

**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #156**

Dr. Anthony DiGiorgio  
INTERVIEWEE

Interviewer: Daniel Lee

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**Abstract:** In his February 20, 2015 interview with Daniel Lee, the 9<sup>th</sup> president of Winthrop University, Dr. Anthony DiGiorgio, recounts his experience with the 1989 Hurricane Hugo. Dr. DiGiorgio shares his vantage point of the 89' hurricane while providing insight as to how the university responded to the incident. Dr. DiGiorgio also provides antidotal stories which took place on campus as a result of Hurricane Hugo. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

**Keywords:** Hurricane Hugo, president, Anthony DiGiorgio, inclement weather, emergency, classes closed, Duke Energy, 1980s.

\*This is an edited transcript. It has been edited for readability while being kept as near verbatim as possible. The original grammar is left mostly intact to preserve the “flavor” of the speaker, but filler words such as “um” and “uh,” false starts, stumbling and stuttering have been removed. Slang and dialects have also been edited. For example, instead of “yeah” or “uh-huh,” “yes” is used. Instead of “gonna” or “goin,” “going” is used. Our transcription guidelines are available upon request.

**Interview Session (February 20, 2015): Digital File**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Keywords</b>
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00:00:00

**DL: Well, good morning, Dr. DiGiorgio.**

**AD: Good morning.**

**DL: You were the president of the school whenever hurricane Hugo hit. This, South Carolina in, uh, 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1989.**

AD: I was, yes.

**DL: Yes, you were. So, if you could just start by telling me-you were brand new to the University at this time. How were you fitting in at that time?**

AD: Well we were obviously still acclimating to aspects of coming from a different part of the country to the South and we wanted to very much but it was new. So, there was that acclamation. I had never been a president before so there was that acclamation going on. A lot of activity. A lot of energy. I think the campus was very excited. Just a quick bit of context for that is that when I came as the 9<sup>th</sup> president of Winthrop starting, officially, July 1<sup>st</sup> 1989, I was the 7<sup>th</sup> person in the president's chair in nine years. So, there had not been much stability. In fact there hadn't been stability. And Winthrop was strong enough to withstand that, but a lot of things had happened. There wasn't consistency. There wasn't a plan. A physical plan had fallen into a lot of disarray. Winthrop looked nothing like it does today in terms of the upkeep of it, etc. So, I think the campus, most of the campus I think, was excited to have a couple coming in and that appeared to be willing to stay for the longer term. And we did. We stayed for 24 years.

**DL: Um, hum.**

AD: That's pretty long, pretty long time. So that's sort of that context. It was a time of great, great, great activities. As a matter of fact, this was [laughs], you're right, it was two months into my tenure.

**DL: [laughs] Yes, it was.**

AD: I hadn't anticipated something the force of Hurricane Hugo coming through and it was interesting because the day before, was sort of a typical day of that period where I was all over the place. I was on campus. I was off campus. I was out meeting people. I was meeting people on campus and the day before, I happen to be in Akin, SC. With an alumni group and word of Hugo being real and likely to hit-nobody knew what the implications were going to be at that point in time. As a matter of fact, there was some indication, at least as I remember it, that if it came ashore at all it would head in the Akin direction as opposed to the direction it finally took. So I think we-we didn't cancel the meeting but we sped it up. I got on my way and we got in the car and got on my way home in about time for dinner time. So that's a long-winded answer that part of the question.

**DL: [laughs].**

AD: But yes, it was a good time of great activity. A lot of newness. Just coming to know and understand and then as I said, the day there were all the announcements, people start leaving the Charleston area because it was clear that's where it was going to hit. And then from there, frankly, the anticipation was it would probably take the course most hurricanes do when they hit

the Carolina coast, and that is, they come in they do whatever devastation they do along the coast and then they veer up the coast.

**DL: Yep.**

AD: And what we get here is the residue. We get moderate winds, rain, change in temperature, and that sort of thing. But, nobody anticipated the force of Hugo and the strange climatic conditions that created a trough with pressure systems on both sides of the Charleston area that instead of allowing it to go up the coast-funneled it right up through the middle of South Carolina. So that's kind of the context.

**DL: Okay [laughs] yeah, you went right into my next question about the warning prior, because there really was no- Because as I 've gone through the newspaper articles-there's plenty after the 22<sup>nd</sup>, but there's nothing-**

AD: Was there was, was national weather reporting, and regional weather reporting, that a hurricane was coming.

