Michael J. Childs, Sr.
Narrator

Deborah Locke
Interviewer

Prairie Island Community, Minnesota
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AL = Aimee LaBree
Minnesota Historical Society

DL = Deborah Locke
Minnesota Historical Society

MC = Michael J. Childs, Sr.

Linda = Wife of Michael Childs

AL: This is Aimee LaBree on April 20, 2011, at the home of Michael J. Childs, Sr., Buffalo Slough Trail, Welch, Minnesota. Interviewer: Deborah Locke.

DL: Mr. Childs, could you spell your name for us?


DL: Do you have a nickname?

MC: Mike.

DL: When and where were you born?

MC: I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on May 2, 1945, at the Milwaukee County Hospital.

DL: Who were your parents?

MC: My parents were Lucille Campbell Childs and Lorenzo Will Childs. My mother, Lucille, was from Prairie Island.

DL: And Lorenzo, where was he from?
MC: He was from Red Granite, Wisconsin.

DL: Was he Native?

MC: He does have some Native in him. We tried to get a quarter blood quantum from the BIA for funding. In his records he was listed as Caucasian; or his dad was.

DL: What about your grandparents on both sides, what were their names?

MC: I only know my grandparents’ names from my maternal side, and that’s Lena Whipple Campbell. She was born in Maiden Rock, Wisconsin. And Joseph – I don’t know his – it was Campbell, anyway. And I don’t know where he was born. But he was Native, and of course Scott.

DL: Oh, Scottish too?

MC: Yes, Anton Campbell, his dad, was an interpreter.

DL: Who are, or were, your siblings?

MC: The oldest is Ramona Childs Jones; she resides here at Prairie Island. Then Claudine Sellers; she doesn’t use her Childs name in her description; she resides here at Prairie Island. I’m the next in line. Dennis Will Childs was three years younger than I am. He lived and died here at Prairie Island. Between me and Dennis was a sister, Christine, and she died when she was seven years old. She and Denny got rheumatic fever in the spring of the year, and I can’t remember the year, but she was seven years old. She died of an enlarged heart from the complications of rheumatic fever. My sister Reta R-E-T-A Childs resides here on Prairie Island. Alan Wayne Childs resides here on Prairie Island. And the baby was Dale Ronald Childs, and he lived and died here on Prairie Island.

DL: How long have you lived here in the community?

MC: We moved from Milwaukee in 1949. I graduated from Red Wing High School in 1964. I went to school at Rochester Junior College and then transferred to Dunwoody Industrial Institute, and graduated from there with a degree in Automotive General Study. I got hired by Sears right out of Dunwoody and then moved back here in 1978, while still working at Sears. I got a buy-out from Sears, a big-ticket severance package in March of 1992. I got my severance and pension and profit-sharing from Sears.

DL: Which Sears did you work at?

MC: I started at Knollwood Plaza in St. Louis Park. They closed that store in January of 1974, and I moved over to the Lake Street Auto Center.

DL: Are you an enrolled member of a Dakota Community?
MC: I'm enrolled here at Prairie Island.

DL: Do you have family members at other reservations?

MC: Yes, I got cousins at all four Sioux communities. I could never name them; I was never interested in that.

DL: I heard a little bit about where you went to school; what kind of student were you?

MC: In high school I was very shy; I couldn't find enough places to hide. I didn't feel very comfortable. But then I went to Rochester Junior College and started in engineering technology, which is basically drafting, and making blue prints. I was a mechanic type; I didn't like to have clean hands. And dirty hands didn't go good with drafting. There wasn't enough carbon tetrachloride to clean it. So anyway, I went to Dunwoody and it was just like they welcomed me with open arms. [Emotional]

DL: You finally found a program you liked, and they treated you well and you graduated, and you made a life doing that.

MC: Yes. It just changed me all around. [Emotional] I served on the Student Senate there at Dunwoody and it just changed me.

DL: What's your earliest memory from when you were a little boy?

MC: Oh, I remember when we lived in Milwaukee. You know how cities are; the buildings are pretty close together and that kind of stuff.

DL: So you remember the environment, mostly.

MC: Yes. Part of the dispute between my ma and dad was that we always had relatives come to visit and stay for a while. That's why Ma decided to move back home.

DL: She came here alone then, without your dad, with the children.

MC: Yes. However, he supported us. He used to drive up here on holidays and extended weekends. A couple of times when he had near accidents, falling asleep on the road and stuff. So he had to lessen and lessen that, but we always knew him and he always sent support through Western Union every week.

DL: What's the first news story you remember from your childhood?

