

Michael Kline: See if we have got this thing lining up right. It is real cold. See if we got it right. Oh, yes. Here we go. It is lining up now. Today is December 2nd. Say, what is your full name?

Charles Brock: Charles Brock.

MK: B-R-O-C-K?

CB: Right.

MK: You were raised where? In Pocahontas County?

CB: Right.

MK: Where at?

CB: Lobelia, I was born.

MK: Lobelia. Who was your dad?

CB: Remus Brock.

MK: Did he raise up a big family of kids?

CB: Seven children.

MK: Seven of them?

CB: Yes.

MK: When did you settle in Parsons?

CB: About 1976.

MK: What brought you over here?

CB: Well, we lived at Waynesville. One day, we moved out from the countryside. So, we moved to town.

MK: Did somebody tell me you were with the game?

CB: That's right. Department of Natural Resources.

MK: What did you do for them?

CB: Wildlife manager.

MK: What did that –

CB: Pardon?

MK: – consist of? What was involved in that job?

CB: Well, game management, the habitat improvement mostly. Some law enforcement.

MK: Did you ever have any trouble with –

CB: No. Not really.

MK: – enforcing the hunting laws?

CB: Not really.

MK: What was your full name?

Arlene Brock: Arlene Swecker. I was raised in Huttonsville.

MK: Who were your people?

AB: Holt Swecker.

MK: Your mother?

AB: Lucy. Lucy Kittle Swecker.

MK: Oh, she was a Kittle?

AB: Yes.

MK: You had a pretty big family of kids?

AB: Yes. We had nine girls and six boys in my family. [laughter]

MK: Where was you in that lineup?

AB: I was number –

CB: Thirteen.

AB: – fourteen.

CB: Yes, just about there.

MK: About the baby?

AB: Yes, that's right. One younger, Betty. She lives up in New York State.

MK: Did you go to school there in Huttonsville?

AB: Well, yes, the grade school. Then I graduated from Tygarts Valley High School in Mill Creek. That's right.

MK: How did you all meet anyway?

AB: Oh, I went home to spend the night with his sister. She was in the same class grade that I was in, and he was there. [laughter]

MK: How old were you then?

AB: I was –

CB: Fifteen.

AB: – fifteen. [laughter]

MK: Did he have a kind of a twinkle in his eye when he saw you?

AB: Well, I later learned that he had. [laughter]

MK: That is great. [laughter]

How many different places did you live in before you came to Parsons?

AB: Well, we were married in Las Cruces, New Mexico. So, he went to the service, and I followed. Then we were married in Las Cruces and lived in El Paso, Texas. Our first home was in El Paso. Then we've lived, oh, different places in Texas. Then we came back and lived in Huttonsville for a while, then owned a homestead house. Then he took employment over at Waynesville as wildlife manager with the Department of Natural Resources. He held that job for sixteen years. Then after he retired, we went to Florida. We spent one winter in Florida, then came back and went one year in Riverdale, Maryland. Then came back and stayed on the farm for a while. Then sold the farm, and we moved to Parsons. We've lived in Parsons for nine years in the same house.

MK: You raised a big family yourselves.

AB: Yes, we did. We had seven sons and seven daughters.

MK: Is that not something?

AB: [laughter]

MK: What are all her names?

AB: Well, starting with the oldest, we have Doris Lynn, and then Charles, then a Jr. Then Charles Junior, then Bonnie and John, Clark, Jane, Curtis, Dora, Brent, Sarah, Charlene, Lois, David, and Mark. Mark is sixteen. That's our baby. [laughter]

MK: Your baby is sixteen.

AB: He's sixteen. David graduates from school this year, from Parsons. That's the reason we don't want to leave Parsons, at least until May, because of him.

MK: Where was this house you lived in?

AB: On Pennsylvania Avenue. That's where most of the damage was done. A lot of the damage was – worst damage was on Pennsylvania Avenue. It left our house standing a shell and it's impossible to move back into now. We can't do it.

MK: Do you remember that weekend when it started to rain?

AB: I surely do. Oh, yes.

MK: Had you seen the river rise before?