**DL: Um, huh.**

AD: They track hurricanes as you well know. They knew that it was coming they know that it was going to be a good sized one. And again, on the coast they were hunkering down. I was in communication, for example, throughout this with Harry Lightsey who was the president of the College of Charleston. Harry and I had gotten to know each other very well and really liked and respected each other. And I was very concerned. So, I had a call in to Harry to see if there was any way that Winthrop could assist. If people were evacuating.

**DL: Um, hum.**

AD: Maybe try to find a place for them. That sort of thing. But he was so occupied down there, we didn't get to talking to until the middle of the next day. I'll fill you in on that, that's an interesting antidote about that. So, there were the usual warnings, the typical ones, but there was nothing extraordinary about this area. And that Winthrop should, in any way, hunker down. That just wasn't in the cards.

**DL: Okay, well my next question is, now we are past the warning stage, the storm has hit. What was that like for you personally?**

AD: The weather reports got to the point where they were saying: This is a unique storm. It is not following the usual pattern. They weren't again, quite sure, but they could see signs that it was going to come up through. Again, we weren't aware of the force. So, we just decided that we got the word out to be prepared. But again, not special precautions. My wife and I almost stayed up all night. I think we went to bed around midnight. And we thought, okay nothing has happened yet. And we weren't sure of the time-if anything was going to happen. As it happened, we woke up a couple hours later and we could see the winds starting. So, it was truly in the middle of the night when it started. And then between, and I don't remember the exact times, but it was sort of

like between three o'clock in the morning and six o'clock in the morning, is when the devastation came. And that was pretty scary. I mean, you could hear the winds. I had been in, as a young child in my hometown had been in a lot of hurricanes. I had been in a tornado. So, I had heard, what a tornado sounds like in term of that very strange sound. One of the things that turned out to be unique about Hugo, was the force of the hurricane winds but it also spawned little tornados. What we saw the next day, were tops of trees twisted off. Just as though somebody, a Paul Bunyan, had gotten the tree and just taken the top of it, and twisted it. And the reports later indicated that what happened was there were mini gusts, mini tornados, that were kind of within the major portion of it. So that is what we'd heard. We were obviously in the president's house on campus when it hit. And I can remember the sensation of it feeling it coming against the house per se, but also-and you know where the presidents house is on campus?

**DL: Yep.**

AD: You could sense it turning just a little bit and going across the front part of campus-up towards Cherry Road. And you could hear some sounds but you didn't dare go outside at that point in time. Communication was tough, because powerlines were obviously coming down. For a period of time the telephone service was not available. And cell phones were not-there weren't cell phones.

**DL: Yep.**

AD: So we didn't have any of the social media communication outlets as they have today. The phone wasn't working, and nobody dared go out, so you were hunkered down and waiting to see what happened. After a while, when daybreak started to come, the phones started working again and I could get on the phone and begin to talk with campus police. Begin to talk with the Vice President of Student Affairs to see how the resident's halls-did we have any indication as to how the students in the residents were. Because we had gotten the word out across the campus and the residents halls for people to do things like-if your bed was against the window, move it away from the window. And to my recollection, we only had one incident, I'll just get that out of the way, where there was a tree that came down and its trajectory went right through a resident's hall window. Nobody was hurt; there was some glass in the room. And the residents in the room were pretty scared but that was the only, I think, damage in the resident's halls per se. So that worked out pretty well. So we knew something major had hit. We weren't sure of the damage. I told the campus police, that as soon as they could get-it was daybreak-as soon as they could get a police car on the road, I wanted them to come to the presidents house and pick me up because I wanted to go around as best we could and assess the situation. And that really wasn't easy because powerlines were down on Cherry Road and across the campus. A lot of windows had been blown out in Tillman. The top of Tillman windows had been blown out so there was glass on the street. Winthrop has all those beautiful trees on that front part of campus, but prior to Hugo, there was almost double the number of trees that there were there.

**DL: Um, hum.**

AD: What we discovered, after the fact, that was many of them were centuries old oak trees and they had started to decay, but we didn't know that-so they weren't as strong as they looked. So it just took that wind and-I'll bring back Paul Bunyan again-I swear to goodness, what it looked like when you stood and looked down the length of it, it looked like Paul Bunyan had gotten this gigantic bowling ball and rolled it down the middle and you saw a tree fall here, you saw a tree fall here, and you saw a tree fall here. So, the campus was really very, very messy. We had to be careful that we avoided powerlines. So, we did a tour as best we could around the campus and I could see that we were hit really hard. I asked them to take me out to the farm. The farm didn't look anything like it does now, back in 89'. So, the damaged at the farm wasn't to facilities per se as much as it was to the environment. Trees down and powerlines down and that sort of thing. Let me say a thing about the power because the power played an important role for Winthrop as well as the city of Rock Hill during that time and its really very important. Winthrop has always received its power not from the city of Rock Hill the power distribution system that Rock Hill has. We were an island within the city of Rock Hill because we had an historic relationship with Duke Energy.

