.org](http://www.aiedfloans.org)

Founded in 1991, this fund provides “gap” financing, technical assistance and business education on and off reservations to members of federally recognized tribes who are creating or expanding retail, service and manufacturing businesses that hire Indian employees.

### **American Indian Business Leaders**

[www.aibl.org](http://www.aibl.org)

This Missoula, Montana-based nonprofit, launched in 1984, supports and promotes the education and development of future Indian business leaders through internships, scholarships and other professional training programs. The executive director is Maurice “Mo” Smith (Navajo).

### **Indigenous Internet Chamber of Commerce**

[www.iicoc.com](http://www.iicoc.com)

This group is dedicated to increasing economic opportunities for Indigenous nations and promoting Native e-commerce and online business-to-business activity. A primary tool is its membership directory.

### **American Indian Business Development Office**

[www.americanindianbusiness.com](http://www.americanindianbusiness.com)

This body has a specific focus on assisting North Dakota companies to obtain state and federal contracts, and Native businesses to obtain 8(a) certification from the SBA.

### **National Indian Business Association**

1730 Rhode Island Ave. NW, Room 501

Washington DC, 20036

202/321-3704, [www.nibanetwork.org](http://www.nibanetwork.org), [phomerjr@hotmail.com](mailto:phomerjr@hotmail.com)

This nonprofit “opens doors for tribal economic development projects and off-reservation businesses, serving in advisory and networking functions,” says its leader, Pete Homer.

—Daniel Gibson