AL: This is Aimee LaBree on June 10, 2011, at the Minnesota Historical Society. Interviewee: Sandra Geshick. Interviewer: Deborah Locke.

DL: Could you spell your name for me, please.

SG: G-E-S-H-I-C-K.

DL: Do you have a nickname?

SG: Sandee.

DL: When and where were you born?

SG: I was born November 19, 1951, at the old Anchor Hospital in St. Paul.

DL: Who were, or are your parents?

SG: The late Thomas George and Iola Jean Mireau Columbus.

DL: And your grandparents?

SG: Moses and Lucy Wells Columbus, my paternal. Maternal, Stephen and Lydia Taylor Mireau.
DL: How long have you lived at the Dakota Community?

SG: I was born in 1951 in St. Paul; I lived there until I was four years old; we moved back to Lower Sioux in 1954 or ’55; and I lived there, went to school until the seventh grade, and then I went to a boarding school in Chilocco, Oklahoma. I graduated from Chilocco, Oklahoma in 1971. I moved back to Minnesota and got a scholarship to go to Gustavus Adolphus College. I finished one year and then I moved back to Minneapolis/St. Paul, and I moved back to Lower Sioux in March of ’91.

DL: Which relative had the most influence on you?

SG: My mother.

DL: Tell us about her.

SG: I had a lot of teachers in my day, but none of them that had more influence on me than my mother because she just knew everything. She gave me the confidence that I have today.

DL: What was she good at?

SG: Everything that she did. She could make a skunk into a meal that you wouldn’t even know. I never did, but my mother ate skunk meat. And it’s a delicacy, but you have to know not to break that sac where that smell gets out. And she said it was very good meat. But there’s nothing that she didn’t do that she wasn’t good at because, like she always told me, “When you cook, or when you’re asked by somebody else to do something, do it as if the Creator himself asked you.” In other words, do your best. Put a lot of love into your cooking; you can make anything taste good.

DL: How about around the house? Could she make clothes, or did she do traditional crafts?

SG: Oh, she sewed. She wasn’t too crafty, although she made little pictures to hang on a wall. But she sewed.

DL: Did she hunt? Did she teach you how to hunt or trap, or anything like that?

SG: She did my brothers. She taught them the skills of hunting and trapping and picking medicine. The things that I learned from her are my culture, some of the language, the traditional ways of a Dakota woman. And I can say about my mother that she was the epitome of the good Dakota woman.

DL: Did you learn traditional ways as a young child? You must have.

SG: Yes, I did.
DL: Do you have a Dakota name?

SG: Yes.

DL: What would it be?


DL: What did you learn about Dakota history while you were growing up, and who told you about it?

SG: I can’t remember where I heard about 1862, but I remember asking my dad, and all he could say was: “Tahicido”, and that means, “It’s really hard.” And that’s all he said.

DL: In other words, it was so hard, he couldn’t talk about it.

SG: Yes. And we knew when we asked our parents something, we knew not to pry and ask more, because we would receive that lesson when the time was right. And I guess the time was never right, because he never told us about the 1862. And it’s probably because my grandfather was sent to Davenport [Iowa] Prison. He stayed there for four years and then he came back.

DL: Was that grandfather involved in the war effort in any way? Was he a warrior?

SG: He definitely was a warrior.

DL: Any family stories come from his experience? Did he tell anyone else that you ever talked to?

SG: Yes. My grandfather’s name was Moses Columbus. He had a sister, Elizabeth Columbus; she married a Red Wing from Flandreau, and because of the separation of the family when he was sent to Davenport, we never knew about Elizabeth or her children until 2003 when the Wolfchild lawsuit started, and that’s when we found out about Elizabeth’s relatives; there are a lot of them.

DL: That had to be a rather delightful surprise.

SG: Oh, very much so, because Moses had several children, I think five. Three of the younger brothers died when they were young; one died in a fire and then that left my Auntie Valerie and my dad. My Auntie Valerie never had any children, and my dad had 17 children, but a lot of my brothers never had children, so we thought we were just a
small little family; we had no cousins from my auntie. And then to find out! I was just really happy that I found all these people that came from William Columbus.

DL: How are you related to Peps?

SG: Sister. Lillian. And we had a sister, Ramona- she passed away in ’72. And then Peps, me, Marilyn, and Melissa is the youngest. So there were six girls.

DL: Can you tell us anything about the aftermath of the war and the scattering of the Dakota people?