**DL: Okay.**

AD: And Duke Energy provides, and still provides, the power to the main campus-the city provides the power to everything off campus-the farm now and everything else. But back then, Duke energy provided the power to the campus. And that was simply because we had a long-standing relationship before the city was in the business and, frankly, Duke charged cheaper rates [laughs] it was a better deal from Duke than we were able to get from the city.

**DL: [laughs] okay.**

AD: The reason that was important, is that we only lost power on campus for about three or four hours. In three or four hours, Duke had our power back up. So, guess what? We were the only place in the city with power for a long period of time as you've read the story.

**DL: Yes.**

AD: Some people lost power for two weeks. Some people, I mean, it was really, really very bad for the community. Winthrop became sort of the safe haven in many stories at that time. For example, we opened the coliseum and the locker rooms in the coliseum in an orderly, regular way, people could come up and take showers. Cause they couldn't take showers at home.

**DL: Yes.**

AD: So we opened the coliseum for that purpose and orchestrated that. We had a building on campus that was pretty derelict building. It was destined to be torn down. It just wasn't one of our better buildings. It was called Brezeale Hall. And Brezeale Hall was located, in essence, where Hardin Gardens is. It was in that footprint pretty much. And it was being used for some holding action. We had some storage in there but I knew eventually I was going to take that building down because that was originally going to be the site for a new library. The interesting

thing about Brezeale Hall was that, number one, it had power. Number two, it was an apartment style resident's hall that had full kitchens in every room.

**DL: Very nice.**

AD: So what happened was, for example, faculty and staff, who again in their homes didn't have power, weren't able to do things, who had small families, would rotate through-you would walk through Brezeale Hall for the first week, and it was like [laughs] you were in a restaurant with the smells from the kitchens that would come through-for the first week- were like you were in a restraint-they were amazing! Again, we orchestrated that to where it was safe and the rest, but that was an indication of the way in which the university-because we had power and for a while nobody else did-we made our resources available to the campus community and to some degree, the greater community. And we had to regulate that obviously because we couldn't serve everybody. But we served a lot of people during that period of time. And our students were fine, because with power, our students weren't inconvenienced. I forget how many days we cancelled classes.

**DL: Based on what I've read, it was only two days.**

AD: It was, I think it was only a couple. And that's extraordinary because [laughs] given everything else, if we didn't have power as long as everyone else, we wouldn't be able to do anything. But because we had power, we wanted to get back to a regular routine as quickly as possible. So our students didn't miss a meal, for example, in the residents halls. They were able the next day-the breakfast was late, but they had breakfast the next day. So that was pretty cool. That was pretty cool.

**DL: That was pretty good. In fact, I was looking at *The Johnsonian* a few days after the Hugo issue basically, and I found it very interesting that though Hugo was the main story, a side story was freshman complaining about the-**

[Crosstalk]

AD: Food?

**DL: dining hall.**

AD: [laughs]

**DL: It's like okay, this is what we're worried about. We must have done something right.**  
[laughs]

AD: I think that fair [laughs]. I think that's true. So, in general terms, what we then did was to begin to get the detailed inventory of the damage on campus. It was pretty serious because we knew there would be insurance claims that we would have to make to the state and to others in order to be reimbursed for- we allowed a lot of people to come on campus. There was more firewood that was cut during that period of time that could-you know I think fireplaces for the next couple of years had firewood. Because there were a lot of pickups and a lot of chainsaws because people wanted to come- and if it were safe, they'd cut it.

**DL: Absolutely.**

AD: So that was good. The tree in front of Tillman. Magnolia tree that's used as a Christmas tree was severely damaged. I was debating whether or not we would have to take it down. What happened was, there was-in proximity of that tree-there was another one of those large oak trees and it was felled by the wind and what happened was, lets say the magnolia is coming out at all sides, the oak tree was here, it took almost all of the foliage on the backside of the tree and just took it down. Almost half of the tree. Didn't hit the trunk, but it just looked like it was half a tree. I kept saying: 'gee what am I going to do, what am I going to do.' We finally decided that after a while they can regenerate. It wasn't going to be pretty for a while and as you look at it now you would never know that it happened.

