

MAKING IT WORK

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PUSHED US THAT WAY
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Monique Legg,
Little Shell member

James Parker Shield stood on the decrepit wooden porch of an old, boarded-up, vandalized building. Looking out at the overgrown lawn in front of him, he pointed to the far end of the property. That’s where the teepees will go.

He strolled along the property’s sidewalk, thinking of the many gatherings his tribe might have here. Instead of old concrete foundations along those sidewalks, there would be vendors selling food, jewelry and artwork.

“This is where we’ll put the straw bale building,” he said as he closed in on the far right corner of the seven-acre lawn.

The plans don’t stop there. Shield turned back to the building, the Dallas Cowboys baseball cap on his head casting his spectacled eyes in shadow.

The building is 15 miles outside of Great Falls. Almost a century ago, it served as the headquarters for the Morony Dam. If Shield gets his way, it will be the home of a fully functional tribal business, the first of its kind for the Little Shell band of Ojibwe. The Montana tribe has no reservation and, after decades of legal wrangling, continues to go unrecognized by the federal government.

Today, the state of Montana owns the land and is looking to hand it over to the Little Shell, which has no money to pay its



ABOVE James Parker Shield stands on the deck of a century-old building — a building that he hopes will serve as a visitor center for his tribe. As the director of government affairs for the Little Shell tribe, Shield thinks the tribe should offer cultural immersion camps at the visitor center 15 miles out of Great Falls.

own tribal officials, let alone buy land. Shield said the land and building would serve as a gathering place, the closest version of a reservation the tribe has seen.

Without a reservation, the Little Shell members are scattered around the world, from Great Falls (where the largest concentration of Little Shell live today) to France.

Tribal leaders say that without a place to gather as a tribe, the 4,500 enrolled members have lost touch with each other and their culture.

But being without a reservation hasn’t been all bad, Shield said. He talks of the success of his fellow Little Shell who, according to the Department of Labor, have managed

an unemployment rate of only 10 percent. This is much better than most of Montana’s seven reservations, some of which report up to 70 percent unemployment.

Shield knows that without a reservation his tribe has learned how to live in the urban world. “The Little Shell are hustlers,” he said. “We’ve adapted and not only survived; we’ve thrived.”



ABOVE Lisa Sims, corporate vice president of Highway Specialties in Great Falls, does not remember any interaction with the extended Little Shell tribe when she was growing up. She said her family filled the place of her tribe both when her father shared Little Shell traditions like making bannock, and when relatives from Canada would bring beadwork during visits.

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Lisa Sims,
Little Shell member

The Little Shell have spent decades fighting for federal recognition as a tribe. Although they have seen small successes locally, the national movement has stalled. In 2000, Montana recognized the Little Shell as a tribe, offering some financial support, but it pales in comparison to federal treaty rights provided for recognized tribes including funding, health care and education.

Perhaps even more valuable would be a

land allotment. Upon recognition, tribes are guaranteed a minimum of 200 acres.

Shield, who was appointed director of government affairs for the Little Shell by Tribal Chairman John Gilbert, conceded that not having a reservation has forced the Little Shell to adapt to the world around them. Even as the tribe continues its push for federal recognition, Shield said the Little Shell's members have benefitted in some ways from integrating into urban areas, something that might not have happened if they'd had a reservation.

Maylenn Smith, director of the Indian Law Clinic at the University of Montana School of Law, agrees with Shield, although she is quick to point out that there are too many factors to consider before making a blanket statement about the tribe's success without a reservation.

“Not having a reservation, they have assimilated into society, but on the other hand, there are a lot of successful Indian entrepreneurs on reservations,” she said. She cited the Flathead Reservation, which has many successful businesses thanks to its urban nature. She stressed that many Little Shell are located in urban areas where both customer and job markets are much stronger than on most reservations.

Monique Legg is one Little Shell member whose career flourished as a result of living

in an urban area. She was hired as a bank teller in Helena in her early 20s and found a love for the profession. Sticking with the bank, putting in the hours and taking classes to improve her skills helped her move up the ladder to her current position as assistant vice president of Valley Bank in Helena.

“Growing up, the way I was raised, I don't think you're really meant to succeed,” she said.

With Little Shell aunts, uncles and cousins living all within a few blocks of her house in Helena, Legg grew up with a familial support system much like one a reservation provides. But growing up in a more urban area means getting jobs that take you away from family and home, and now only she and a cousin remain in Helena.

“We are scattered,” Legg said. “Society has kind of pushed us that way. You have to live, and to live you have to work.”



ABOVE “There are no such things as banker's hours,” said Monique Legg, assistant vice president of Valley Bank in Helena. Legg laughs when she recalls her first jobs at a Burger King and a movie theater.

