

Money, Greed and Power Keep Chukchansi Casino Closed, Tribe Still Divided

By Ezra David Romero



Tex McDonald leads the faction that attempted an ambush of the casino in October, 2014.

Credit Ezra David Romero / Valley Public Radio

The future of the Chukchansi tribe in Central California is in jeopardy. The federal government shut down the tribe's casino six months ago after a conflict over control of the tribe escalated to violence. Now many tribal members are without basic services, and the multi-million dollar resort sits vacant, threatening the tribe's finances. As Valley Public Radio's Ezra David Romero reports, the Chukchansi people are just one example of what happens when big money, greed and power intersect in a struggle for cultural identity.

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5:42

Listen to the story here.

Chris Ballew's great-great-great-grandfather was the last known chief of the Chukchansi tribe

Credit Ezra David Romero / Valley Public Radio

Chris Ballew is as Chukchansi as you can get.

"My great-great-great-grandfather was the last chief of the tribe," says Ballew.

Her family has lived on the same 1,000 acres in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada near Yosemite since 1892. It's here in the ranch style home she built with her husband along the Fresno River where Ballew says she feels the most connected to her Native American heritage.



But that tie today isn't enough to make Ballew officially part of the Chukchansi tribe. She and 18 others in her family were disenrolled from the tribe in 2012.

ROMERO: "What was the mood like that day when you found out you were disenrolled?"

BALLEW: "Disbelief and anger and hurt. My uncle was honored as an elder at the pow wow and a week later he got a letter saying he was no longer a member."

Listen

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Listen to Ballew here.

Ballew is just one of hundreds of members that have been kicked out of the tribe. Membership began to shrink after the Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino was built in the early 2000's, because tribal leaders found ways to disenroll members. There are around 900 members today, but 30 years ago there were as many as 1,800.

"It wasn't even money; it was the idea of money. There weren't that many Indians up on the hill before then the casino came and people started moving in."

The Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino sits shuttered in Madera County.

Credit Ezra David Romero / Valley Public Radio

After tribal bills are paid, earnings from the casino are divided between members. Fewer members mean larger monthly checks in the mailbox. But since the casino is shuttered, those checks have stopped. At the same time tribal government has broken down. At one point there were seven tribal factions and multiple tribal councils.

Nancy Ayala is on the current Chukchansi tribal council. Opponent's claim Ayala intended to kick hundreds of tribal



members out in 2013 stating the tribe should be limited to two families, 46 people.

Ayala says as soon as the tribe started talking about the casino, membership grew.

“It wasn’t even money; it was the idea of money,” Ayala says. “There weren’t that many Indians up on the hill before then the casino came and people started moving in.”

Ayala remembers life before the casino.

“Before all this we used to go over to the North Fork pow wow and play cards and ball and stuff like that and be all together as Indian people,” Ayala says.



Vernon King of a rival faction of the Chukchansi Tribe attempted to take boxes out of the casino but were stopped by Madera County Sheriff's Deputies.

Credit Ezra David Romero / Valley Public Radio

Money has complicated matters for the tribe so much that their casino was shut down six months ago because of violence. One of the factions stormed the casino in what seemed like a Las Vegas heist: SUVs, body guards and guns.

Tex McDonald led the takeover.

“They didn’t want to do an audit,” McDonald says. “Since they’ve been in power \$11 million is missing. So we come in and want to know what happened to it. They stole money from us.”

McDonald’s now in jail for his involvement. A day later his faction tried to remove sensitive documents from the casino but they were stopped by another faction.

"Get my vehicle up here now."

"This is attempting to repossess."

"Tell them we need it up here now."

"The federal court order says they shall not attempt to repossess or take control of the casino."

Listen

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Listen to the disagreement here.

There's still allegations that around \$46 million in tribal money is unaccounted for. Besides greed, many of these factions believe a large part of the problem is over how the tribe defines membership. A member has to prove they are Chukchansi either through land given to their ancestors by the government or by proving a "special relationship" to the tribe as a Chukchansi whose ancestors weren't given land.

Tribal leaders want to open the casino as soon as possible. Around 1,200 employees were let go when the casino shutdown in October, 2014.

Credit Ezra David Romero / Valley Public Radio

If they can't prove either they're out, but only if the council questions their membership. Dixie Jackson is the secretary for the Morris Reid faction. She originally helped open the casino.

"If you do away with all those then you're going to do away with my cousin my aunt or my grandpa or me because I don't fit into that pattern," says Jackson.



Fresno State Political Science Professor Kenneth Hansen studies the Chukchansi tribe He says the rules for membership, plus millions of dollars from the casino have created a subculture of greed in the tribe.

"When they say it's not about politics, it is," Hansen says. "When they say it's not about the money, it is. Where those two things converge you have an explosion it seems to me."

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Hansen says the tribe's issues date back to the late 50s when the tribe was disbanded by the government only to be recognized again in the 80s.

"People are robbed of their identity when a tribe is terminated, the community is dissolved, records are destroyed, so you're not really sure who actually belongs to the tribe anymore," Hansen says.

Today multiple factions have to come together, putting aside individual issues with a hope of getting the casino open. Reggie Lewis leads one of the largest factions.

"We're trying to deal with all the issues, form all the tribal members and even though they were supporting, Nancy, or

they were supporting Tex, or they were supporting my sister and Monica,” Lewis says. “You’re still a tribal member and we’re still going to treat you like a tribal member.”



Chris Ballew says she isn't sure if the Chukchansi tribe will ever get along internally, but she hopes the casino opens so elders can receive services again.

Credit Ezra David Romero / Valley Public Radio

Back in Ahwanhee just a short drive away from the casino, Chris Ballew, one of the descendants of the last Chukchansi chief is skeptical the tribe will ever get along.

ROMERO: “What would your great, great grandfather say about all this if he knew today where his tribe’s gone?”

BALLEW: “He would just have a fit. He’d probably closed down the casino.”

Listen

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Listen to Ballew here.

The tribe hopes to solve these problems with the opening of the casino within three to six months and by holding an election for a new tribal council as early as May.

