

**20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Hurricane Hugo's Impact on MUSC**  
**Oral History Project**

Interview with Peter B. Rock  
July 6, 2009

Interviewer: Brooke Fox, MUSC University Archives

Location: Colbert Education Center and Library, Room 407

Brooke Fox: The following is an oral history interview with Peter B. Rock for the twentieth anniversary of Hurricane Hugo Oral History Project. The date is Monday, July 6, 2009. The interviewer is Brooke Fox.

Hey Peter, thank you for joining me for this interview today. Let's start by discussing your position at MUSC in September 1989.

Peter B. Rock: I work in the engineering carpenter shop.

Brooke Fox: How long had you been with MUSC at that time?

Peter B. Rock: At that point, I'd only been in almost a year.

Brooke Fox: Oh, okay. Okay, let's now focus on Hurricane Hugo. Can you describe the days leading up to Hurricane Hugo's landfall around here. When did the university, and when did your department, start preparing for Hugo's arrival? When did you really think it was going to actually hit Charleston?

Peter B. Rock: It seemed to me that the department started getting concerned about it after that weekend before the storm. So when we came in on Monday, we worked our usual shifts but we were being constantly informed that we're keeping an eye on this thing, we've got to be careful, they were planning who would stay and how that would play out. And I think at that point, we were probably cleaning roofs, looking for debris around the campus. It was just normal pickup, not real serious 'get ready for a storm,' but just get the debris cleaned up. The things that take the most time. It was on Wednesday when they told us to go home and prepare our houses, and plan to stay over. And of course, that included, you know, sending the family out of town, putting the grill in the garage, you know, those sorts of things. And for me, that went very well. My family had a place to go and so they packed up

and we kind of packed up the house a little more seriously than we ever did before so I don't recall but there must have been a little more fear factor in the news at that point.

Brooke Fox: And was the university fairly insistent upon telling people -- when did it -- was it Wednesday or Tuesday before the storm hit that they were telling people, staff if they're not, essential employees to leave the area and stuff like that?

Peter B. Rock: They were reinforcing the essential employee concept. Of course, I'd only been here a year but I understood what it meant to be an essential employee at that time and so in our department, in physical plant, for the laborers, it was pretty much mandatory. It was here's the deal: you're essential employees. You will come to work. You will take care of your family, get to work the next day, and plan to stay. And it was pretty -- they were pretty adamant.

Brooke Fox: Okay, and that morning [unintelligible] because after the storm hit a Thursday night into Friday, that day on Thursday what did you all specifically do since you had probably cleaned up all the debris and stuff earlier in the week so that day...?

Peter B. Rock: We were actually concentrating, my division was actually concentrating on windows: windows and doorways and anything where water and wind would compromise. We went around the entire campus checking windows, securing them. In some cases, we actually fastened them permanently because they wouldn't latch well. So, there was a lot of labor intensity to that to make sure that these windows were going to hold. At the time, the Children's Hospital was a new building. It was only about two or three years old. The Institute of Psychiatry had only been open for I think six months to a year. The

Psychiatry building was okay because it had windows that were built to tolerate patients so that was a no brainer. The Children's Hospital on the other hand had some window issues that reason being we fastened them more securely because we didn't feel like the latching mechanisms were gonna hold.

Brooke Fox: Did you have to put up plywood or...?

Peter B. Rock: Actually, that afternoon or that evening when it became more evident the storm was coming this way, we did go up into the eighth floor NICU and we boarded up most all windows in that unit.

Brooke Fox: Okay, but basically, the campus was fairly -- for what you were expecting was fairly secure by the time...?

Peter B. Rock: Yeah, that's true -- nobody really knew what to expect. I mean, there was nobody on campus who had been through a storm as severe as that. We didn't, you know, consider the way the water would act and the way the wind would act. You know, we were just kind of going on what we can do.

Brooke Fox: When that evening, that Thursday evening, the winds started picking up, where -- were you assigned to a specific building?