AB: The river didn't rise – oh, I'd seen the river. Yes, many times. Then on Monday, when it was really raining all day long, I kept telling the children that we would have – I felt we would have to evacuate. I told them I'd lived there nine years, and I never made that statement. So, I knew what I was saying. Then when my husband came in, he verified that. He said, "Yes, indeed, we probably will." So, we kept watching the river across the road. I packed the clothes, left them on the dining room table, ready to evacuate when he said to go. We kept watching the river. All of a sudden, he came up from the basement and said, "The water's three feet in the basement," or thereabouts. Then I looked out the window and the water were up knee high, just raging through the lawn from across the slough, not the river where it normally would've come up. Just cut across and we were there.

MK: What time was that then?

AB: That was approximately 7:30 p.m.?

CB: Not exactly.

AB: Well, maybe 6:30 p.m. I don't know. Probably 6:30 p.m. I should have –

MK: About dark?

AB: About dark, that's right. Then we –

MK: What happened after that?

CB: Well, the boys saw a car stranded across the street being washed away – a small car. So, they ran over and helped the woman, the baby, and the man and the dog out of this car. They got back while I told them to cut the fan belt on the Ford truck, and we would take the family and leave. So, he cut the fan belt, my boy did, and then it wouldn't start. The battery wasn't hooked up. So, he didn't even see that. So, that made us later than ever trying to get out. So, we couldn't go.

MK: So, you were stranded then.

CB: That's right.

MK: Could not get away.

CB: No, we couldn't.

AB: Well, the boys dashed out in that raging water after the lady. We saw the car moving, and she was in there. She was screaming. She wouldn't let David help her out. But he assured her that he was holding her and to come on. Then she was close to dropping her baby. David got ahold of the baby and helped. She took off running on up the street after she got out of the car and got her baby. So, the next day, or a couple days later, David was in the schoolhouse. A lady came up with her daughter and she said, "My daughter says you are the one that saved me that night," and she just burst out crying. She said, "I just want you to know, if you hadn't done that, I would've lost my baby." She said, "I was losing him, and you grabbed him." So, we were proud of Dave [laughter] over that.

CB: Curtis, he had gone out to help another lady out across town, and he didn't make it back that night. He couldn't get back. So, he took my car and left it up on the Quality Hill. He never got back that night. So, he, by helping someone else out, he saved the car at least.

MK: So, Curtis was helping somebody else?

CB: Right. So, that left us without a car to get out. Curtis saved our car and we thought he might have gone down with the flood, but didn't see him until the next day about 3:00 p.m. or 4:00 p.m. Curtis, you can tell him what happened.

MK: I will get over to him when I get closer.

CB: Okay.

MK: But after that, then there were three of you and the daughter? Two of you and the daughter?

AB: There were four of us and the daughter. There were five of us in the house that night. Dora. We kept watching the water rise and we saw the basement filling up. We could look down the steps to see the basement filling up. Then we saw it start seeping through the floor registers, and immediately, I thought, "Oh, my lovely wax floors." I hated to see [laughter] my wax floors being ruined, not realizing what was really going to happen. But then it kept rising and rising, and we went upstairs. My daughter and I went upstairs and – the telephone still worked. My son was talking to another daughter from Washington, D.C. He told her that it's lapping up on the chair that I'm standing on talking to you. Then the telephone service went out. The water kept rising, and our son propped our two big French doors open, leading to the outside on our front porch. Then we watched through the night as things floated out from our house. We saw our microwave going. David grabbed the microwave by the cord and pulled it up over the banisters and said, "It was certainly a heavy [laughter] piece of equipment," and we saved the microwave. But we never dreamed of anything – we could have carried much more upstairs, but we just thought, when we saw flooding, we'd get a little water on the floor. Just wipe it up. Here, we had a raging torrent of water – about four feet of water. The basement filled up eight feet, and then four more feet on upstairs. So, then we went upstairs. All of us went upstairs and we waited it out. We watched parts of five houses pass our – we still had electricity, you see. We watched parts of five houses pass our house. Then at one point, David yelled, "Dad, there goes the back porch." I thought of the many treasures that I had on the back porch, but it all went. Then Charles was looking out the window and he said, "The water's at least five feet up on the garage." Shortly thereafter, he said, "Oh, the side is caving in the garage." [laughter] Then the front doors went, of the garage, and then the roof. It all went down past our house. We watched Curtis's car go. We watched our truck go. Charles had put his potatoes in a freezer and buried them out in our garden. We watched the freezer, hit the truck, and we had potatoes and spun it around. So, I guess they both ended up – well, the truck ended up on our neighbor's porch. Yes, beside his house. That's the – or I mean the Parsons advocate home. The lady that –

CB: Ms. Smiths.