MC: Gosh, I can't even remember.

Linda: He didn't have any electricity until he was like, 17.
MC: Yes. I lived in that – do you see that brown house [on their property]. It looks like a shed, but it’s....

Linda: It doesn’t have windows or anything because they put boards over them, just to keep the building up.

MC: We grew up there, and there were eight of us kids. We usually had cousins and stuff that stayed with us. So it was a three-room house; not three bedrooms.

DL: Which relative or relatives had the most influence on you when you were growing up?

MC: They were all quite important to me. I want to say the most important was my Uncle Sonny, Joseph W. Campbell. He gave me my first car [a 1946 Ford two door sedan] when I got my license in 1961, and he told me, “I’m giving you this car, but I want you to take care of it and make sure your ma gets to town.” [Emotional] And I still own the car; it’s out in my barn.

DL: It must have been very touching for you to get that car and be able to work on it. Were you at school at that time, or was that before school?

MC: I was in high school, because I graduated in ’64, and he gave it to me in ’61 when I got my driver’s license.

DL: It was before Dunwoody, then.

MC: Yes. And so that kind of leads me to Uncle Jim; James Campbell. He had a son – he had three sons and a daughter, but he had a son that was my age, and he worked at a junkyard in Hopkins, Hanson Auto Parts. And so he kept trying to get his son interested in cars and his son actually lived in South Dakota. They lived at Grandma’s once in a while, too. His son wasn’t interested [in cars], but it was a great opportunity for me, because he showed me how to work on cars and gave me some knowledge of what parts go in certain vehicles, and go in other vehicles.

One of as that I learned was that a 1950 Mercury V8 would bolt into my 1946 Ford. So that was important. Uncle Irvin Campbell helped Ma out by helping us harvest wood, mainly right here. So that was important. Uncle Tommy, that’s Thomas Campbell, he also helped us with wood and stuff like that. He always had a car, and so he was able to take us to town for groceries. Other than that we flagged the train down, actually over where Ray Owen grew up; it’s called Strum’s Crossing. We could flag the railroad train down. We’d catch the train to Red Wing which was 43 minutes west-bound. [On the return trip,] we’d catch the train in Red Wing. And Ma, she had all the prices and everything, and shopping lists.

It was important that we catch that train, because if we missed it, we had to catch the Greyhound to Highway 61 and County Road 18. That was about a four-mile hike down
the valley. So it was pretty important we caught the train. And then once in a while – not once in a while, but a couple of times we didn’t have either, and we had to walk down the railroad tracks. That’s about an eight-mile trek from Red Wing.

DL: Who taught you about being Dakota?

MC: Oh, I didn’t finish.

DL: Okay.

MC: Grandma Lena was very important to us because she came over practically every day. That’s Lena Campbell. She didn’t speak much English and we didn’t know Dakota because my mom went to Pipestone and Flandreau Boarding Schools. They were – I wish I could think of a word that was severe enough to say how they were stripped of their language.

DL: Yes, that was the intent.

MC: Although we didn’t know what Grandma was saying, we could tell [what she meant]. She was here so much that we knew what she was saying. Her sister, Rose Blower, also was here a lot; we called her Auntie Rose. She was very important to us too. Ma’s sister, Hazel Wells, lived right across the tracks and they visited a lot; siblings, you know, they’d come over and talk a lot. All the closest relatives were right here; they just were part of our life.

And that’s how we, leading back to your question, that’s how we got our values of Dakota life. It was very important that you shared, just everything. Times were hard and basically we either fished every day, or we hunted squirrels. We didn’t have guns; we used slingshots made out of the crotch of a tree with strips of tire rubber and leather.

DL: So that’s why that red squirrel [outside the picture window] caught your eye.

MC: When Linda’s granddaughter was here and the deer were out here. (She’s five now, but she was four then) and anyway she said, “Grandma, where’s the bow and arrow?” Back then they we used to hunt deer with bow and arrow.

Anyway, we’d either fish or hunt. Of course it’s cold right now, but we’d normally have to walk these railroad tracks about half-way to Red Wing and pick up turtles, and then we walked along the river banks and picked up turtles. We ate a lot of turtle; snapping turtle and what we called sand turtles. Then there’s kind of a medium size one we called a tiecha – it’s an Indian word; I don’t know how to spell it, but it’s kind of like a tortoise. It’s got big scales on sections; they don’t really have scales, but the sections of their shell are rather pronounced. It’s a vicious-looking turtle. So anyway, those are the three types of turtles. There was a leather-back or soft-shell, but we very seldom got them because they were fast-moving, unless you caught it on the fishing line.
DL: How about rabbits?

