

Diana: Today is November 15, 2017. What is your name?

Mike: Mike Harden.

Diana: Where do you live?

Mike: Here in Ashland.

Diana: What's your occupation?

Mike: I farm and ranch.

Diana: How old are you?

Mike: I am 68.

Diana: When did you first become aware of the Starbuck fire, hereafter referred to simply as the fire in general.

Mike: I had a friend that called me at noon and told me that there was a big fire southwest of Englewood. Probably south of Frosty Ediger and the wind was out of the south, probably blowing forty or fifty miles an hour and he said, "You might want to think about getting your tractor and disk." So I ate my dinner and that's how I knew about it. It was about 12 clock.

Diana: You were at home?

Mike: Yes.

Diana: When they first called. What was your immediate reaction?

Mike: Well, I knew in a fire like that, the fire trucks were totally helpless. It would take me several hours to get there, but there was nothing to contain it at that point and that's... It had been burning part of the morning and there was nothing going to stop it until it got to the farm ground, which was south of Mineola. I thought "Well, I probably need to go see if I can help."

Diana: So what was your equipment that you went and got? Was it located close to town?

Mike: It's north and east of Ashland about thirteen or fourteen miles.

Diana: So what did you go get?

Mike: I had a four-wheel drive tractor and an offset disk setting up there. As soon as we got our dinner eaten, I took my hired man and he and I went up and we had to... I don't remember if we had to put the batteries in the tractor or what, but we had to unhook it from a scraper and hook it up to the disk and air up the tires on the disk. I don't remember if I checked the fuel or not. I probably did. Then I had to start heading to town with it.

Diana: And where did you go first, when you got back to town? Where did you decide was a good place to start?

Mike: Well I just went out on the highway on the west edge of town and started disking the road ditches.

Diana: So what time was it?

Mike: I'm saying... It was really weird because when I road (roaded) the tractor in, I got there to the Mt. Jesus road next to the highway (160) and then here is all these vehicles. I go "Come on people, give me a break. I'm trying to get to the west edge of town. "Well I didn't realize that they had evacuated Ashland. So here I'm meeting all these vehicles with a tractor and disk and I finally just got to where those people could slow down for me. That's what I decided. I don't know what time... maybe 3:30.

Diana: That would be 3:36, I think when they gave the evacuation order. So it would have had to have been somewhere between 3:30 and 4:00. So when you left town, could you see smoke? When you first left town to go and get your tractor?

Mike: I don't remember. I honestly don't remember.

Diana: When you were coming back (to Ashland) could you see smoke? Could you see flames?

1. Mike: No. When I got to Mt. Jesus, there was smoke to the northwest up on Bouziden and in that area. I called back to Mille Fudge (Emergency Management Director), and I said "Millie, There is smoke up here." I said "Should I stay here, do I need to stay up here and protect stuff? What do I need to do?" She said "I've got to have you on the west side of Ashland." So I said "Ok, just be aware that there is smoke up here northwest up here of Bouziden." So I continued on to town.

Diana: So how long did you plow, and where all did you plow, or disk?

Mike: Well, I disked up and down the road ditches on the west side of town. And then when the wind switched out of the north, I was just coming down the road there south of the school on the blacktop that goes north on the west side of town. I think it was Kit Walker that I met and the smoke was horrific coming out of the north, and I said "Hey, do I need to go north and help?" and he said "Mike you can't see anything." he said "Dave is up there trying to save his house with a tractor and disk." So I said "Well, I'm going to head that way. He is going to have to have help." So I disked... I had already disked there around the school. I disked up some of the yard. So I started disking down the road on the west side of the school, road ditch and all. Then I got on north up there by Randle Spares and there was a road grader in there in his yard on the north side of his house. They waved me on in. So I folded up my disk, went across the cattle guard and unfolded and started disking. I disked on the north side of his house and then on west side of the house I could just barely get through because the creek falls off. So I disked along the creek and there to the south of his house there was some cattle on the wheat of Bouziden's I think. I disked a couple of times there, trying to make sure it didn't come up out of that draw and went on further east. There were some cattle down there and some horses. So I thought "Well I had better disk and make sure that the fire didn't get to them." So I disked back north, and then I thought "Well I need to do a bunch of disking on the north side of the house." At that point there were several fences there and I said "Hey, I ain't got time to mess with fence." I just started plowing through fences.

Diana: Could you see pretty well still, or was there a lot of smoke?

Mike: There was a lot of smoke.

Diana: But could see?

Mike: Oh yeah, I mean I could see two or three hundred yards. I mean it wasn't that low of visibility. But he had a lot of big weeds there north of his house and a bunch of bales stacked. I was thinking "Oh man, if that gets in there." So I just took out across his pasture there. Weeds were as tall as the hood of the tractor and I just disked. Then I hit a fence to the north, so I disked along the north side and I came back down and disked again, then I disked some more right on the northwest side of his house there in that pasture. By then I could see the flames right to the west, north west of his house. So I thought "Uh oh." So I disked some more there in the big weeds.

