

When Anna Prieto Sandoval became leader of the Sycuan Band of Mission Indians in 1972, its reservation near El Cajon was a tumbledown settlement of wooden shacks with outhouses, a 100-year-old Catholic church and a cinder-block meeting hall. About 80 members lived on the tribal land, and none had a steady job.

When she stepped down two decades later, the Sycuan had risen from abject poverty to become a national model of tribal self-sufficiency, a transformation that Sandoval was largely responsible for — and that she came to regret.

Sandoval, 76, a pioneer of the Indian gaming movement, died from complications of [diabetes](#) Oct. 28 at her home on the reservation, a tribal spokesman said.

In 1983, shortly after California began to allow Indian tribes to enter the gambling business, she brought in a bingo hall, which succeeded beyond expectations. Within a decade it was replaced by a glittering 68,000-square-foot casino complex that housed a 1,500-seat bingo parlor, a 35-table poker area and a 20-seat off-track betting theater, as well as a restaurant, bar and gift shop. Unemployment disappeared, and the Sycuan became one of the richest tribes in the nation.

"Her dedication was tremendous. It was all about her people, about native people," said Daniel J. Tucker, current chairman of the Sycuan band.

Tucker said Sandoval's vision and drive led to dramatic improvements. New houses for every family replaced the dilapidated structures. She built a new church, a medical clinic and a fire station. As the gambling operation grew, the Sycuan became one of the largest employers in east San Diego County, with 600 workers and almost 1 million visitors annually.

The reservation became, in her words, "a little Las Vegas," but she fretted that not all the changes were good.

She said that in the pre-casino days, if your roof leaked, you called your neighbor for help, and that when there was a potluck, everybody made a dish. Once the money started flowing, however, old customs started to fade. The tribal office supplied the roofers, and food for the

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potlucks came from caterers.

"Now the kids don't have no hardships," Sandoval complained in a 1994 interview with the San Diego Union-Tribune, noting that even 18-year-olds were given their own houses. "I guess it's good in a way, but when you lose your traditions, you don't know who you are, what you are. All they know is what's mine."

Sandoval was born on the reservation May 14, 1934. Few people in her tribe had more than a sixth-grade education, but she finished high school and later, after raising five children, attended Grossmont College in El Cajon and taught the Sycuan language, called Kumeyaay, at San Diego State. Twice married, she struggled to feed her family. She told The Times in 1991 that one of her worst days was when she walked 10 miles from the reservation to El Cajon to look for milk for her children. "I said, 'God, what can you do to help us?' " she recalled.

The answer to her prayer came in 1983 when Pan American International, a company that ran one of the first Seminole bingo halls in Florida, came to her with a proposal to build one for her tribe. Some Sycuan tribe members opposed the idea, wary of traffic jams and an influx of strangers. Sandoval overcame their objections by offering a site in a remote corner of the reservation that she owned with another member. "They got mad about it later," she said, when the Sycuan Bingo Palace prospered and her profits increased.

In 1987, Sycuan tribal council members broke with Pan American to run the operation themselves. Revenues grew, and in 1990 the tribe dedicated the new casino center.

Sandoval acknowledged that her "iron hand" leadership style alienated some tribe members. In 1991, she came up three votes short of winning reelection as tribal chair. But she was still one of the wealthiest Native Americans in California, with a grand house on a hill and a shiny Cadillac in the driveway. "She loved her cars," Tucker said.

After she died, most of her personal possessions — clothes, TVs, furniture — were burned in accordance with the Sycuan belief that she would need them for her journey to the next world.

Anna Prieto Sandoval, 76; Sycuan leader was a pioneer in Indian gaming - Los Angeles Times

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She is survived by her brother, George Prieto; sons Joseph, Raymond and Orlando; 15 grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren.

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