MC: Yes, we had rabbits we caught with sling shots.

DL: Did you have any snares?

MC: No. Those were used by rabbit-chokers, the Chippewa [laughter]. Yes, those were the rabbit-chokers. We didn’t choke rabbits.

Linda: His home was a safe house, too.

MC: Yes, that was the other thing I wanted to say.

Linda: Other families that were in trouble.

MC: It’s kind of like a woman’s center, I should say. A lot of the men after working, and most of them had to go to the Twin Cities to work, like Swift’s and Armour’s, after work they got paid. They’d stop off and drink and come home and abuse their wives. So a lot of times we spent with other families here at our place, because it was a safe house.

DL: Why did your mother decide to do that?

MC: I don’t know. It’s just part of the spirit, I guess, a family.

DL: It’s part of who she was.

MC: A family. In fact, according to Dr. Asp in Red Wing, he’s a psychiatrist I went to for a while, and he said – that’s why I cry so easy, emotionally – I can’t allow myself to get angry, you know, and so I cry.

DL: It must have been a very busy childhood for you. There were a lot of kids in the house, three bedrooms; you were out putting food on the table….

Linda: No, three rooms.

MC: Three rooms, yes.

DL: Three rooms. And you’re helping to put food on the table.

Linda: They didn’t feel like they had to do it, though, it was just a normal, routine chore.

MC: It was just part of life.

Linda: His sister said one time that they didn’t consider them poor.
MC: We thought we were rich. In fact, one time a local family, they had quite a few kids like we did; I'd say eight or nine, and their barn burnt down and their cow got killed. We made souvenirs; we used to make little souvenirs – well we made them by the thousands, to sell to novelty companies in Minneapolis and St. Paul and Rochester. We made some to sell to teachers and prominent business people in Red Wing, so we could collect money to help the family replace their cow.

DL: Souvenir what? What were they souvenirs of?

MC: Well, like a boutonniere….

Linda: Moccasins and bead work or drums. They made drums.

DL: Did you help replace the cow then?

MC: Oh yes. In fact, some of the family still works at the casino, different members of the family.

DL: Do you have a Dakota name?

MC: No.

DL: Did you ever hear of the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War during your growing up years?

MC: Yes.

DL: What do you remember hearing?

MC: Well, the main thing we heard about was our relative. I couldn't describe how he's related to us, other than his name was John Other Day. There's a memorial to him in Henderson, Minnesota. He helped guide non-Indian families through Indian villages for their safe journeys. Some people understood it was a humanitarian gesture, and others felt that we were betraying the tribe. And so we kind of lived on the ropes there, so to speak. I mean, if somebody wanted to use something against us, they might bring it up. But we were proud of it.

DL: And so your heritage is a relative who helped save lives.

MC: Yes.

DL: Did he survive, Mr. Other Day, after he brought them to safety? Where did he bring them to?

MC: Well, I don't know exactly. Did we read about him while we were at the museum?

Linda: Yes.
MC: There is an article in *The St. Paul Pioneer Press*, and I got a copy of it here. I was going to get it out, and I forgot.

Linda: Do you know where it's at?

MC: It's in that one scrapbook, and it's in the funnies part of the newspaper – like, “This Day in History,” or whatever. Anyway, there's this article about him in the Twin Cities' paper.

DL: Did the war have a direct impact on you and your family?

MC: Well, yes. [Laughter] Because they exiled the Sioux – they called them that – the Dakota, from the State of Minnesota. That included my grandparents, of course. And so they were exiled from Minnesota; they were taken by barge down the Mississippi to the Missouri River, and then up the Missouri, up to Santee, Nebraska. I can't think of it right now, but [they went to] some other similar prairie where there were no trees and stuff, like the areas in Santee, Nebraska, and hopefully I'll think of the town in South Dakota – it's not a town, it's a reservation. And they also went to Canada – I can't think of [the name of the place], for some reason I can't bring up…

DL: Was it Crow Creek, or…

MC: Crow Creek, that's the one. Thank you. Yes, it was Crow Creek. That was a desolate place and a lot of people died. There was no food, and that's what started the war, the traders. They owned stores and normally traded goods and hides and stuff for supplies.

DL: What were the names of your great-great-great grandparents?

MC: I only know Lena Whipple and her sister, Rose.

DL: They were part of that?

MC: Oh yes. There were white sympathizers, or friends here. They came back under darkness, migrated back. They walked all the way.

DL: They came back home.