Diana: Was it dark?

Mike: Oh no, it was still light.

Diana: So like four or five or six?

Mike: Yeah, something like that. So I disked in there and then the fire was burning sideways. It wasn't really coming at me, and I thought "Ok." So I went further west, towards the fire and I put in another fire break so the fire couldn't even get over to where I had disked. I disked a couple times in there and then kind of... well I didn't really watch I just... I thought "Well, I need to go back down and check to the south of the house. When I got down there it had come across a draw, and it had kinda jumped my fire guard and had some of the cattle trapped in there a little bit, so I disked around them again and disked again right south of his house so it couldn't come back to the house from the south. And I thought "I need to go back north and make sure it doesn't get through." So I disked on up in there and then I realized that I had it contained so it wasn't going to get to his house, so I thought "Oh man. I've got to get on south, because what about those places on down there and the town and the school and all of that." So I started disking on the west side of the road. Well I had to fold up my plow to get across the cattle guard. When I looked back, I realized that I had part of Randle Spares other cattle guard in my plow, so I had dig that out. I dug that out, and then I could go on and get across the cattle guard. Then I got on the other side and started disking down the road ditch. Then I got down there to Wanda's (Bisel) and I thought "Oh boy, well I can see the fire to the west." I could see the fire a mile or so to the west of her house. So I disked in front of her house and on the highway. There was a highway patrolman sitting there in the middle of the intersection. He didn't stop me from disking. I was disking on the south side of the highway and I was disking on the north side of the highway, I disked on Wanda's yard, I disked on the west side of her house, in her tree row and everything and I thought "This ain't going to work, it ain't going to be enough." So I just drove out of her yard and drove on the west side of her house and had the disk in the ground. I went through the fence and went on the north side of the house, across at an angle. I went through another fence and then came back around to the east of her house. I don't know if I went through the fence there or not. I think I did. Cuz you know, you have got to make sure it doesn't make it through (the fire). Somewhere in there I disked some more in the school yard and then I disked on the south side of the highway there so if it tried to get across the highway it couldn't get in that orchard there. So I disked in there and disked clear over to the next street. I disked clear down to the vet building I think. So then, I don't know how many strips I put around the north side of her house and west and then I thought "Ok, that will work." Then I thought "Well, I need to disk some more up by Kenny Swanson's house." Because I didn't want Kenny to lose his house. So I just went down there to the south end of where the hospital was and pulled it up (folded up the disc) and went through the gate and started disking there. I disked on the west side of his house and on south down there in the CRP grass. Then I disked back west to the dump and came back again and disked more in there and made it wider and then I think I disked another time in there.

Diana: So were you seeing flames while you were disking now?

Mike: Oh yeah. You can see flames to the north west.

Diana: But they are not coming from the west, or not from the southwest coming up.

Mike: No.

Diana: They are all up on the north side, right?

Mike: Well, it's on the west side of town.

Diana: But it's coming from the north?

Mike: Yes. Well see, when I met Kit Walker earlier, that was... it was still light, probably five o'clock or I don't know what time it was for sure. That's when... The wind had already switched out of the north. So when I was up there around the Spares the wind was out of the north. When I first got there (to Ashland) it was out of the southwest, and then that's when I disked in the school yard some. Then when it went out of the north, that's when I said I needed to go on north up by the golf course and up in that area. So the fire coming from the north couldn't come through by the golf course. That's when I got clear up there by Randle Spare's and then I did that(disked around Randal's Spares house), and then I came back down on the highway, I got the dirt road on the west side disked (on the dirt road west of the high school). So if it came in from the west, hopefully it wouldn't jump the road. Well then after I did Wanda's, around there, then I disked up in Shupe's pasture on the west side of the road. I would take you up there and show you where I went off that one hill right there on the south side of the creek. Have you seen that?

Diana: No.

Mike: It was...

Diana: Pretty steep?

Mike: It was... Yeah. But I disked, I put two guards (fire guards) in there and went through some of Shupe's fence. Tried to disk around some of his equipment. He had a tractor and a truck and some stuff there. So then after I got that done, I decided that I needed to go on down to Kenny Swanson's house. Well then like I said I disked in there several times (Kenny Swansons). And then, I had gotten a tree or two and the disk would ball up with the big weeds. The weeds were as tall as the hood of the tractor and it left some clumps. So I had to take it out (the plow out of the ground)and spread it (the clumps). Well I guess when I went over the clumps, it kind of jarred the tractor. Well I got a couple of pines (trees) then and when I got up there around Kenny's house, I must have had... I don't know how many passes I made. Well because I stopped, and I've got pictures from the hood of my tractor looking to the northwest and the flames and then coming looking (scanning) to the west and kinda to the southwest up there. Then I took and took pictures to the southeast and you could see the flames on the east, southeast part of town and then clear up... of course it was dark by then and all you could see was the lights of town. But I'm estimating that the fire was clear up there by the cemetery. It's hard to tell. Well anyway, then I was disking a little bit more and then a hydraulic hose on the transmission on the tractor (broke) and dumped all the oil and my tractor stopped.