The Little Shell have taken root all over the world, and even when several live in the same town, that doesn't mean they know each other.

In Great Falls, enrolled Little Shell member Lisa Sims is busy at work making street signs.

Her sign shop is filled with large machines that hum, drill and slice on command. She is the only person who works in the shop and she moves to each contraption with speed and precision.

After 23 years in the construction business, she has risen from flagging traffic to her position now: corporate vice president of Highway Specialties, which employs up to 90 people in its busiest time of year and takes on an average of 35 contracts per year.

Sims said she loves the variety of her responsibilities at work. In a single day she could be in her office doing payroll, and then

LITTLE SHELL TIMELINE

1830 Turtle Mountain Chippewa begin migrating west with the buffalo.

1879 One band crosses the Missouri River and establishes a small settlement where Great Falls is today.

1892 The U.S. government sends a delegation to the Turtle Mountain Reservation to address poverty and starvation. Chief Little Shell tries to get more metis, or mixed-blood Indians, recognized as Chippewa, but delegates will not hear his arguments. Chief Little Shell walks out of the meeting, and the Turtle Mountain band agrees to the Ten Cent Treaty, selling the tribe's 9.5 million acres of land for 10 cents an acre.

1896 Congress orders all Cree Indians in Montana to relocate to their reservation in Canada. Some Little Shell are mistaken for Cree and shipped north in cattle cars with the Cree.

1906 The Ten Cent Treaty is finally ratified by Congress. More than 500 Chippewa file for trust land. Congress receives complaints about the number of Indians settling on public land all over Montana and North Dakota, and these Chippewa are denied benefits from the government.

1978 The Little Shell submits its letter for intent to the Montana State legislature for recognition.

2000 The state of Montana formally recognizes the Little Shell as a tribe.

2009 The federal government denies the Little Shell's petition for recognition, arguing the tribe does not meet the legal requirements of federal recognition, including a failure by the tribe to display political influence over its scattered and landless membership.

have to run out for a traffic control job. Later, she could be back in her workshop making signs.

She lives by the wisdom of her father, who spent years working for Montana sheep ranchers and receiving a bundle of hay to sleep in and blankets in return. She keeps his lessons close: life achievements are special and should be taken care of. To Sims this meant that if she wanted something, she had to go out and get it.

"Not depending on the government for anything makes me, I think, more appreciative of what I get for myself," she said, thinking of times when she visited her family on other reservations and saw others who do not appreciate all that they have. "You should be a good steward of what you have," she said.

But not having a community of Little Shell meant her family didn't know what tribe they belonged to until she was a teenager. They had to dig into the past to solve the mystery.

"We always knew we were native, we just didn't know much else," she said. "I guess for

us it's the job of the individual to make sure we know we're a part of something bigger."

"Little Shell have such a sense of overcoming things that we aren't afraid of failing," Shield said. "That's how I got where I am today."

He grew up in a shantytown in Great Falls located on Hill 57. He remembers the Indians there using large metal basins as bathtubs. Every once in a while they would pile into trucks and take their tubs to the meat packing plant across town. There, they would purchase all of the innards that the plant couldn't use.

"We called it tripe," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "And it wasn't so bad. Some of the parts that we ended up getting are delicacies, depending on how you prepare them."

For almost 200 years the Little Shell have approached their problems with this make-lemonade spirit.

Bands of the Chippewa, including the Little Shell, began migrating with the buffalo in North Dakota and Montana in 1830. While the rest of the tribe continued

to migrate, one band crossed the Missouri River in Montana in 1879 and established a settlement of about 25 families near where Great Falls is today.

When delegates from Washington wouldn't hear Chief Little Shell's pleas for a larger reservation and more financial help, he walked out of the meeting. This left other Chippewa Indians to sign a treaty, effectively selling their land for 10 cents an acre.

With no land to call their own, the Little Shell squatted on public land all over the states, creating shantytowns like the one on Hill 57.

Shield remembers scavenging at the dump for food, scrap metal, clothing and anything else useful that they could find, all for the sake of survival. "Every dirty job in this town was done by our people," he said. "Fencing, picking rock, shoveling manure — that's a dirty, hot, funky job."

It was rough, Shield said, and when he was kicked out of high school for fighting in 1967, he headed south to Oklahoma, where he lived in the streets, worked where



ABOVE Patrick and Philip Legg participate in the flag song during the Kyi-Yo Celebration in Missoula. After not growing up in Helena, Patrick feels that having to seek out his heritage has been a more enriching journey than if the information had been right in front of him.

he could and fell in love. Taking this path in life meant a late start on the traditional track to prosperity. Eventually he headed back to Great Falls, where he attended the College of Great Falls and, at the end of his time there, he was appointed executive assistant on Gov. Ted Schwinden's staff, moved up to serve as the state coordinator of Indian affairs, and then worked with Rep. Denny Rehberg as a regional campaign coordinator and a field representative.