MC: Yes. They had white sympathizers, or friends that helped them find safe places to be.

DL: Safe passage?

MC: Yes.
DL: It's interesting that they had help.

MC: It goes both ways.

DL: And they provided help, and then a couple of generations later, your mother provided a safe place for people, too.

MC: Oh, yes.

[Linda brings out photo album to show]

Linda: Some of the handmade moccasins.

MC: [Displays a page of pictures.] They're from Dunwoody. I got a Life Achievement Award from Dunwoody. This is my car. That was my first wife and the mother of my kids. And of course, that was me. There's my car again.

This is me trying to cut off a messed-up piece of hair. There's my '46. And there's that church – did you see that church? This is right out here, looking that way when there were no houses and no trees then.

When I graduated from high school in '64, I worked for a short time at Armour in South Saint Paul. At midnight on the Fourth of July, 1964, I had an accident and my right leg went through a conveyor auger and cut off part of my knee. These [pictures] are when I was in the hospital. I [retained] full use of my leg until 2005, when I got a staph infection.

There was my sandwich; my lunch. This is from the Christ Church, a parish in Red Wing. They gave me some money when I was going to Rochester Junior College. Back then, seventy-five dollars was a lot of money....

DL: That could be your full tuition, then.

MC: Yes, that's right. So you can keep asking now.

DL: Have you ever been to Mankato, to the execution site?

MC: Yes. When I was serving on the Tribal Council we worked with a group that was building the parkette. We helped with the sculptures and stuff/

DL: When you saw that spot, did you feel any special emotions?

MC: I did not.

DL: [Referring to photo album] Dayton’s auditorium, graduation, Dunwoody. That’s very nice.
MC: Yes. Here’s my Grandma Lena. And Howard Bailey, he was a prominent guy with Northern States Power.

DL: I see. We’re looking at Mr. Child’s scrapbook. We’re looking at a picture of his grandmother. Underneath the picture the caption reads: “Handmade pair of moccasins, was a surprise gift from Mrs. Lena Campbell, age eighty-four, to Howard Bailey of Zumbrota.” She looks like a Grandma; she’s got a hat and scarf on, and a jacket and heavy boots and a long skirt, because Grandmas always wore dresses.

MC: Probably had a cloth bag.

DL: Probably had a cloth bag somewhere, and she’s got, it looks like a scarf around her neck. She’s dressed for the weather. And she’s half-smiling at Mr. Bailey.

MC: And probably that year she was even walking from her house over to here, which is the best part of a mile.

DL: Which is why she’s eighty-four.

MC: Yes. That’s like my Uncle Sonny, Joseph Whipple Campbell, and he’s ninety-one. Oh, here’s Grandma Lena. And here’s when I worked at Armour.

DL: Oh, your pay stubs: twenty-five cents donation?

MC: That was the union dues. I never belonged to the union, but they took my union dues out. Here’s when Grandma Lena...

DL: Turned 90.

MC: That was the “Red Wing Republican Eagle.” Once again, Dunwoody, a big part of my life.

DL: Yes, we can tell. That was a good place.

MC: Here’s my marriage on February 19, 1966.

DL: Oh. Is that your grandma?

MC: Yes, that’s Grandma Lena and there’s my wife. And this is my brother, Dennis. He went to the U and then to New York and then Washington, D.C.

DL: You’re a sentimental man, the way you kept every scrap of your life here.

MC: Here I got a rebuilt engine for my ’46. And you can still see – lookit.

DL: “Rebuilt the entire engine for $221.”
MC: It’s a Ford engine. These are the receipts for our wedding ring. You can see it’s like 60 dollars, but I had to pay five dollars a month forever. I think Myra’s ring was sixty dollars, and mine was five dollars. And then here’s Dunwoody. Here’s an ad for recruiting people.

MC: I gotta tell you something unusual, that I was part of the original group that… [Continues to page through scrapbook and gets onto a different subject] I’m underneath the car, pointing to a suspension part. Anyway, I was a part of the original group – we felt we needed standards… Oh here it is!


MC: Yes.

Linda: He taught me how to change the brakes on my car.

DL: That’s an interesting skill.

MC: Anyway, these are some of the courses I took from Dunwoody: and then here’s Human Relations, you know, that was important to Sears back there – Automotive Air Conditioning and different courses. This is my employee’s; I bought a boat from one of my co-workers, and so this was a safety poster and it says: “If we’re not safe, we’re sunk.” And they put my name on the guy and I can’t read what’s down there.

DL: “By guys at work; 1972, when he bought the boat.”