Diana: And where were you when that happened?

Mike: I was south of the hospital. So my hired man was there and at that point, I got in with him and I thought "Well I've got a road grader down there by my shop. We had just gotten some batteries, so we put the batteries in it and so I took the road grader back down there and put a fire guard around my tractor and plow. Then I'm going "Ok, I haven't been southeast of town, I need to go see..." because I've got a place there and a bunch of equipment around there and see if its burning through there. So when I got out there it hadn't gotten that far... hadn't back burnt back that far west. It was east of me a mile. Caroline Degnan's Road, it was right east of that a little ways. And I thought "Ok, that's back burning, and I don't see any fire trucks or nothing." So I thought "Well, I had better go down to her house and see if anyone is around."

Diana: Did you see anybody with spray rigs?

Mike: There was nobody.

Diana: Nothing?

Mike: Nothing. So I got down there to the cattle guard right there on my southeast corner of my field. That's about a quarter mile north of our house, and I could tell there was nobody. There was nothing there. And I'm going "This is going to back burn onto her place."

Diana: Was the wind still blowing?

Mike: It was going out of the northwest.

Diana: And blowing hard?

Mike: Well, by then see, it was still blowing pretty good, but then see, the humidity had come up and it wasn't blowing like it was at five or six o'clock when it was probably fifty or sixty miles an hour winds.

Diana: Had the temperature dropped?

Mike: Oh yeah, I'm sure it had. But I was inside so I didn't notice it. So I thought, "I'm dropping my blade in the ground and I'm going to plow a fire guard around starting from the cattle guard and going south east and on the northside of her house up there and around it." Again I just went right through her fence. I didn't even stop. Came around Carol on the east side and got around to a road on the south side of her house and I thought "Ok well, that will block that." So I turned around and widened it out a little bit and I got back up to the cattle guard. Well then, several people showed up. And I had wire around the tires and wheels and so all of the guys, they cut the wire off it and I could see the fire was coming closer to my fire guard and I said "Guys, I've gotta go, cuz I need to widen that." So I started back down that fire guard again and I got, oh... right north of that barn and I ran into the fire. Of course then you can't see, and then I didn't know where the fire guard was for sure. And I go "Ok, I'm going to go on through that." So I went on through the fire and then came around and she had a yard light so I could see where the house was and kinda where the barn was and the corrals. So then I got to the south end of where I had put in a fire guard and then I started back again and I wanted to make sure it hadn't jumped. I can't tell you if it jumped it or not. All I know was, I just... At that point I just went to the fire, put the blade down and started throwing dirt with the tip of the blade on the fire. And then I came around and started to head west, kinda on the northside of her house and the fire was coming in there pretty good. I couldn't see the flames, but man, you could see the reflection off the smoke and I'm going

“Do I want in there or not?” So I started... three times I started to go in there and I go... and I chickened out. Finally about the third or fourth time I go “Ok, we’re going.” So just kinda went where I thought the fire guard was and then when I got back in there to where the fire guard was I just stayed right on the part that wasn’t burnt and I just let the tip of the blade... I didn’t have time look back, but it looked like it was putting it out, so I just went along the fire throwing dirt on the top of it. Then I go and I’m blading and I’m blading and I’m blading and I’m going “Where’s the road? Where’s the cattle guard? And I go where in the world?” because I mean you ...

Diana: Have no sense of direction?

Mike: Have no Idea where you are.

Diana: Yeah.

Mike: And finally I get up there and I go running through a fence. And I go “Oh man, I’m not where I thought I was.” And then I get on up there a little bit further and then I can kind of see the lights of town and I kinda realize where I’m at. So then I get on up there to another fence, and then I go “Well, I’m not going to go through that fence.” So I just put a fire guard right there, so when it burnt down there and then I went on to the west.

Diana: So were you still south of the dirt road on Degnan’s or had you gone across?

Mike: Yes.

Diana: So you were all still south of the road?