Since then, Shield has held every job from art gallery owner to Great Falls Tribune columnist. He also started an economic advising business and a magazine aimed at covering Indian issues in Montana. "I'm like weeds," he said with a shrug. "I've sprung up everywhere."

Patrick Legg has learned that if he wanted to know something about either his heritage or his future, he had to be the one to figure it out.

When he and his older brother Philip started mowing lawns in Helena at eight and 10 years old, they didn't want much more than some spending money. They weren't trying to be entrepreneurs. But not long after going door-to-door around their neighborhood, more than 20 families and businesses around Helena had hired the two boys to maintain their lawns.

"Patrick was just a little squirt," said their father, Kevin Legg. "He couldn't even push a mower by himself."

Within the first month they paid of their mower and weed eater and began budgeting for more equipment, Social Security and insurance bills.

A lawn care business like theirs would have been difficult to grow on a rural reservation because it wouldn't have had as many clients.

"I could have worked residentially-wise, maybe," he said. "But the commercial clients, which ended up being probably a little more than half (of the clients), that's how it ended up getting big."

The year Patrick graduated, Fire and Ice, which is the official name of the lawn care and snow removal business, had taken on 82 accounts — 48 for mowing and 34 for plowing — and that wasn't even at the business' peak. They had dropped several accounts at this point because Philip had left for college and couldn't help out in the summer because of internships. Taking on so many accounts taught these brothers dedication and hard work, the same traits that have persisted in their tribe.



ABOVE Patrick Legg stands in front of the lawn care equipment he and his older brother Philip purchased in the past decade. The brothers started Fire and Ice, a lawn care and snow removal business, when they were 8 and 10 years old.

Looking back on more than a decade of long, hot summers, Patrick is proud of the success of Fire and Ice. Most of the money they saved up went to paying a good chunk of each of their college tuition bills — Philip's at the University of Great Falls and Patrick's at the University of Montana. Now the brothers are both college students pursuing futures in law enforcement with the U.S. Forest Service. Patrick also hopes his future will include writing and singing country music.

He also wants to learn his tribe's language and continue dancing at the powwows he's come to love. Monique Legg had made the effort to enroll the boys in a school program when they were younger that would help them get back in touch with their heritage.

"I knew my boys would be lost if I didn't complete that circle," she said. "Then, the next thing I know, they would come home from school and know more than I did."

Shield works away at his desk in his Indian art gallery right across the street from the C.M. Russell museum in Great Falls. His white coffee mug proudly displays the Little Shell tribe's seal, which he designed.

He knows how hard it is to find solid

facts about his tribe, but he hopes the tribally owned visitor center at the Morony Company dam will help. Shield wants the tribe to offer cultural immersion camps on that land.

But that decision is a ways down the road.

For now, he's hoping he'll succeed at orchestrating his next big project: finalizing the tribe's ownership of the would-be visitor center.

Shield sees an inherent unfairness to the federal recognition process, which requires the tribe prove details of its past that he doubts some recognized tribes would be able to prove.

"We do everything (recognized tribes) do without everything that they have," he said. "We shouldn't have to strive for things other tribes take for granted."

The tribe has a few bills sitting in federal committees and, in planning a new appeal, is hoping the support of the Montana state legislature will lend the tribe an extra hand.

He and tribal chairman John Gilbert are convinced that if the government voted to recognize the Little Shell, the tribe would become an economic force to be reckoned with unlike any seen before. The business expertise they have garnered over the years would make them unstoppable, they said.

All they need is a chance.

Never one to sit still, Shield has taken it upon himself to fix up the old Morony building while the state works out the land deal. The tribe has decided to devote most of the \$70,000 provided by the state to the visitor center. Still, that money won't pay for much.

To make up the difference, Shield has contacted the Montana Conservation Corps for help in renovating the building's spacious deck. He hopes for donated help from other tribal members with skills in plumbing, architecture and construction.

Shield has ripped up carpet to reveal hard wood floors and identified holes in the walls that he'll need to fix. Bat droppings litter every surface. He has spent hours inside this building working by flashlight and breathing through an air filtration mask to avoid health risks.

But for one day, he disregarded the enormous amount of work in store to show one of his employees the building. They inspected every room, and despite decrepit condition within each, Shield was still thinking ahead. He told her to pick her office now before all the good ones are taken.