Peter B. Rock: Basically what we did then, and you got to kind of remember what the campus looked like back then. You know, the Wellness Center wasn't there, there was a Wellness Center in the bottom of the Alumni Building, but still there was also student housing. So, at one point, we were going over there to run the students out that weren't willing to leave and we had to board up that building. In the midst of rain, at that point, you know we were in a tropical storm doing that. I've lost track of where I was going with that. What was the question?

Brooke Fox: I asked were you assigned to a specific building.

Peter B. Rock: Yeah, that's right, that's where I was getting to. We actually theoretically abandoned outlying buildings. We closed them up, we turned off their power, and everybody centralized themselves in the hospital proper. So, the garage offices were closed, all the outlying buildings were just closed down and shut down so we didn't have to man those buildings.

Brooke Fox: What was the feeling of everybody that you were around during the time kind of preparing -- were people anxious, were they are just nervous, or were they so focused on what you guys were doing that you didn't really have time to...?

Peter B. Rock: Initially, we were kept so darned busy and it wasn't an issue -- day one. In the midst of that, the hospital was renovating floors and we were staged in one of the renovation areas, it was the sixth floor of the hospital. So, the space wasn't finished. There were no beds and there were no toilets, there we no sinks. It was under construction so we had to pretty much camp out in the construction site, which of course for space requirements, as we had to do. And at that point, we were sent out to do odds and ends.

Somebody saw a window that looked like it would be compromised or a doorway that was going to take on water, so we were doing little things here and there. We actually went around the clinical science building and made sure all the windows were latched. And in hindsight, we should have done it again because some of the tenants decided to be curious and opened the windows and then they left before they latched them again.

- Brooke Fox: So, they came back to wet offices? So how many people in your department and facilities, were on campus during the storm?
- Peter B. Rock: I could only guess, but I would say our department at that time, our department took care of hospital maintenance too. So, I think our entire team may have been in the neighborhood of about three hundred.
- Brooke Fox: Did you have to come to work – did you have to bring your own supplies to make it through the night -- water and food?
- Peter B. Rock: Well, you know, surprisingly enough, just like a second meal, it should have been three meals.
- Brooke Fox: So, describe kind of through the night what you were doing, what was happening, your remembrances of...?
- Peter B. Rock: Basically, I guess it was around nine-thirty, ten o'clock, is when the wind started picking up, and at that point, it was just a curiosity; we were just watching it. It seems that the front of the storm wasn't that bad. We had some windows fail and of course, our reactions was, "Well, let's go deal with it." So, we were picking up water, trying to fix windows, and the wind wasn't that bad, we can do that. And then the eye came and there was quite a relief, everybody was like, "Oh, this is cool, this is over with." It wasn't so bad, but you know, the word was going out, "Oh, by the way guys, we're in the center of the storm."
- At one point, I had to go help the manager of the supply room cross Jonathan Lucas to get some more supplies and were wading in waist high water and we assumed that was the worse of it. Well, that got a lot higher. It was really when the back of the storm came that things

got interesting. The wind got so incredibly high at this point now, windows were failing, they're being smashed out. And there were things that were trying to keep sealed but just weren't winning. It was at the point where you say, "The heck with it. We have to wait until this wind dies down."

There was one situation in the Children's Hospital on the seventh floor, the window had blown out, and they asked two of us in there to go close the window. Well, two of us couldn't open the door because the wind was so strong. And we were like, "No, we can't go in there."

Brooke Fox: But there were no patients in there, right?

Peter B. Rock: No, no. At that point, all the patients had been centralized into the main hospital. Quite frankly, I think their patient load was – they had reduced it very low. It was really low so that wasn't an issue.

Brooke Fox: So you kind of ran up and down the hospital during the storm.

Peter B. Rock: Yeah, there was something rather profound that came out after the storm when they thought about it and it was mostly on the research side that noticed it because we did a lot to try to protect researcher's equipment and refrigerators and all things they would be worried about. And they said you know it was really funny when the storm started, any sort of management went out the window and the workers just did what they had to do. Earlier in the storm, they were trying to direct us, send us to places, keep track of us and then at some point, it was just every man for himself and they all did, they all pulled through to take care of the campus.

Brooke Fox: Did you have to, at any point, go down to the basement of the hospital?