Mike: Yeah. I was a half mile south of the road (Sitka Road). So I put a fire guard, I knew where that cattle guard was, so I put a fire guard the rest of the way west on the northside of that fence and then down the west side of that field next to the west fence and then back to where the cattle guard was. When I got there the fire was all out, except to the very north. And I had that so it wouldn’t come on south. And then I’m thinking “Ok, that fire is still burning southeast of her house.” Fire trucks came in there and they kind of knocked it down and then here she (fire) came back again. And I’m going “Ok, that thing is going to back burn, and there is nobody here. Just how far west is that thing going to back burn? Is it going to back burn into town?” Because basically there is CRP from her house clear back to the creek and then when it gets to the creek, it could go north or south or whatever or both. So I started down the road on the west side of her house, blading, trying to put up a fire guard there. And then I get down there (south of her house) and there’s a fence. And I’m going “Oh what did I do now?” Well in the meantime another friend of mine called me. He had a place up there north of Ashland, a mile or so north of Ashland, and the fire was backburning into his place, and there were no fire trucks. So I said “Ok, I’ll be up.” Now somewhere in there I went to the house and ate some supper and I don’t know when that was.

Diana: It was dark, right?

Mike: Oh yeah.

Diana: So did you go take your blade through town? To get up north?

Mike: Oh yeah.

Diana: So how, when you say your cutting a fire wall, how big is your blade?

Mike: Well that blade is sixteen foot. But, I don't do it probably the right way. I put the heel of the blade down and had it at an angle that it throws the dirt out, and it... the bad thing is it creates a ditch, but if you try to blade flat, out in the pasture when it's dark, how are you going to see... how are you going to know if your getting all the grass. You gotta get it clean or it will burn across. If you put it down to far, you know far enough that your creating a ditch and throw in a ridge, then you know that you are building a fire guard.

Diana: So do you have lights?

Mike: I had one headlight. I couldn't see beyond my front wheels.

Diana: Could see the fence, right?

Mike: When I hit the fence yeah, I saw it.

Diana: That's when you saw it?

Mike: Yeah, that's when I saw it. So anyway, back to my friend north of town. So I went up to his place. Well it was burning in from the east side. So I said "Hey, I can't see." I said "You have got to get in front of me, and I will follow you." So he got in front of me with his pickup so I could see where to go. So I put a fire guard on the east side of his place. Well I bet I built a fire guard a mile and a half long on the east side of his place. And then come to find out the next day, it got to the fire guard and then on the south end, it burned on west and then it came back from the south and burnt back in from the south. But anyway, it didn't get him bad. So when I got back to the south end, then I had to turn around and blade the whole way back. So then I go "Ok." and that may have been when I went to town. I think that is when I went to town.

Diana: Did you have to fill up with gas?

Mike: I don't remember filling up with fuel.

Diana: Ever?

Mike: Nope. Evidently I could read the fuel gage. Your asking me things that honestly, well that was important, so I must have subconsciously kept track.

Diana: So you knew.

Mike: Yes, I knew that didn't want to...

Diana: And that would be maybe a time when you went to town.

Mike: Well, I came to town, and I may have stopped and eaten something, let Joe go eat something too. And then I go "Ok, well I need to go back out south of Caroline's house and go clear on south to the other road down by Klingers or Andersons."

Diana: Where McVickers live now?

Mike: Well it would be east of them.

Diana: East of them.

Mike: A mile. A mile east of them. There's a closed road in there south of Caroline's house. So I called Dustin Walker because he was familiar with Caroline's and I said "Hey, what did I do out here south of Caroline's house?" I said "I run into a fence, what did I do?" He said "Well there's a gate right there and you can go on south." I said "Ok, well, I need to put in a fire guard." So I got Joe in front of me, again I couldn't see where to go and so Joe was leading me while I was a blading and I went a mile or so south of her house. Bladed all the way down there to the dirt road. Opened the gate, bladed to make sure it was clear, sneaked through. Then I bladed all the way back up to her house. In the meantime somebody called me and said they were worried about over there next to Randel Spares house. The CRP was burning beyond the Allison place, that's north of Tony Maphet's. But it was burning back to the west and there was nothing to keep it from going down the road ditch. So I drove back up there and I put a fire (guard), you know, cut it so that it couldn't burn from the road ditch to the field. There's a wheat field there and got into the wheat field to make sure it was blocked.

Diana: How fast can you go on the blade?

Mike: Oh, I can probably run twenty mile an hour.

Diana: So it didn't take you that long to get there?

Mike: Yeah, oh... fifteen minutes. So then I came back to the house. Maybe that's when my wife fixed me something to eat. Because I said...

Diana: Were you in contact with her? Did she know where you were most of the evening.

Mike: Well, That's... How do I want to say this...

Diana: Did she evacuate or was she still in town?

Mike: She didn't know to evacuate because she was working in the FSA office. And the word didn't get to her. Well, I didn't call her. I knew she was ok. I knew she was safe. And then I found out later that she had evacuated. Went clear over to Protection and then Coldwater. I'm going... and then she kinda got on to me, she said "You never called me once" and I'm going "I'm sorry, I..."

Diana: Was busy?

Mike: "Was a little bit busy."

Diana: Did you talk to a lot of people though when you were on the tractor and on the blade?

Mike: Not really, because well, you're busy. You're trying to pay attention. Now on the way to town, I did call a couple of my kids and said that they were evacuating Ashland. Just to let them know what we were into. The fire hadn't reached Ashland, so I wasn't concerned. I just wanted the kids to know so they could look on the news and...



