Native American Roots – Tribal Membership

The criteria for membership vary from tribe to tribe, but getting tribal membership usually isn’t easy. In addition to proving lineal descent from someone named on the tribe’s base roll, you must establish the required degree of blood quantum – the percentage of your physical make-up that is tribal native by bloodline.

How do I find out the membership requirements for my tribe?
There are 562 federally recognized tribes of American Indians and Alaska Natives. If a web browser search for the name of your tribe does not pull up the information you need, you can consult the Tribal Leaders Directory published by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and published on-line at www.bia.gov/DocumentLibrary/index.htm. You will need to work directly with the leadership of your tribe to establish membership.

What are the most typical requirements for membership?
Each tribe has a base roll which was established, usually, in the early 20th century, listing the members of the tribe at that time. Your first challenge will be to prove direct lineal descent from someone listed on that base roll. Then you must prove that you have the required level of blood quantum – the percentage of your genetic make-up that is native by bloodline. Most tribes require a 1/4 blood quantum – that is, you must be at least one-fourth Native American – but note that the Eastern Band of the Cherokees requires that you be only 1/16 or higher to join, and the Cherokee Nation has no minimum quantum restriction, so long as you can prove descent. There may be other conditions for membership as well: requirements for tribal residency or continued contact with the tribe are common.

How is “blood quantum” demonstrated?
One full-blooded grandparent would give you a 1/4 blood quantum. Likewise, two half-blooded grandparents would give you a 1/4 blood quantum. To apply for tribal membership, you would have to get a CDIB (Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood) card issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Can I use a DNA test to get tribal membership?
Only in rare cases. A common type of DNA test is an “autosomal” test, which purports to show the percentages of ethnicities in a person’s overall genetic make-up: that you are such-and-such a percentage Caucasian, such-and-such a percentage Native American, and so on. The value of these tests is disputed, and no federally-recognized tribe allows autosomal tests as evidence of tribal ancestry. There have been a few cases in which a Y-chromosome match with a recognized Native American has been accepted as compelling evidence for tribal membership.

Can I get government benefits through tribal membership?
According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, “There has long been a myth that Indians receive a monthly check from the U.S. Government because of their status as Indians. There is no basis for this belief other than misinformation and misconception of the status of American Indians. Some tribes, tribal members and lineal descendants received payments from the Federal Government resulting from claims settlements. But there are very few per capita payments that remain today.” There are a few government benefits that would be looking into, such as scholarship programs. So if you want to know more, you can contact the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Indian Services at www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/OIS/index.htm.

Can I get financial benefits directly from my tribe?
Some tribes distribute payments to enrolled members from revenues from the sale of tribal assets such as timber, hydroelectric power, or oil and gas. However, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, “Many tribes cannot make per capita payments because they do not have natural resources or other revenue from which they make a fund distribution.” Most people are aware that casino income has been financially rewarding to some Indian groups. Some of these tribes have responded by tightening membership restrictions, so that the rolls of some tribes are now effectively closed.