MC: Here’s another brochure, recruiting students to Dunwoody. And there again…

DL: There you are, reaching up. Nice.

MC: Here’s another receipt for remanufactured engines from Ford.

DL: How was it, working for Sears?

MC: Super.

DL: Were they a good employer?

MC: I was hired by the assistant store manager, his name was Tony Badnock. And our general manager was named Earl Poletticca. If you looked in a dictionary under “empowerment,” it was almost as if his picture would be there. Anyway, one time I had some question for him, and I forgot what it was, and I went down and said, “Mr. Poletticca, I got this one question and maybe you could help me.” So whatever it was, I
asked him, and he says, “What if it said Mike Child’s Garage, instead of Sears; what would you do then?” And he says, “That’s your answer.”

DL: Act like it’s your own.

MC: Yes. [Looking through scrapbook] Here, I think this is it. Can you carefully open that?

DL: John Other Day

Linda: Oh, it was a cartoon.

MC: Well, it was part of the cartoons. And here’s Chief Little Crow. And again, I’m not much on history, but I know it’s important….

Linda: Do you want a copy of it?

DL: Yes, that’s marvelous.

MC: Can you guess what that was?

DL: Oh, I wonder. My gosh, that’s your first born, isn’t it?

Linda: We had a National Night Out, and they make floats to signify safety, or whatever. And his daughter came over and we decided to – his dad made him a boat called “Scrapper.” He made it all himself, a boat that he could go into Lake Superior in.

MC: It was made to run on Lake Michigan and it had a 135-horse motor on it. I still got it.

DL: You don’t throw anything away, I see that.

Linda: And so we decorated that all up, and we had the ’46…

MC: The red one. This is not the one that Uncle Sonny gave me, but it’s a duplicate.

Linda: It’s a ’46. But we had that pulling the boat. And so we called Uncle Sonny and said the ’46 is out here. He goes, “Okay,” and he goes running out the door; he’s eighty-nine years old at the time. He’s, “come on, Connie, let’s go!” “Where’re we going?” “I don’t know, we’ll find out when we get there.” So he came over…

MC: To the community center.

Linda: Yes. We arranged it that a friend of ours would drive Uncle Sonny around. And so he was behind the steering wheel and Uncle Sonny says, “Move over, I’m driving!”
So he gives him the car and he starts driving and he goes, “I want this back, I’m an Indian-giver.”

DL: Did you give it back?

MC: No. But now that Linda mentioned that, I don’t know if anybody else gave you this information, but the word, “Indian-giver,” it was kind of like double-speak, like George Wells [Orwell], *1984*. You’ve got this area to live in, but then they’d take it back. And they tried to turn it around to be that’s the way Indians did it. But in reality, Indians didn’t feel they owned it; everything belonged equally to everybody. And so if somebody wanted something; take it, it’s yours. We never took stuff and then took it back. That was just a derogatory statement, which was really double-speak.

DL: How about if I name a few places and you can tell me if you were ever there?

MC: Sure.

DL: How about Fort Snelling?

MC: Yes. In fact, there’s a monument, not only to Amos Owen, Ray’s dad, but my youngest brother, Dale Childs, and his contributions to the Minnesota Dakota history. And I don’t know if anybody explained the word, Dakota, it means, people. But we mostly hear of Sioux and Lakota, which is the same word, except we’re the Eastern Sioux and we use a D in our dialect. And the Western Sioux, which are Lakota, they use the L instead of a D in the language. And then there’s also Nakota and one more, but I can’t think of it now.

DL: Did you ever go down to the area of the internment, where the camp was at Fort Snelling?

MC: Yes.

DL: What was your thought of that?

MC: I knew about it because it was important to Grandma and their family, but I didn’t get any special feelings. I don’t know if I was in my own world, or what.

Here is an interesting thing: when I was growing up, I always felt I could will myself to fly, or levitate, or whatever. And of course we have a relative named Inkpaduta and he could levitate; be here now, and also be in South Dakota at the same time.

DL: He could? Did you ever see this?

MC: I didn’t. Even now, Ramona sees visions and stuff, and my brother Al, he saw the Tawochidas, they’re wood people. I never saw any of that stuff. But what I did is I always felt I could fly and that I could levitate and I could see myself, interacting with my
classmates at school, and if I was running or something, I felt I was performing, or I was an example for others. And so it was just always interesting, I mean, I could levitate and see things, like where the nuclear plant is now, which was where white farmers settled at the time – I could go there. And I could go to the trestle, there’s a railroad trestle where the Vermillion River converges with the Mississippi there, near that spot, near Lock and Dam #3. I could do that and of course, most of it was around here and I could see myself, like if I was cutting wood, or hauling wood, or whatever, I could see myself doing things, and interacting like I was showing my classmates the way my life was. It was a very unusual thing.