Diana: Yeah. Facebook seemed to be a better place to look.

Mike: I'm not on Facebook.

Diana: Oh, yeah. But are they?

Mike: I don't know. So, I let them...

Diana: You let them know what was going on? So they would kind of have an idea? Did you have any property close to town, well you had that place south of town, right?

Mike: Well I've got the Berryman place. My horses were there.

Diana: Did you go out that way?

Mike: No, I called Joe, or Joe was with me and I sent Joe out there to check and see and he said the fire hadn't gotten there. So and then it looked like the fire was out. I had no idea what happened out there. I figured maybe I had lost my horses. I said "If you can, go out there and turn the horses out in the wheat field.

Diana: And what about your properties east of town. Did it burn that part?

Mike: No. No that's what I said...

Diana: Because everything was east of there?

Mike: Yeah, it was east of there. It got to that corner (NE corner of my property).

Diana: So when did you go from being around Ashland and helping put stuff out there, and then going to Lexington. Because didn't you go out there?

Mike: Yeah. Well, I think that when I came back from putting a little fire guard across the ditch there by Randle Spare's, I have no idea what time...

Diana: Nobody knows what time anything was.

Mike: Ok, well, I think that's about when I came back and ate a little something. My wife was back... Somewhere in there we did make communication and... but ya know, I don't know. I honestly, I have had to go back and look at times on pictures that I took, so I knew kind of what was going on. I thought that when I came back in and got the road grader that I talked to her, I think I talked to her before I got the road grader. I don't know. There was so much going on, I honestly, I was just trying to...

Diana: Keep the fire from going where it didn't need to go?

Mike: Well, yeah. Doing what I could do. Well anyway, I think I ate something, and then that's when I said "Ok, I've got to go up north and see what's going on up there?" So I think while my wife was fixing something to eat, I said "Gayle I've got to go check up there (Lexington)." So I got my pickup and I headed up north of Sitka and well, you know where that electric substation is?

Diana: Yes.

Mike: It was burning across that pasture, but it was backburning. And it was going to backburn across me and I've got a bunch of equipment and stuff right there to the east and I've got cows in there. And there was no fire trucks. I called to see, and there was no fire trucks. So I go ok, I've got to go back to town and get the road grader.

Diana: So you really hadn't gotten very far?

Mike: Very far?

Diana: You got to like the curves or...

Mike: Yeah.

Diana: But not all the way.

Mike: Yeah well the fire was already out to the north. There wasn't any fire. It was all to the south west.

Diana: And it was going east?

Mike: Yeah, it was back burning to the east. That's right. So, I think... See when I got east of Ashland, I stopped there at the three mile junction (dirt road Sitka) and looked back, and I've got pictures looking back across the Christman place towards Caroline Degnan's, the fire on the hill there. And then, I got on over further east, and right west of Sitka, right there after you cross the low water bridge, then here's... I stopped there to take a picture and I've got several pictures of the fire around Sitka and you can see the glow of the flames and then you can see the elevator.

Diana: You can see the elevator with those big tall flames?

Mike: Well, it was that pile of wood...

Diana: Oh, the railroad ties?

Mike: Yes, they were burning. And the glow, of course, the grass was burning there west of Sitka too. I had forgot about that. So it lit up the elevator pretty good. You could see it in the pictures. So, that's when I went on up north and then I realized "Hey, I gotta go up there (Lexington)." So I came back (to Ashland), I think I ate, and then I sent Joe home and I go "I've got to get the grader." So I took the grader up there (Lexington) and that's when I put the fire guard there at the substation so it couldn't back burn across me. Now when I got that done, I think it was 5:30 in the morning, when I look back at the pictures. See I lost all track of time. Complete track of time. The adrenaline was just.

Diana: When you were up there at Lexington, did you talk to your brothers?

Mike: No, they were on east up there trying to get it (put out the fire) on further east. And I'm wore out by then. So I called them when I got through with the grader and I said "Hey, the grader is here guys." I said "I've got to go home." I said "I'm all in, I've got to go home."

Diana: So when you went down the highway, everything was burnt going back into town, going down the highway?

Mike: I don't know. I can't tell.

Diana: You can't tell? You can't see anything?

Mike: I've just got one little headlight in the front, that see's the front tires. Now if you kind of look to the side, but everything... It's dark anyway, I mean at night, you can't tell for sure what is what.

Diana: So did you go home and go to bed?

Mike: Yeah.

Diana: How long were you down? I mean did you sleep for a while?

Mike: Well, I went and took a shower and probably went to bed, and I don't know how long I slept. Like I could look... there was a picture that I took the next morning out there east of the substation looking back south. There was smoke back up there in the hills. So that's probably where I went first. I guess, I don't know. Honestly I lost track of everything I did on some things. You know I have a heart issue.