Peter B. Rock: The foreman for the maintenance shop, as the story goes, there was a valve that needed to be shut down, and in order to do that, he was having to wade through water up to his neck to get under the building to shut this valve down. I personally didn't have to.

Brooke Fox: Who was the foreman?

Peter B. Rock: That was Don Barr.

Brooke Fox: Is he still...?

Peter B. Rock: No, he retired quite some years ago.

Brooke Fox: Mm-hmm. Okay. I'll check to see if he's still around. During the height of the storm, did you notice -- were people more anxious, were anxiety levels...?

Peter B. Rock: I think we were all so busy. There were enough things to have to deal with. The windows were failing terribly in the Children's Hospital and the other thing that happened is we lost water pressure so none of the toilets would flush. You know, just little nuisance things were happening all over the place.

Brooke Fox: What about electricity?

Peter B. Rock: We had lost electricity; we were on generators. And we didn't do too good on generators; that was pretty tough. Luckily, the generator power was where it absolutely had to be. But if I recall, I think we had some generator failures.

Brooke Fox: But you weren't responsible for any of that?



Peter B. Rock: Those were the electricians' and they really worked hard. They were camped outside their generators; and you can imagine without any sort of air circulation, sitting by a noisy generator for a long period of time was tough.

Brooke Fox: The morning after the storm—it went through the night that Thursday and from what I heard kind of died down before the sun came up.

Peter B. Rock: Right.

Brooke Fox: What did you see? Did you happen to go outside when daybreak happened and what did you see?

Peter B. Rock: I do recall at about three o'clock in the morning, we had to go start boarding up windows on some of the exterior buildings. Primarily, like I say, the alumni house, because they didn't want students to move back into the building. There were some foreign students that obviously didn't have a place to go and so it was kind of hard to get them to get out and stay away. And then I do remember that I was with a crew going out to board up windows on the campus and we were over at the Riverside Building, the Family Medicine on Calhoun Street, and of course, it was hit pretty hard. It didn't have great windows so we were pretty much boarding up the entire building up for security and weather, you know both. And it really hit me when we're sitting there working with the National Guardsmen and the M16 walking around the building with us. And I thought, "Oh my God, this is serious isn't it?"

Brooke Fox: So, they had deployed the National Guard before the storm started?

Peter B. Rock: I haven't seen them until the next day.

Brooke Fox: Okay, yeah, because I've seen pictures and I thought they just came in after the storm.

Peter B. Rock: Well, it would have been that next morning. Like I say, it was my first time to get outside of the hospital so I didn't know what was going on.

Brooke Fox: Mm-hmm. So, that Friday, you probably spent... how many hours did you work ?

Peter B. Rock: I was here -- well let's see, I came to work on Thursday and I think I finally got to go home on Saturday midday.

Brooke Fox: You got to go home and look at your house and see, how was that?

Peter B. Rock: Well, you know, it's really funny. It comes back to the same thing. I was here, but what you could see just scanning over Charleston. It's almost like you had to remember what was there because all of a sudden you're noticing things on the horizon that weren't there anymore -- church steeples that had come down. But until I got in the car and started driving, it was when it really hit me. You know, I got to the Crosstown; of course, there was no traffic light. No traffic lights up, I mean they're in the street. Trees down, very quiet. The smell of wet carpet had just saturated me. Everything to me smelled like wet carpet. And so, when I got across the bridge and -- I realized I couldn't take my normal route to get to my house because of trees that were fallen down.

Brooke Fox: West Ashley or Mount Pleasant?

Peter B. Rock: Mount Pleasant. It was really amazing. I had to probably turn around three times before I found a route that would get back to my neighborhood. And luckily my house was fine. It had minor shingle

damage, no water inside, nothing broken and I found that the telephones were still working.

Brooke Fox: You were lucky.

Peter B. Rock: I made the mistake of putting the grill and the chainsaw in the shed and a tree fell in front of the shed so I had to get a handsaw to cut the tree away so I could get the chainsaw and the grill out. But it was nice, the phones were working. The other thing that was just really blew me away is I got the portable radio, turned it on and there were no radio stations. It was all dead air. And finally I got a station -- I think it was PDQ in Jacksonville, Florida, and they had finally said okay FCC has said stay at 50,000 watts. We need the communication to Charleston. So, that was my entertainment, and of course, by then, I'd finally gotten in touch with my family and I said, bring cash and gasoline. We'll find food but cash and gasoline.