DL: Do you still do it?

MC: No.

DL: Did you actually feel that you were rising physically?

MC: Oh yes. In fact, I can still do that. If I want to see another view, I just physically rise and see it.

DL: Wow. Have you ever seen him levitate?

Linda: No.

MC: I do it at night. I mean I do it during the sleeping times, is what….

DL: So it’s like your spirit that’s rising.

Linda: It’s not his body.

DL: Oh, okay.

MC: Not physically, but that’s the way it is.

DL: Some people can do that physically. But I don’t think they go too high.

MC: I never did, but always thought – and I mentioned this to my cousin, Curt Campbell, Sr., and he’s my Uncle Jimmy’s son, and we served on the Tribal Council together and we traveled a lot and did a lot of story-telling and stuff. And I asked, “I wonder if I were to have concentrated on it, or really got into it, was it because of the spirit of Inkpaduta.” By the way, that was my brother, Dale’s Indian name, Inkpaduta.

DL: So he got the same name.

MC: Yes.

Linda: Who was the lady that lived in that little cabin there?
MC: Mary Rock.

Linda: Did you tell her about her saying her prayers every morning?

MC: I didn’t see that. Ramona remembers all that, but I didn’t.

Linda: Oh, you’ve never seen it?

MC: No.

Linda: Mary Rock would come outside and say her prayers every morning, out here. And she’d have birds landing on her arms.

MC: She lived in the gray house. That’s another thing; that was built as one of the reservation houses; I think it was in 1937. I had it re-roofed; it had the original cedar shingle roof on it, and in – I can’t remember the year, I had the roof torn out and I had it re-roofed.

MC: Anyway, so what were we talking about?

DL: We were talking about the woman with birds landing on her arms.

MC: [Back at photographs] That’s the receipt for our wedding flowers. [Laughter] Anyway, I felt I was levitating. Oh, I was telling you about speaking with Curt, my cousin, Curtis Campbell Sr. and I just thought, if I had more traditional people around me or something, maybe I would have developed more of that.

DL: That was a gift. That must have been really exciting too.

MC: Yes. It was important to my mother that we were taught to survive in the greater society. We were taught to speak English very clearly, learn grammar and that, and to really survive in the greater society because of what she went through, because of the punishment and cruelty and un-teaching of culture and family values. My mother knew we had to survive in the greater society. That was important to her. After all the children were raised and out of school, she went back to school and got some kind of nurse’s aide training. She also worked in the library at Burnside School.

DL: She must have been very proud of you, with your employment and your longevity at Sears.

MC: Yes. In fact, there’s a book, I can’t think of the title right now, I got it here, but it’s something about: what’s it like to be an Indian, or something. It was a hard-covered book, and in there she mentions that I worked at Sears Roebuck at Knollwood Plaza.

Linda: She was interviewed in that book?
MC: Yes. It was similar to this interview; she was interviewed. Just to show you the difference, I knew my stuff. At Dunwoody, unlike the colleges where 4.0 was a premium grade, at Dunwoody the closer to 1 was the premium. So you can see, very many of my grades were 1’s and 2’s.

DL: Good grades.

MC: Yes. So I was number two in the graduating class of April, 1968.

DL: You found your calling; machines and cars.

MC: Yes, it was a big thing. Here’s another thing: discrimination and a rental unit in Minneapolis. We lived in this one apartment complex. We thought maybe we’d move down the street to a little bigger, better place. So Myra went there while I was in Dunwoody and she said we’d like to move in. Oh yes, he said to stop back because she wanted Mike to see it too. When we got there, it was rented.

DL: Sure.

MC: But then Minneapolis sent a similar mixed marriage couple – I don’t know if they were married, but a mixed race couple, and it was the same thing. I think it was Douglas Head? Anyway, we wrote to the State of Minnesota. There was a similar case in Wisconsin. We went to a bar and restaurant over in Wisconsin after I raced at the Red Wing Race Track, and after one night we thought, we’ll go over there and kind of celebrate. And they wouldn’t serve us; they didn’t serve Indians. So this is the letter we wrote to Wisconsin and the response from them.

Linda: This is the boat that his dad gave him.

MC: Yes, this is scrapper. I got that. It’s out in the barn if you’d like to see it. [Laughter]

Linda: And then he wrote down there, “Childscraft.”