Diana: How did that work for you?

Mike: It didn't flare up during it. It did not.

Diana: You didn't think about it?

Mike: What I've found with it (the heart issue), unless it's really bad, you don't feel it. And I think that the adrenaline probably overcame some of it. If that makes sense. And I don't know and when it hits me the worst, it seems like it's when I'm sitting in a chair, relaxed.

Diana: Tuesday did you go out and fight fire or basically were you just seeing where the fire had been and what damage was?

Mike: I think I went out to see where the fire had been and taking pictures.

Diana: And what kind of damage did you have?

Mike: Did I have?

Diana: Yes.

Mike: Well...

Diana: Did you lose any cattle?

Mike: No. All mine were on wheat.

Diana: And did lose lots of fence?

Mike: Yup.

Diana: lose all of your pasture?

Mike: Most of it, yeah.

Diana: Did you lose hay?

Mike: Umm, I had some hay stacked south of Sitka. On Gary White on CRP. There was, I don't know how many hundreds of bales down there. I knew it was gone, but I didn't have time to go and look. I mean what difference is it going to make anyway. At that point it ain't going to make any difference.

Diana: So what kinds of things did you do Tuesday then? Once you kind of assessed the damage?

Mike: I think I just went around to see what the damage was and took pictures.

Diana: So how did that make you feel? I mean, what kind of... How did you feel about all of that?

Mike: There was nobody, I didn't really know of anybody who died. I didn't know the extent of... how many homes were burnt. I wasn't hearing any catastrophic things. When I drove back through the mountain road I could see dead cattle. I didn't know how many, I should've probably taken some pictures so we had pictures to show.

Diana: did you have any electrical lines that were down that you had to drive over or...

Mike: Oh yeah.

Diana: Go around.

Mike: Wasn't any down, but there was along the road where the poles were burnt off.

Diana: Anything that really shocked or amazed you in what you saw?

Mike: I can't remember anything.

Diana: Nothing that stands out?

Mike: No.

Diana: What do you think your most vivid memory of the fire is?

Mike: My most vivid memory of the fire. Never thought about that. I guess it would be, over the next several days or weeks the feeling of desolation. You know the trees were gone, the fences were gone, just the overall blackness. And every morning when you go out the putrid smell of the smoke. And we went, see our kids (grandkids) go to school in South Central (High School) and we had a basketball game up there at Hays (State Playoff), and so we just made up our minds that we were going. So we went on up there that weekend. Just to get away. I guess, when I thought about my situation, I'm just going "Wow, I'm ok." I didn't lose any livestock, didn't lose any equipment. Yeah, I lost fences and I lost

my grass, but I didn't know how many people lost lots of livestock. Then I started hearing about people who lost their homes and then you get to thinking about how devastating that is, and I'm going "Wow, I feel for them." I know how much I was struggling with the reality of what happened and I hadn't even really lost anything.

Diana: So did you have a lot of damage to your tractor, or your blade?

Mike: No. Just broke that hydraulic line, and well that disk, it messed up a bunch of the disks on that disk but, that's just... It didn't break it, it just...

Diana: Things you have to fix.

Mike: Yeah.

Diana: So you've been around this area all your life pretty much, and you have seen other wildfires and other things come through like this. How does this compare?

Mike: Well I was involved oh, probably ten years ago or more. There was a fire north of Sitka about three miles. And the wind had come up out of the southwest and this was in January. The wind came out of the southwest I'll bet it was blowing sixty miles an hour or more. It was blowing dirt and sand against the windows of the museum. And then about a quarter till twelve the sirens went off. And I'm going "Oh my God, wow." In this kind of a wind, this is a wreck. So I called down to find out where it was and it was north of Sitka. Well see I've got land right up there. And I go "Where?" and so they told me and I go "Ok, that's on me." So I had a tractor and disk here by Ashland so I got em started and headed up there and got that fire. When I got to that, they didn't have the north side put out at all. Had a little bit of it, mainly on the south side, and so I just started disking on the north side of it, and it was controlling it. Then I got probably half way down and then I met a fire truck coming back towards me putting it out and then it was starting back up behind him again. So when we met, he turns around and he starts putting it out in front of me and then I can put half the disk on burnt and half the disk on the unburnt. And then the cow chips don't start it again. So we were probably running along there... I was probably running eight or nine mile an hour disking.

Diana: Yeah, and that burnt a lot of...

Mike: Yeah, there was probably three or four thousand acres.

Diana: Nothing to compare to this though.

Mike: No. Not in the massiveness of it. The thing that got this is, that there were three fires. And you had the one coming up out of the southwest, which had been burning for five or six hours. And really didn't have any of it contained. And then you had the ones to the northwest of Ashland that were burning to the north and east. There was nobody up there. And of course I was looking at the map the other day, and it burnt all the way from Denny Denton's house, clear east of 34 highway up by Kirks. It was probably three miles east of the highway there at Kirks. So you're talking twenty miles long. When the wind come up out of the northwest, you had a twenty mile wide wall of fire coming at you. There was no way to contain it at all. Plus you had the fire southwest of Ashland that turned and went southeast.