Brooke Fox: At the time while you were still on campus, can you describe some more what you saw, what other damage?

Peter B. Rock: Well, during the storm was really busy. I mean even almost to the point of so busy I don't recall everything we did, and we did a thousand things. The pediatric ICU actually had a window blow out and we had to -- I think they had moved the patients into the corridor but for some reason I remember there was a lot of medical activity in that room while we were trying to get this window closed and boarded back up, and it was. It was just, you know, eighty mile an hour winds coming through this room, you know.

Brooke Fox: How many of you did it take to?

Peter B. Rock: It took about three or four of us to push it up and then somebody to put screws in it and finally put it in. We had about three or four episodes like that that I recall. The other thing was we had a lot of water infiltration, we couldn't figure out it was coming from and then we finally discovered that it was the kind of the false glass windows on the exterior of the Children's Hospital. You look around, it looks like constant windows, but some of them are just false. Well, sure enough, those broke out so the water would just come racing down into the floor below and we really didn't know how to fix it because we couldn't figure out where it was coming from. Because they did, they were really insistent about trying to fix things and it was kind of like, you know, we can't fix it while it's happening.

The OR's were secure because they are a center core but they do have a hallway around the perimeter and we were called down there because the water was streaming in and we're like, the water's streaming, I mean, we can't help you, you know? You just have to wait.

Brooke Fox: So, going back to what you said you smelled carpet for a long time. That was probably a lot of work you had to do was take up the carpet.

Peter B. Rock: The carpet odor was just everywhere. That wet carpet odor.

Brooke Fox: And it probably molded immediately because of the humidity and the heat.

Peter B. Rock: Oh, yeah. And there are places we didn't discover right away, you know, it was because people weren't coming back so you didn't have a lot of people coming back into their spaces to see what was there right away. The other smell in the air actually was Fall, which I realize later there was this smell of carpet and this other odor that was

familiar to me but I didn't know where it was coming from. And it wasn't until the next fall that I realize, "Oh, it's the smell of Fall." It's like one day its Summer, all of a sudden instant Fall, "boom." I mean it just shocked the environment. Maybe it has something to do with leaves being blown off the trees or something, I don't know, but I remember that smell of Fall very strongly.

Brooke Fox: Was the week or so, week or two after the storm, there was probably a lot of cleanup, a lot of time spent -- what did you, besides carpets, did you have to replace the windows or was that a more of a contractor thing or...?

Peter B. Rock: Well, you can imagine that some windows are so specialized that we just couldn't necessarily go back and fix it. The wonderful thing was though, the old buildings with the old wooden-framed windows, the old double-hung windows -- they all held well. All the older buildings held up well; may be a pane here and there broken but the old traditional double windows sustained it. And the other thing that was pretty profound is all the damage to windows were actually about the eighth-floor level. The ones that really got hit with debris and really suffered were about eight floors up.

Brooke Fox: I heard that because the roof of the Children's Hospital is flat -- or one of the roofs on one of the buildings are flat -- they put down tar paper, and then put pebbles, and so that was probably what caused a lot of the damage...

Peter B. Rock: That's right.

Brooke Fox: Especially with cars that were in the garage. That all the car windows were blown out.

- Peter B. Rock: Yeah, that's true. I don't recall how many buildings we had that actually did have rocks on the roofs, but that was an issue.
- Brooke Fox: Have they changed that? What they do with that now, or do they still...?
- Peter B. Rock: I don't -- yeah, traditionally they don't put rocks on roofs anymore. In this area -- on the coast.
- Brooke Fox: What was the most damaged building that you...?
- Peter B. Rock: Actually, I think it was the Childr- I mean other than the smaller buildings that just couldn't tolerate it -- the Children's Hospital. There was flashing failures and broken windows and as far as the fact that we had to be in there, and it didn't hold up, that was pretty bad. The main hospital, like I said, still had the old wooden double hung windows, they didn't have that much damage. At the time, the North Tower was just a frame, it was under construction. There was one large window that broke in an ICU off to the side with a patient there. And when we went to see it to clean it up, you know we were, "Oh my God. Is he okay? Oh yeah, he slept right through it."
- Brooke Fox: Can you describe what was the atmosphere during the week or so after the storm hit? Everybody kind of really bonded together and worked together, and it was really...?
- Peter B. Rock: It was a busy time, I mean, we went on twelve-hour shifts. Like I say, when I went home that Saturday, I had to come back twelve hours later and then of course, twelve hours -- I get twelve hours off, twelve hours on -- I think we did that for about two weeks. And of course, the hospital went back to business pretty quickly. It was a different time, you know, computers weren't the most important biggest thing