MC: He made fourteen boats in his lifetime. Look here, this is a ’46 Ford.

DL: You’re ready to go to work.

MC: Yes. Last summer I had a hoist put in my barn; it’s a 9,000 pound lift.

Linda: Yes, we just gotta get his wheelchair a little bit taller.

MC: There’s my timecard from Sears. The thing of it is, see, I started in April of 1966, and this is my first timecard. And the reason I got it is because at Sears I was one of the four key carriers. The general manager had one, the store manager, and his
assistant had one, and then two other people; I was one of the other two that had keys to the store and the combination to the safe. When they closed the store I was one of the ones who had to, I mean, I didn’t have to, but I was assigned to stay back and close it, you know, and I happened to find my timecard. That’s my first timecard.

DL: What is your opinion of the war, the 1862 war?

MC: Well, it was a very sad thing in the history of the United States. Somebody asked Adolph Hitler how he managed to do that Holocaust and stuff against the Jews, and he used the United States treatment of the Native Americans as the model. And of course, we know 1862, that’s our interest here in Minnesota, especially as Dakota people, but they used germ warfare, they brought in people who were very sick to annihilate large communities of Native Americans throughout the United States, especially on the East Coast there.

DL: What do you think about the treaties?

MC: They’re not worth the paper they were written on. It’s really sad because our people, they meant so much to us; unlike today where everybody writes out their speeches and stuff. Of course there’s a lot of litigation if you speak wrong, but even back then the white leaders, they had prepared speeches and different things, and the Native people, they didn’t need speeches; they spoke from the heart. Like I mentioned earlier, we didn’t own the lands, they belonged to everybody, and so we were willing to share with others. And it was used against us; the generosity was used against us.

DL: Do you think it’s a good idea to commemorate the events of that time?

MC: Oh, I think it is, because now we’re able to tell more of our viewpoint, where before it was all the white settler interpretation. And it’s so interesting: I went to the Hastings Library and there were people with the last name of Childs throughout Dakota County; especially around Randolph, Minnesota. There was a – I can’t remember her name right now, but there was a Miss Minnesota, or Miss Dairy Minnesota, and her name was Childs. I was trying to read, see who they were and stuff and I just happened to come across a thing where people – and they were of German descent – going through Henderson, which happened to be where John Other Day was honored. But these Indian families were living there, and they went to the village and this one woman grabbed the baby out of this other’s arms and just whacked it against a tree and killed it.

DL: I heard that story.

MC: They were trying to dehumanize the Indians, so they used all these terrible words like “savage.”

DL: What’s the best way to commemorate those events, which were very difficult and very tragic?
MC: I just think to tell some of our history, like sharing our wealth, like the use of medicines, our methods of raising crops. I think now we’re far enough away so they can tell both sides and let people see the two interpretations.

DL: If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for Dakota people today?

MC: I guess I’d wish that the Donald Trumps would stay out of our business, and the Mark Daytons. Donald Trump keeps beating, beating on about Obama’s birth certificate and all this. Well, you know, when I was on Tribal Council from 1993 through 1997, and during those terms, the Mashantucket Pequots up in Connecticut were opening casinos and getting approval to open their casinos. Donald Trump went in front of the United States Congress, and it’s in the record somewhere, I don’t know how you get them, but he says, “They don’t look Indian to me.” And they are a dark-skinned Indian; they’re a black-skinned Indian. So how did he become the nationality…

DL: Police.

MC: Yes. And now he’s doing the same thing with Obama and I’m hoping to alert somebody to bring it out soon that that’s the way he is. He doesn’t know.

DL: And the Governor; what would you want to tell the Governor?

MC: He was talking to Esme Murphy on Channel 4, and the week before he was on [another channel] and they were promoting him and telling how he met with all these different communities around Minnesota. My understanding is he would not meet with the Indian tribes.

And then the next Sunday [on the news with] Esme Murphy, Mark Dayton was [interviewed] and he says, “I think it’s time that Mystic Lake has some competition.” So that’s his justification; he wanted to open up a gambling establishment at the Mall of America. And I really think that the thing is that our communities, we were out of sight, out of mind, and so that’s why we were so disbursed in such outlandish places, yet we still seem to have a spirit for helping others. I don’t know what our employment is now, but we’re the largest employer in Goodhue County, and at one time we had around 1,400 employees here. And so we’re a big contributor to the complete community. Our dollars are recycled at car dealers…Listen to this: the shoe sales people. There was an article in The Red Wing Republican Eagle, they dropped the “Republican” part of their name, but it’s still The Red Wing Eagle, and it says they have this People’s Platform feature. A store owner in Red Wing wrote that the Indians with their per-cap money were buying up all the expensive shoes, so he didn’t have shoes for his regular customers. Now, as a business person, wouldn’t you want somebody to buy all your stuff and need to buy a greater supply?