AB: Smiths. Then we were terrified. We were hearing crashes and the logs going. We'd just watch everything; freezers and washing machines and logs galore go down. I watched the next-door neighbor's house – a little red house that sat back near the railroad tracks, and I watched it hit right into another house. Then it broke up. Everybody kept cool. We were pretty calm. Then we happened to look over and we saw our neighbor's house move about twenty feet, and then maybe we panicked a little. But as I said, we remained calm. Then when we saw (Brownie's?) house move, I think I panicked just a little bit. Led by my husband, we knelt, and my husband told God, "Unless you intervene, we're going to perish." We had always tried to obey God and we claimed his promise that since we did, that we'd ask for his protection and for him to bring us through it. He did [laughter] just as we asked. Just as we knew he would. That's why we weren't all that afraid. We just had that assurance. So, then the waters began to recede about 2:30 a.m. Our son checked, and he said, "The water's down six inches." He was measuring the wall. Then within a half an hour, it was down eighteen more inches.

CB: It moved fast and went down quickly.

MK: Did you tell me that there were trees that fell on the house or –

CB: No, they –

MK: – crashed into –

CB: – floated by and hit the house.

AB: Well, one went through the bathroom window.

CB: Oh, yes. But they hit our neighbor's house. One went all the way through his house and one –

AB: Three, Charles. I went there and looked.

CB: Tore his household.

AB: From one end of the house to the other, trees that big around. Three of them went right through his living room. It's there to be seen. Oh, that's the great flood of [19]85. I don't know. We hated to lose our home. Like our son said, "We not only lost a house, we lost our home."  
[laughter]

MK: All the treasures and everything.

AB: Our treasures. All of a sudden, the treasures didn't mean so much anymore when we were – certainly, when we asked God for protection, we didn't ask for our treasurers. We asked for our lives. It was that urgent.

CB: As many as he would grant.

AB: Yes.

CB: So, we lost one person. He didn't want to leave his trailer.

MK: Who was that?

CB: Our neighbor's brother-in-law, wasn't he?

AB: (Dew Myer?). His name was Dew Myer.

MK: He got washed away in the trailer?

AB: He died.

MK: How do you explain this flood? What do you think happened? You were watching the riverside, but the water came from the other way.

AB: Came from the other way. Broke through. It took the nursery bottom before it even got to us. That was gone. I walked there for exercise.

CB: Washed the railroad tracks away too, you know.

MK: Did the water back up behind those tracks for a while before it broke through?

CB: I don't know. It was just water from hill to hill, but at least eight feet deep outside our house.

MK: There are three rivers that come together?

CB: There are two that come together below Parsons. We were on the Black Fork.

MK: What are the other rivers?

CB: The Shavers Fork. They come together below Parsons and form the Cheat River system.

MK: What did you see the next morning when the sun came up?

AB: Water, everywhere. There was no dry land. Then about 9:30 a.m., bits of dry land began to appear. We saw a man in a kayak coming toward our house and we were glad to see [laughter] him. He asked us if we were all right and that sort of thing. Then about 10:30 a.m., we were able to step out on our lawn in dry spots.

MK: Did you get down to town at all? What did it look like?

AB: Oh, yes. Yes. By noon, we were able to pick our way downtown. It went down rapidly. Oh, downtown was beyond reason. Just beyond reason. Lambert's Chevrolet was gone. There were at least – how many houses? Ten houses on our own avenue on Pennsylvania.

CB: All the three of them had been moved.

AB: Yes. All the three had been moved. Five had washed down right beside near me. Then on down Pennsylvania Avenue, near the Tannery Road, there were many, many houses went. I never did know.