then, you know. So, it wasn't like that was an issue then. I mean, it was -- they were using computers but they still had to do it by hand so.

Brooke Fox: Yes, that's true. So in your opinion, how long did it take before the university returned to kind of its business as usual?

Peter B. Rock: I would say on the hospital side, pretty quickly. And in the other side of that, and of course I don't know because I didn't pay that much attention. But you know, I don't think they had the emergency business they thought they would. They may have actually had it later with, you know, cleanup accidents, not necessarily hurricane accidents. But if I recall, let's see, that would have been -- we were back to -- our teams were back to our normal work within six months.

Brooke Fox: Where were your offices located? Where were they located at that time?

Peter B. Rock: We were in parking garage one. Parking garage one.

Brooke Fox: Parking garage? Okay, was that damaged at all?

Peter B. Rock: No, surprisingly that was fine. There was nothing more than maybe some water through windows. I don't recall a big change over there. Yes, surprisingly enough the little outer buildings did well.

Brooke Fox: That's interesting. Do you think because the higher buildings such as the main hospital, the Children's Hospital, because they're up so high, they would that ...?

Peter B. Rock: Yeah, well like I said before most of the damage was up -- and damage as you say from debris, there was actually a number of pieces of flashing that were flying off buildings that we found on the street.

But no, the smaller buildings were not so bad. And then again, we were kind of on the good side of the storm. It was the rising water that probably was the biggest culprit because the water did -- the first floor elevation of the hospital is fourteen feet and the water pretty much just came to the first floor level. Luckily it didn't really come in, but it came right out there so we know we had fourteen feet of water.

Brooke Fox: Did you have to put sandbags out?

Peter B. Rock: It was funny, I think by the time, we knew what doors we really needed to sandbags, but I think by the time it got there, we were pretty much just putting up with whatever it was going to give us, and it went down rather quickly. It was actually amazing how quickly it went down. It came up and once the storm passed, you could practically watch the water drop. I think that was pretty, pretty amazing. You can just literally see it doing like this.

Brooke Fox: Overall, how would you say that your department and MUSC -- the response to the hurricane, were there any lessons that you think you learned from it or anything that you all did that probably didn't work as well as it should have?

Peter B. Rock: I think we did well, I really do. I mean, I think that -- like I said, the kind of trying to manage the emergency workers fell apart, simply because there was so much to do. There was just -- everybody just decided to find what they needed to do and they went and did it.

Brooke Fox: But that worked out well?

Peter B. Rock: But that did work out well because the workers cared about the facilities so that was good. Now, of course, you know after the storm, they were grumbling because of course everybody wanted to go home.



I mean, I certainly did. I didn't know where my family was, couldn't communicate with them, had no clue what my house looked like. And then we would get these spotty reports, which were probably not really good for somebody who still has to be working here. "Well you know, I hear this whole neighborhood's gone." "Huh?" Well, it turns out you know, some of it was not very accurate.

Brooke Fox: Yeah. So, its amazing how that spread since there wasn't really any communication.

Peter B. Rock: Right.

Brooke Fox: So, and if you had to do it all over again, would you stay?

Peter B. Rock: I don't know, it's still a preparation, nightmares as far as I'm concerned. I don't know, I almost think the medical side has a better handle on it. Maybe we should look at their protocols. The Engineering side still feels a little uncertain. The one problem we did is all our workers are on site the night of the storm. So, there was no, you know rested relief. And it's a tough thing to figure out, you know, who stays away, who stays, who's going to come back, you know, after the storm. I'm almost thinking I think the hospital does a better job at that. I think they've set it up that way -- you will stay, you will come back. Engineering still has the idea that 'no, you got to keep them all here' and I don't know if that's going to work again.