DL: Those uppity Indians.

MC: I mean, it was – and they printed it!
Linda: You know when Pawlenty tried to renegotiate their contract, and that was just astounding to me – he said that when they first made the compacts, the [state legislators] said just let [the Minnesota tribes} have [casinos]; they're not going to make a nickel out of the, anyway. And so when they did [succeed], then they wanted to renew the compacts.

That's just like of your banker – you got mortgage on your house, saying, okay, we gave you this at two percent and you're locked in at two percent, and now we want to charge you four percent. They can’t change it. His sister, who says that this money is from years and years of parents praying for their young. Her grandma used to pray every day and say, "someday, someday you’ll have money". You'll have wealth. And she believes that. And she prays every day, thanking.

MC: My sister, Ramona. She still prays. She says the young people don’t realize what we went through to get that.

Linda: But if you look at a lot of millionaires, kids up in the Cities; I’ve worked up in the Cities and they’re not all like that, mind you, but there’s some that misuse and don’t go to school and don’t go on to college because they don’t need to – they have money.

MC: And why should we be considered different.

Linda: But there’s a good majority here that do, that are going on to school and are educating themselves and making good choices.

MC: We do pay for completion of education anywhere in the world. We have members worldwide; we’re not just limited to the population on the reservation, or serviced by the reservation. Just like in my own family -- I’ve got a niece that lives in Hawaii, one in Alaska. We’re not limited just to Minnesota; we’ve got relatives in New Mexico and all over.

Andy Rooney was on “60 Minutes” and they were talking about the disadvantaged Indians. He said that the casino owners should support all the Indians in the United States. Did he tell that to Rudy Perpich’s or Mark Dayton’s relatives, or the Carlsons? Did he say, “Mr. Carlson, you should support all Swedish people”? He didn’t say that.

Linda: I know his sister, she’ll go and get a truckload of winter coats or bicycles and take them to a Res out there.

MC: And our tribe, we support soup kitchens and different infrastructures for disadvantaged tribes.

Linda: The Miesville Fire Department, or a baseball diamond, the hockey arena in Red Wing.
MC: The Prairie Island Hockey Arena in Red Wing.

Linda: Or the Eagle Watch Observatory in Wabasha. My girlfriend from Ely said that we helped fund a project at the Fond du Lac Res. So they do, they disburse themselves to others.

MC: Yes. And you know they had that, where they had Indian mascots or Indian names for sports teams. And we funded one that stands out in my mind because my brother-in-law lived out in Cottage Grove and we supported the name change of their high school sports and we funded redoing the logos all over the school and their uniforms and the renaming of it.

MC: And that’s just one of many that I can think of that we funded. And you know, if they put a casino at the Mall of America, maybe some people from the inner city would take light rail or other transportation to work there, but by and large, how many are they going to help. And then at the same time, chances are it would create a greater liability to the counties that [benefited from casinos] and became more welfare-free due to the wages and the hiring of the Native tribes. We not only paid them a wage, but we supplied them with insurance. And that is a very important thing with downtrodden people; I mean, if you’ve got insurance you can usually climb out of that little hole because what normally happens – like with Sears, and I have four children – without the insurance it would have been very difficult.

There’s a chance of falling back into hard times where you’ve got alcoholism and drug abuse and stuff like that. I happened to go to an AIM meeting, American Indian Movement, up in Minneapolis when I lived up there, and this was during the time that we had the Wounded Knee conflict. I heard some of the stories how the reason so many people had alcohol abuse and stuff is because they were just constantly oppressed. They just barely got something and somebody else comes around and either takes the job away or they’re just constantly told “you’re worthless.”

I gotta tell ya this from back at Sears and about Earl Polettica. One day I had this customer, and unbeknownst to me he went down and talked to Mr. Polettica and he says, “You know that Mike, your service manager, he’s a very good mechanic,” he says, “But it’s too bad he’s drinking on the job.”

MC: Earl Polettica says, “I know Mike Childs personally. He’s a teetotaler.” He accompanies the man back to the sales floor and gets the sales checks and he refunds him his money and he says, “I want you to be my competitor’s customer. I do not want you in my store.” [Emotional] When you get backing like that...

DL: It means a lot.

MC: Yes. I mean, that’s quite a personal thing.

DL: Well, I think we’ll stop here. Thank you.