Diana: So when they converged, it was kind of...

Mike: Yeah, they converged south and southeast of Ashland. The only thing that stopped it was farm ground.

Diana: So who were some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful during the fire?

Mike: During the fire?

Diana: Or after. People that were most helpful, or agencies that were most helpful.

Mike: Well of course the fire department, that was totally overwhelmed.

Diana: Did you get to see any of the strike teams that came in. Did you get to see them work?

Mike: No.

Diana: Just saw them sitting in town?

Mike: Yes. I didn't see any of them work, I was just trying to...

Diana: Get your own stuff back together?

Mike: Yeah.

Diana: So did you see any of the helicopters?

Mike: No

Diana: Or the planes that came in to drop stuff?

Mike: Nope.

Diana: So basically, were you mostly working up in the Lexington area to fix stuff, or were you kind of all over? What was your biggest priority after the fire?

Mike: You know that's all kind of a fog.

Diana: What did you do with your cattle? Did you have to do anything with them?

Mike: No, they were contained because it didn't destroy any of the fence where they were. So they were fine. And even the cattle here around town, it didn't really affect any of the fence, so i was in good shape as far as all of my livestock.

Diana: What about water?

Mike: Well, they got the electricity going timely enough that my electric well up north, took care of my cattle. And of course, I don't use electricity here west of town. I do southeast of town, but we didn't lose that cause...

Diana: What about your horses out at the west Berryman?

Mike: It didn't get that far. Lacked a half mile from getting to that place. So they were fine. Like I said, I was very fortunate.

Diana: Did you get any of the hay that came to town?

Mike: Yes. I did get some hay.

Diana: Did people bring it to you or did you have to go pick it up?

Mike: No there was some...well, feed and seed was totally overwhelmed. So Jeff asked me if I would take some of it and unload it, so I took some and unloaded some on me and helped him unload quite a little bit of it too. I took a loader tractor down there and helped.

Diana: Lot coming in?

Mike: Oh yeah, there's lots of hay. I don't know how many thousands of bales they stacked down there south of town.

Diana: And then they started just shipping it out to the ranches.

Mike: Well, people would come in and get it. But it was still... there was a big pile of hay left this spring.

Diana: Did you go down to the Christian camp and eat with the volunteers?

Mike: No I didn't. I really didn't. I had grandsons here by then and we were working on tearing out fence.

Diana: Did you have any volunteers help you?

Mike: No, I didn't.

Diana: Just family?

Mike: Just my grandsons, they were needing a job and looked to me like the other people needed the volunteers. I had had help. I just put those boys to work.

Diana: What effects, physical, financial or emotional do you think the fire caused you?

Mike: I would say to begin with, it wasn't so much... but the reality set in of the work of the fencing and all then I got to be pretty grumpy and hard to get along with. Chewing on them boys that they need to do this and that, which I feel kinda bad about.

Diana: So how many miles of fence did you have to replace.

Mike: I'm probably going to be around five miles. I had quite a little bit of new fence, and that was a difference, but I don't know how many corners... I bet you, I may be up to close to a hundred corners by the time I get done. Do you know how much time it takes to put corners? You're looking at a minimum of two hours to three.

Diana: Putting in still?

Mike: Yeah.

Diana: And putting them in concrete.

Mike: Yeah. Takes time to get them... well of course I've been buying them but, we've been adding pegs to keep the concrete around them. And just hauling them out there, drilling the holes, getting them set up, mix the concrete. It's just unbelievable the amount of time it takes to build corners.

Diana: So what did you do with all of the burnt fence?

Mike: Hauled it to the dump. Yeah I've got, I don't know how many tickets and stuff. Those boys had spent part of the morning unloading the trailer that they had loaded up the previous day. And had to separate the wire from the post and all that. Sometimes they would bring in the trailer at noon and spend part of the afternoon unloading the trailer.

Diana: So how many grandsons did you have helping you?

Mike: I had two grandsons and then another young guy.

Diana: Can you perceive anything positive that has resulted from the fire?

Mike: Well, how generous people are. Probably the most humbling I've ever experienced.

Diana: Did you get a lot of people thanking you for plowing.

Mike: Oh yeah. I just did my part just like the firemen. That's all I was doing. I had somebody that was really carrying on "What can I do for you, how can I repay you." I said "Hey, a thank you is enough." And that's where I honestly felt like I was just doing my part. But back to to the humbling thing about the people and the generosity, I had to learn how to be a...

Diana: A taker?

Mike: A gracious receiver.

Diana: I think that's one of the hardest things we have all had to learn out of this, don't you?