Brooke Fox: At the start of every hurricane season, is there some kind of...?

Peter B. Rock: They set up a protocol, what we're going to do, and for the most part that's what they do. They have a Team A, Team B, and Team C; A and B, both being the entire staff staying on site. This Team C is

really only management and I just think that needs to be changed. I think there needs to be a Team C of real labor that could come in.

Brooke Fox: Yeah because your work, besides the hospital, is kind of really vital to get things running again so...

Peter B. Rock: Oh, yeah. And it's a tough call. I mean I can understand because you know you don't know what the storm's going to be and you may need that many bodies on hand. We don't have a lot to choose from; actually, we have less staff now than we did in 1989. The carpenter's shop itself actually back then, had twenty-five people; now it's got nine. So, there are a lot of issues they have to contend with.

Brooke Fox: Did you have any final thoughts, any stories you want to share about that time or...? Or what is your, what memory is kind of burned into your head that you always think of when you think of Hurricane Hugo?

Peter B. Rock: I think the most profound was turning the radio on and not finding a radio station because that seems like such an elementary common everyday. You can always listen to the radio.

Brooke Fox: Yeah, I think if you had batteries, you can turn it on.

Peter B. Rock: So, I was turning on the radio and I got nothing. That was pretty shocking.

Brooke Fox: Was MUSC without communication for a few days?

Peter B. Rock: No, they got electricity back. I think we had electricity back, I think by Saturday. They were not on generator power long. Maybe a day or two. You know, the other thing that was interesting was the Marriot was the cafeteria vendor at that time, and of course they ran out of

food. You know, they were trying to feed the people on board; they were losing food because of refrigeration and that sort of thing. I think finally Marriot, somewhere outside the city, brought ice but I could never understand why they were, you know, pretty much rationing the food. I couldn't figure out why the Marriot's weren't bringing other supplies in. We were starved for certain things. And so, it puzzled me, you know. There's a Marriot up to road, you know, it's just, "Put it in a truck and bring it down here, guys."

But we did, at some point, we were -- one of the days, I guess it was Friday, we were actually -- they were rationing out this little veggie bars or something. And they were like, I could have a half of one.

Brooke Fox: That was it?

Peter B. Rock: Yeah, that's it. That was my lunch. That's why I thought, "Wait a minute, you know, they're Marriot. They're, you know, a nationwide company. You think a truck could get down the road and come down here."

Brooke Fox: I guess at the beginning, I'm probably guilty of this too as I hoard at the beginning and then at the end, it's kind of like, you know.

Peter B. Rock: That's right. But it was quite interesting. It was just shocking to see some of the things that had happened.

Brooke Fox: Now, that was the biggest storm since that -- there haven't been any other storms like that since?

Peter B. Rock: Oh, they talk about some. I want to say Hazel, I'm not sure, you'd have to look at that up.

Brooke Fox: But you haven't been through anything here?

Peter B. Rock: No, I haven't anything like that. I've been through little hurricanes -- and it was surprising. Well, the other thing that hit me too was my parents, they stayed through many storms. None very bad, and pretty much said to themselves, "Oh the heck with it, there's no reason to go anywhere." This storm, they left. They knew enough notice that, "No, I'm not staying through this." They just had a sense that this was the one that they were not going to try to ride through. And consequently, their house survived, they lived in Isle of Palms. Their house survived, it did have a layer of water that ran through it but that's all. And surprisingly enough, when they were allowed to go back on the island they walked in the house with power; power's back on. So, they didn't live like some of these other people talk about six weeks. Neither did I. I had power four days after the storm. We kept our lights down so nobody would notice.

Brooke Fox: Were you the only one in the neighborhood who had power?

Peter B. Rock: We were one of very few.

Brooke Fox: All right, well that's all the questions I have unless you have anything else.

Peter B. Rock: No.

Brooke Fox: I appreciate it, thank you.

**End of recording.**