SG: On December 26, 1862 is when the 38 were hung in Mankato. And President Lincoln pardoned all but 38 of them, and most of them were sent to Davenport, Iowa, like my Grandfather William. He served four years in Davenport, and then they shipped him up the river to Crow Creek in 1866. And then he left there, after, I'm assuming a year, and made his way to Flandreau, South Dakota. From there I track him to Gray Cloud Island, which is present-day Bloomington, Minnesota. And then he came back to Lower Sioux. Cha Chiyape- the BIA name is Lower Sioux now. And then he passed away- I don't remember the exact year. What else did you ask me now?

DL: About the way that the Dakota people in general were forced to scatter, in order to save their own lives. It sounds like you had family members who stayed, though.

SG: I don’t know that they really stayed. It was after the 1862 Conflict, we were basically kicked out of the State of Minnesota. And I think that still stands today.

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

SG: Yes.

DL: Any thoughts about that place?

SG: The first time I found out where the actual site was when I went there, it was emotional. But when you think of our warriors that were hung there and the sacrifice that they made for me and all my people, it makes it a little bit easier to know that they sacrificed so we can have what we have today. But I do, in my daily prayers, humbly ask for guidance from all my relatives, my ancestors. And when I do go there, you can almost put yourself back in time and wonder what they were they actually thinking. And they were brave to go, walk up there, knowing that they were facing death. But at the same time, I’m sure that they forgave, and were happy to know that they were going to meet their Creator. A lot of people are afraid of death, but when you can make peace before you go, it makes it much easier. And I’m sure they knew that they’d be seeing their relatives that went before them.
DL: Have you ever been to any of these places, and what are your thoughts about them. I’ll just name a few, starting with Fort Ridgely.

SG: Yes. There again, each of the places, I’ve been to all of them, and they bring a sense of knowing. Like I said, it was our ancestors that roamed here at one time, and it gives you peace to know that: you know what? I’m standing in a place where my ancestors were, and it brings me back to: I wonder what they were thinking when they were here. But it gives me comfort to know that they stood right here. They knew.

DL: Like at Cold Water Creek?

SG: Yes.

DL: How about the Lower Sioux Agency with the storehouse? What are your thoughts when you see the storehouse and all those reminders from the 1860’s?

SG: It’s like I said, it brings you comfort to know our people all roamed that area. We know what happened, we know the things that they went through, but there again, the things that they did to sacrifice so that I can have what I have today, makes it easier. And that they were true warriors. They went and they did what they had to, for me.

DL: Please explain a little piece of history for me personally, that I don’t quite understand. The people who asked Little Crow to be their war chief, went to war and ultimately it led to hangings and it led to a scattering of Dakota people. How did that save the Dakota people? What did it save them from? What would have been the fate without that intervention, without that chapter?

SG: (long silence) Hmmm.

DL: I mention it because I’d heard this before and I should have asked then; I should have asked two months ago when somebody first said it. We all know it changed history, but how exactly did it change history for the better? What did it lead to? It led to a scattering of people. Did it stop starvation, did it stop the stealing of the land? How did it help? Or maybe perhaps they were examples of courage and fortitude at a really difficult time?

SG: I like the way you asked that, because fortitude is one of our 12 core Dakota values. My concept of leadership is probably different from somebody else’s, but when you have a leader and you put all that trust in that leader because you know he’s not going to steer you in the wrong direction, that’s what I believe our people did… took Little Crow’s direction because they trusted that he wasn’t going to put them in harm’s way. There’s a lesson to be learned in every tragedy, there’s a lesson to be learned from all of that. I lost my train of thought; ask me again.

DL: I mentioned fortitude and I wondered if that was a lasting gift maybe we could say that the warriors gave to the Dakota people, which was courage under fire and their
willingness to say: “I will die for this while I’m standing tall. I will not cave, I will not cower, and I will be a walking example for you, of what a courageous Dakota man is.”

SG: That’s exactly what they are. Our children, our women, our girls and boys are nurtured by their mother until they’re 4 or 5 years old. Then the boys are given over to the men folk to learn the ways of the men. The women stay with the women to learn the ways of the women. So our children are groomed from the time they are born, and the boys are shown the skills to be a brave warrior. You don’t say, especially when you talk in our language, things that are untrue, or say things and then take back what you say. Therefore fortitude comes in. When you agree that you’re going to do something; you’re going to do it; nothing’s going to get in the way; you’re going to carry that mission out. And that’s what they did. They showed their skills, they showed bravery, fortitude. They probably thought about all our core values and that makes for a good Dakota woman or man, when you live according to those values.

DL: Have you ever been to Fort Snelling? What are your thoughts about that?

SG: There again, like I say, every one of those places, when you step foot on the ground it immediately brings you back to: ‘You know what, my ancestors were here; what am I going to do to honor them?’

DL: How can you honor them today?