**DL: Right, yeah.**

AD: So that was just one incident. As I said the windows at the top of Tillman on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floor were blown out and were boarded up until we could get replacements put in. A lot of roof damage because-given the age of the facilities, and as I said, Winthrop facilities at that time were not in the best of shape to begin with. They had sort of been neglected for a period of time, so we had to do a lot of accessing of roofs and to do some roof repair. There is one interesting antidote, in regard to that. The building was Stewart House which was on the corner of Oakland and Eden terrace-that white stucco house. Goes way back in Winthrop's history. The Stewards were the family who lived in the original Presidents House and gifted the Presidents House to Winthrop when it became a college here. For some financial considerations but basically it was a gift, and then the Stewards built that house on the corner. That's why it's called the Stewards house. Because that was the home that they built. And eventually, they gave that one to the college. It's a very unique house, very old. It goes back to the 1890s. And if you look at it sometime, notice the roof. It has the most interesting tile, green tile, handmade tile, roof. It's just unique. There not flat tiles, there almost like the rounded tiles on the roof.

**DL: Okay.**

AD: Well what happened was the wind took the chimney, blew it down, and the chimney went down the whole side and took a swath about as big as this rug, or even bigger, from the roof, and all the tile was gone. So one of the things we had to figure out was how in the heck are we going to replace-Do we have to take all that historic tile down and put a new roof on? A new kind of roof. Or is there some way...Well we had on campus at that time a gentleman named Bill Culp. Bill had a long and unique history with Winthrop. His father was the director of the physical plant under David Bancroft Johnson, the founding president of Winthrop. Bill Culp was born on

the Winthrop Campus. Bill Culp became the director of the physical plant at Winthrop and was the director of the physical plant when I came here as president. So you want to talk about a memory and a history [both laugh]. So, I called Bill and I said: "Bill, what are your thoughts about that roof?" He said, "Let me do some checking." I said, "Good." Bill went back into old, handwritten records, and found the company in Chicago. Found the bill of lading, the Company in Chicago that made those tiles. [laughs]

**DL: [laughs]**

AD: Found out they were still in business. They still had the old order [laughs].

**DL: Wow.**

AD: Bill gave them the specifications for how many we needed and I'll be darned within, I don't know, six months or so, you couldn't tell the roof was damaged.

**DL: Nice.**

AD: So it was a really, really interesting kind of story in the way we tried to go about the preservation of and the restoration of the campus.

**DL: How much would have passed between 89' and when that tile was originally ordered?**

AD: Oh, it was back...I think that was the original tile of the house.

**DL: Okay.**

AD: So that was in the 1890s.

**DL: [laughs].**

AD: So, this company had been around for a very long time. And Bill found the invoice!

**DL: Uh, huh.**

AD: And called the company-[both laugh]. They were still here and had a copy of it! [laughs].

**DL: Hey, we've got this 100-year-old invoice.**

AD: That's exactly right! It was just one of those heartwarming stories about Hurricane Hugo. So, the campus was a hive of activity in general for all the reasons I said. The resident's halls-Beazeal Hall was being used as a waystation for people. The coliseum was being used. We used whatever people asked us to do, that we could reasonably do, we said sure. We go ahead. And then slowly but sure after a couple of weeks, power was restored throughout the city, etc. But as I said, we were the oasis for a long period of time.



**DL: That's one of the things that I've noticed in my research. Is that, Winthrop had that damage, especially a lot of tree damage, and broken windows, but relatively, compared to Rock Hill as a whole, the campus got off pretty lightly.**

AD: We did. We did. We didn't have major structural damage outside of the windows and some roofs and tiles and that sort of thing. We didn't have trees falling on buildings like they did in so many of the homes in Rock Hill where the tree actually fell on the house and damaged it. So, we didn't have the structural damage-which again, allowed us to put our energies into other things. And getting back and having classes two days later was something I really wanted to do. I wanted to get back to normal life even though we didn't look normal [both laugh]. I wanted to get back to normal living as much as possible. And we did. We did.

**DL: What was your personal impressions of the damage in Rock Hill? Did you see...**

AD: Oh, yes, I did. It was very bad. It was a true hurricane. As I remember the winds as they came through Rock Hill were clocked at between 90 and 100 miles an hour. I think that Hugo was a hurricane 4...?