CB: On our side, there were four left, I guess, instead of three, that didn't move.

MK: But the main street of Parsons, what did it look like?

AB: Well, like somebody said, it looked exactly like there had been a war without hearing shots. Pennsylvania Avenue just looked like a bomb had been dropped on it. Now, that's about as near as I could tell you. Houses were leaning. They were lying on their side. They were moved. Most of them were moved off their foundations. The highway was gone. It was just gone.

There were great big holes. The concrete was in great big slabs. Dozens and dozens of trees with their big trunks, lying in our backyard, lying all over, lying up against houses. Window lights broken out. In our home, there was window lights broken out. There were porches gone. Cars gone. Just utter chaos. It was dreadful.

MK: What did the stores in the downtown center look like?

AB: They were just gutted. There was debris. Mostly debris just washed in there and swept everything out and filled up with debris. That was nearly every store in downtown Parsons was totally destroyed. Barb's drug store, the banks. The bank's big, wide doors were open, and you could see clean, swept through.

MK: Mud?

AB: Oh, mud. Mud. When I came downstairs and we stepped in the foyer of our home, and there was at least, well, eighteen inches of mud, I'm sure, that I stepped in. Then when I looked in the family room, we couldn't even get the door open. But I could peep in, and my furniture was just all turned and bursted up and mud as two or three feet deep mixed with that furniture in every room in my house. The table in the kitchen was overturned. Refrigerator was lying in our living room – or the dining room, rather. Had swept it into the dining room. I looked at some of the houses there, and it was exactly the same thing. There was no difference. The furniture was totally destroyed. My downstairs furniture in my basement. We had just newly paneled our basement and it was destroyed.

MK: The water came up so fast that you could not even think about getting stuff upstairs?

AB: Well, it's like I stated earlier, we thought we would have some clear water to mop up. We would just probably go get some water, maybe come in our living room, three or four inches deep. None of us had ever seen such a storm. We'd just never had seen water like that. We just knew that, like I said, it would ruin my nice wax, this clear water floating or this muddy water going over. But we weren't prepared for the four feet of water with trees and everything else churning and destroying our furniture.

CB: By not getting out though, we did the save papers and things. Took them upstairs.

AB: Well, yes. We had a lot of important papers that were on our end tables and our coffee table, and they saved that. We took a lot of stuff upstairs. We took my lamps. We took a lot of chairs – rocking chairs. Went off our front porch and we saved a lot of things. Then most things, we piled on top of the dining room table. A lot of our chairs and end tables and so on, on top of our dining room tables and on top of our kitchen table. The kitchen table fell over and destroyed what we had put on that. Then the water came over the dining room table and deposited about a foot of silt mud.

MK: Must have been moving with tremendous force.

AB: It was tremendous force.

CB: A raging torrent.

AB: Just a raging –

MK: Right in the house.

CB: Yes. It was coming in the windows and doors and going out the front doors.

AB: We stood at the top of the stairway and looked down and watched the four feet of water going out our living room doors, right smack out on the porch.

MK: You had propped the doors open?

AB: Yes, we propped them open. We knew how to do that.

MK: Why did you think to do that?

CB: So, hard to go through.

AB: The pressure. Someone said not to let pressure build up in your home.

MK: So, you knew to open the doors to release the pressure from the water?

AB: Yes. Yes, we did.

MK: What would have happened if you had not? Water would just have broken through.

CB: Probably even build up higher in the room because it was coming in, see. By not letting out it, it would have got deeper. Because the bathroom had got at least a foot deeper where we didn't have the door open.

MK: Oh, I see. The water.

AB: Then we took the furniture and threw it out in the – for the people to cart away, whomever does that [laughter]. We're kind of fresh out of furniture, but we –

CB: We got what we asked for our lives.

AB: We got for what we asked for our lives. That was good enough and fair enough.

MK: Did people generally think that God must have been angry to reap such a flood? Did people associate God in some way with all of this?