SG: By telling their story from our Dakota perspective; not hearing it from history books.

DL: By bringing them back to life, is what you are doing.

SG: Exactly. The ride that we do in December; the walk that we do; the letters that Clifford and I are working on. Anything. Educating people today about who we are as Dakota people.

DL: What’s your opinion of the war?

SG: (long silence before answering) Oh gosh. You know, our men are groomed for protection, and so are our women; our women will kill to protect their young. Our men will, too- not that they’re going to go out and kill whatever. We have a story about this woman that was protecting her young child from a bear. And they always say that our women can be fierce as a grizzly when it comes to protecting their young. And our men are groomed as protectors for all our people. Oh, I could go into a lot of stuff. I see untruthfulness on the part of the non-Native people that were in the war. You know, we are a peaceful people, we are a very spiritual people, and when we see that something is done wrong to us, who wouldn’t defend what was theirs? We’re not a people that are going to lay down when somebody wants something. We also, at the same time, share, and give freely of what we have. But I see it as we were taken advantage of. You know, we were willing to share anything that we had, but when they made promises and
we see that they weren’t keeping theirs; what are you going to do? That’s why our men were warriors; they’re going to stand up and protect what was rightfully ours.

DL: What do you do with this history as a Dakota woman today? Do you leave it in the past? Do you bring it into the present? How much energy do you give to it as you go about your daily life? Do you let that anger burn today, because that’s a good thing to do to keep that alive, or do you try to look to the future? How do you live with the past?

SG: You know, I’m not angry about- it’s something that happened, you can’t bring it back. You accept; you don’t blame. And like I said, in every tragedy you look for that lesson to be learned- from anything that happens in your life that’s negative. And I do things today and every day. I’ll tell anybody who will listen to me about who we are as Dakota people to better understand we’re not how they stereotype us. We are a peaceful people and very resilient. We bounce back from anything. And I live in close connection with the Creator; pray every day, keep that constant connection.

DL: Your sister is Lillian Wilson. She too, is a prayerful person.

SG: I can’t imagine life without prayer. Because I always teach my grandchildren. I only have one grandchild, but I always teach the young ones to pray, even if you say ‘all my relatives.’ You say it to keep that constant connection between you and the Creator. If you don’t have that, look at all the things coming at you; all the negativity coming at you. You’re going to be argumentative; you’re going to live a chaotic life. But when you have that connection, things can be thrown at you and you just take it in stride. But people don’t realize that your life is laid out already. I have a book, it’s called Words of Wisdom. Frank Fools Crow said you have to accept His way of doing things because you can’t change it; it’s already laid out, your path. So you have to accept His way, the Creator’s way of doing things. And you ask in your daily prayers to understand and accept the Creator’s way of doing things.

DL: Could I ask you a philosophical question that’s fairly difficult? It occurs to me as you’re speaking, if you accept the Creator’s ways, then you look at what has happened to your people as, in some cases, very, almost insurmountable obstacles: the land was taken, which would change the culture dramatically. Things were introduced that changed the way people acted and behaved. You know what I mean, all these negative influences. Do you look at that and say, the Creator dropped this on me and so it’s for me to cope? I’m not sure I understand that role.

SG: He only gives you what he can handle; he’ll never give you any more.

DL: So the charge to the Dakota people was, I’ll give you this war, but no more. I take that back, the Dakota people chose the warfare piece of it, right? But the land theft and all of those things that came down on them.

AL: Resilience.
DL: Resilience.

SG: Resilience, yes. I don’t know what chief said that, but he said, and it will always stick with me, is that what was taken from us, will be given back to us. And I believe that. It might not happen in my generation, but I know that our people are gifted; we’re protected.

DL: And still here.

SG: We’re still here. They never got rid of us. It was their master plan, was to annihilate us. They tried in how many different ways- starvation, diseases, the 1862 conflict, taking our land, doing whatever they can, but we’re still here.

DL: Fortitude.

SG: Fortitude. Yes.

DL: What contributions have the Dakota people made to Minnesota and to the country?

SG: What would people have without the land?

DL: Nothing.

SG: Right. We gave. We were generous, but they basically took and tried to wipe us out. We’re still here.

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

SG: For peace between all people. Well, peace and understanding, because I always said that everybody always prays for peace. People always demand my respect, but it works both ways- you have to know about me and respect me. That way, if we had all that, there would be peace. Look at what’s happening over in the East, all that fighting. And basically it’s kind of the same thing; they’re trying to change their ways. You can’t take a people’s culture away from them. Learn about their culture and then understand them. Why try to change a people? We don’t all want to be the same; that’s what makes life interesting.

DL: Thank you for your time.