

Attorney who made tribes rich comes under fire

By Dale Kasler and Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

He started out in a tent at the reservation at Wounded Knee, S.D., an idealistic young lawyer defending Indians' rights. He evolved into a champion for Indian casinos – a towering political figure who cut deals with California governors and helped give birth to a \$7 billion-a-year industry.

Sacramento attorney Howard Dickstein has made his tribal clients rich. He's largely responsible for creating three of the region's top casinos: Jackson Rancheria, Cache Creek and the stunningly successful Thunder Valley resort near Lincoln.

After nearly 40 years representing tribes, however, Dickstein is a polarizing figure. His negotiating tactics have angered some tribes, and he is often depicted as a controlling presence who meddles in tribal affairs.

For the second time in four years, he is facing bitter accusations of gaining vast personal wealth at the expense of unsophisticated clients.

Two banned members of the United Auburn Indian Community, which owns Thunder Valley, have accused Dickstein of duping the tribe into paying his firm \$26 million in fees over six years.

Most of the money – about \$23 million – came through a fee arrangement that, until 2009, gave Dickstein's firm 2 percent of the tribe's share of Thunder Valley's profits. Legal experts and rival tribal lawyers say they have never heard of such an arrangement.

Dickstein said there was nothing wrong with it – and that he's

worth every penny.

“A tribe’s financial relationship with me is a phenomenal net benefit to the tribe,” he said.

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