**DL: It was a hurricane 4 when it hit the coast.**

AD: When it hit the coast. It was probably a 3, maybe a lower 3, when it came through here at my recollection. But that's still, still a hurricane. Rock Hill was still really pretty badly damaged. and again it was the infrastructure and the power grid that was the most important thing to get up and to get going. And Hugo is one of those things, that if you talk to anybody in the community who was living here then, they all have Hugo memories. They all have Hugo stories. Hugo comes up whenever there is a hint that brings it into people's consciousness, I mean right away, a conversation [laughs] goes back to hurricane Hugo. So, it was a signature event.

**DL: I was actually 5 years old and I was living just outside of Columbia when Hugo hit.**

AD: You remember.

**DL: I actually remember sleeping through it and waking up the next morning and just seeing trees just destroyed everywhere.**

AD: Right.

**DL: Based on some of the stuff I read, you were criticized somewhat for reopening the school so early.**

AD: Yes. It's sort of like when you make a decision about whether or not you're going to have classes for a snow day, you know. You're going to inconvenience somebody by your decision and you know that. And I knew that by getting back to normal as soon as possible. I was sure we were able to handle it, number one.

**DL: Mm, hum.**

AD: But number two, I also knew that some people were going to be inconvenienced. There were some faculty and staff who lived out further from the campus who didn't have electricity and it was hard for them to get in. But in checking around, we ascertained that the majority, the great majority, of faculty and staff could get in. And again, when you have, I don't know, 2,500 students in residents' halls without the normal activity going on, you get cabin fever. You get restlessness. You get all this other stuff [laughs] you'd rather not deal with.

**DL: I understand.**

AD: So, we figured that the odds were better and in our favor in opening and gave people wide latitude if they couldn't get in. So, if some classes had to be cancelled or rescheduled, that was fine. Make whatever arrangement you need to make and make sure you and your family are fine, but the university needs to move forward. So, I expected it, and I got some of it. It's just the way that goes.

**DL: I understand.**

AD: Yes.

**DL: I threw this one in here because it's just something we do in the army. AAR: After Action Review. No matter what happens, after an action, you have to talk about what went right, what went wrong, and what can we learn for the future.**

AD: Sure.

**DL: So, what would you say?**

AD: Well, number one, we did do that. In fact, that was a hallmark of the way my administration approached things. We debriefed, AAR'd if you will, just about everything that we did that was of major significance. We always looked back and then took notes. I am not sure I could give you a specific list of things that we came up with at that point in time.

**DL: Okay.**

AD: I am sure there was a list and I am sure that we went ahead and-and there hasn't been a hurricane since, [both laugh] so that the end of that problem. But I am sure there were some minor things that we found out about communication systems. We needed a better way of trying-in an emergency, again, without email of any significance-how do we communicate? What other ways can we think about communicating in times of-in serious times like that? So, we did have those conversations. I am not sure a formal report ever got made more than-what we always did was at the group I called the executive officers who were the senior staff of the university, myself, the vice president, the president's office staff, we met all the time. And we would conduct that review and then they would reach out to those that reported to them with questions

and information and it would bubble up. So that we would gather that and act on it.

**DL: Lastly, if there was anything you could have done differently? I mean, again, based on what I have seen, Winthrop did extremely well with a horrible hurricane-**

[Crosstalk]

AD: I'm not sure if its anything major.

**DL: Yeah.**

AD: That I would have done differently. You know, if I knew it was going to hit with the force, there may have been some precautions that we could have taken but again you can't protect yourself against the wind knocking a window out.

**DL: Absolutely.**

AD: You can't. Or taking a tree down, you can't protect the powerlines. You know. So, the major damage-the major things were damaged, but the biggest thing was to get out the word to the resident students.

**DL: Hum, um.**

AD: And we did that, we had enough time to get the word out to the residents life staff for students. And to have the resident's life staff be very consoling to students or working with the students to not be more afraid you know, we're okay. We are able to withstand this, etc. So, there's no panic there. And there wasn't. There wasn't. So, I don't know if there's anything I would do in a major way that was different than what we did. Frankly, I do think we came through it in pretty good shape. And as I said, we're real [inaudible] for the city during that period of time.

**DL: Okay, well that's all the questions I had. Did you have anything else you wanted to...**

AD: No, I think that's it. It's interesting reliving that and going back. I think it's a good chapter in Winthrop's history.

**DL: Absolutely.**

AD: It's a good chapter.