AB: Well, I talked with Mental Health about that, and they said they had some of the elderly that were affected very much by it. Then there was some bitterness with younger people. But

there was none with us. No bitterness. That's just not a part of us. No way. Why it happened? I don't know. I don't know why West Virginia was chosen to be a [laughter] candidate for such destruction. I don't know. I guess God has a message. I'm sure he has a message because people don't keep his commandments. They don't obey his laws and he couldn't honor us. He couldn't honor people because they don't do it. Because he states that in order to have a good life, to keep his commandments, his statutes, his judgments, and his laws. If you don't do it, you pay the penalty. At least we had our lives spared. We got what we asked for that night. But I'm sure that I've talked with people even since, and there was some bitterness, but not with us. No way.

CB: I needed to clean up my garage anyway. So, I got it cleaned out completely.

MK: [laughter] You got clean out, trucks, cars and everything.

CB: The insulation machines and all. The stainless-steel drum, I caught it floating out by, and reached down and pulled it up on the back porch. But then the back porch went, and it took my stainless-steel drum anyway.

MK: Do you think Parsons will be able to recover from this?

AB: I do. I certainly do. I'd say one year from now, when you come into Parsons, you won't be able to tell that there was ever a flood there. It's just the American people's way of coming back. They do it. They do it.

MK: Do you think West Virginia people are especially tough?

AB: I do. I certainly do. [laughter]

CB: They're self-reliant.

AB: They're self-reliant. They live in a manner in which – well, they're closer to one another. They're closer. They'll help you. They'll help one another I think more so than in lots of states that we've been in.

MK: I have been going over to the school, which is where we met. It just amazed me to see the same women working night after night there in the kitchen to get people fed. Has that generally been the spirit around town, of the ones that was not wiped out helping the ones that was?

AB: That's right. Yes. That's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. How those people dedicate their time – give of their time. Another thing that I noticed that amazed me, no matter with whom we met, when we were with FEMA or Mental Health, what impressed me so much was the kindness of the workers. Always, they were kind. Always, and very patient. They'd listen to your story, if you wanted to tell one, and particularly so –

MK: You were saying as far as recovery went –

CB: We had the worst economy of any state and union and the nation. I doubt if they ever will recover, really. My honest opinion of it.

MK: Just hit too hard?

CB: Well, yes, and we were already down, see.

MK: What do you think will happen then?

CB: I don't know. It may just be a warning to the whole nation. God may have removed his protection from our nation too.

MK: Do you think because it flooded this way one time, it could do it again?

CB: Well, they don't seem to think that it ever will. I don't know really. Could.

MK: You think people will have to leave out of here if –

CB: Well, they may try to hang on. I don't know what they'll do. I don't think I'll stay.

MK: Where will you go?

CB: I have a building over at Craigmere. Might move over there. I'm not real sure.

MK: You are not going to try to fix this house though?

CB: Maybe I will come spring.

MK: Would you ever live in that house again?

CB: Maybe temporarily.

MK: You would not be afraid of the river again?

CB: I wasn't afraid of it, but I'd watch it closer, I think, next time. Yes, I would.

MK: Well, you are good people and you have got a good spirit. Is there anything else you can think of?

AB: Well, I've found that it has brought our community together. I truly have. I've found that. When we go and eat at the schoolhouse, everybody's saying hello to one another and hugging one another. Even me with my neighbors, I talk with them and I'd wave at them. But now, I find that I have a closeness with them that I never have had. I have friends now more – I make more friends. I think Parsons will come back. I truly do. I think it will come back on a more grander scale.

MK: Do you think there will be a lot of federal dollars that will help that to happen or what do you think?

AB: No. No, I do not. I do not think that. I think, and I have thought from the very beginning, that it's an individual thing when each of us takes a bull by the horns and gets busy. I think it's an individual thing. We're going to have to come back. Now, probably, Parsons will rebuild the business section. I don't know how that will come about. But there's been reports that maybe a mall will go in and that sort of thing. But I look to see a better Parsons. I truly do, business wise. As Charles said, I don't whether we'll be back or – the house is still standing. It was a beautiful home. It was a gorgeous home. Of course, my furniture went right with it, I mean, and being nice [laughter]. But it's all over and we'll pick it up, the pieces, we're just going on with our lives.

MK: That is great.

[end of transcript]