Mike: Yeah. And that minister when we had the community service, one of the comments he stuck with me, is "What you may think is your most admirable trait may be your downfall." And I think about, for one example, our pride and having to humble ourselves to be a thankful recipient. And I realized how important that is to be a gracious, humble recipient, because people want to help. It makes people feel good to help. And that's important. That's what gives us all worth, I guess you might say. It makes us different from animals. That we can share and help one another.

Diana: Were you amazed at the number of people that wanted to come here and help?



Mike: I was amazed at how far people came. And I was amazed at all of the convoys of materials and bales and all. Like I said, it was totally overwhelming. Totally overwhelming.

Diana: And it keeps coming. In some respects, because there are still people that still want to come. So what can you do or have you done to prepare for a future event?

Mike: I don't know that you can prepare. I do need to get my disk fixed up, because no more than these double offset discs cost anymore, the biggest thing is going to be having access to a tractor. Because a lot of people have gone no till. But having a disk and a tractor available, honestly, that's the only way you stand a chance with a fire like that is if you've got a number of farmers or people who have equipment to put a fire guard. (Because most farmers have gone no-till, discs are not available and the large tractors to pull them).

Diana: So what about the community? What can they do to prepare? Were you amazed at how people evacuated?

Mike: I didn't pay attention.

Diana: You were too busy?

Mike: I was too busy. All I know was that I met that solid stream of vehicles. But you know, and I hope I don't say this wrong... I wouldn't have evacuated. And I guess I wouldn't have been scared, and maybe I should have been. So, I don't... I want to be there, to help, in some way. Does that sound foolish?

Diana: Not coming from a farm background.

Mike: Ok

Diana: And knowing how everyone used to, before they had a fire department...

Mike: Pitch in.

Diana: Yeah, everybody had a spray rig and went and brought their spray rig and payed money to help get a truck. And I've heard several people say that they are going to get another spray rig.

Mike: But, you won't use it enough and then it won't work, and then you will have to work on it. And so, I think the biggest thing you could do as a community, and I'm probably going to step on some toes here. I think a good fire department probably edges out the hospital. Sorry. And I'm stepping on toes here but...

Diana: How so.

Mike: You know I have been opposed to what we have done. Spending that amount of money for a hospital, it's nice, it's wonderful, it's beautiful. But it is not going to be utilized. That's my number one concern. It's not... it's foolish. We could have fixed up and gotten by with what we had. We've got other things that need attention worse than the hospital. When I was on the hospital board back in the 80's, we didn't even have any doctors. We didn't even have patients in the hospital and we had more people here then, than we have got now. And we got by didn't we?

Diana: We did.

Mike: And we got by pretty good. Honestly, is this nice? Yes. Is it needed? Yes. But we can't justify spending it, it's not going to be utilized. I'm sorry, to the extent that it needs to be utilized. That fire department is probably... without that good fire department... And I'm sorry to be...

Diana: Reality is reality.

Mike: Reality is reality. And I'm not saying we don't need health care here, we really do, but I think we've... health care has changed a lot in the last twenty years. They don't let you stay in the hospital very long. They try and get you up and get you going quicker. So, I'm sorry. I just don't think... we can't do any procedures here. This is just a place to bring you and stabilize you and decide where to ship you. We don't have enough staff. If you tried to put enough staff here, they wouldn't be utilized enough, they wouldn't be trained enough, because they aren't using their talents enough to stay up on it. I think we would be better served with a good ambulance service and maybe some paid EMT's.

Diana: Paramedics.

Mike: Paramedics. And I don't want to lose the hospital. It just breaks my heart. And I'm probably going to take flack for that.

Diana: Never can tell. So do you have any other thoughts about this experience? Anything that sticks out in your mind about it?

Mike: I hope nobody else ever has to go through this. I'm struggling very hard emotionally right now. It's bit me financially. I think we are going to be hurt next year worse. Like me, I've sold off 40% of my cows. The grass did not come back very good. If we don't get some good rain and things, we are going to be hurting on grass. And what's going to happen is people are going to have to liquidate their cows this next year. The price is down on the cows. I could see it really being tough. And then with this fencing deal, it's strapped a lot of people financially with the amount of money they are having to spend and the amount of time and the amount of stress. I know with myself, I'm probably under the worse stress I've ever experienced in my life.

Diana: So did you take advantage of the community foundation and KLA and some of those?

Mike: Yes I did get some generous donations from them.

Diana: And then did you do the fencing stuff through the FSA or the Soil Conservation?

Mike: Yes, but I didn't take any of the donated supplies because I felt like there wasn't enough to go around. And I'd just go ahead and do mine through the FSA and let the other people have the donated fencing supplies. I just felt like that was the right thing to do.

Diana: So anything else? Any other experiences from this? Are you doing something to combat your emotional? Are you getting some help, or are you taking trips or...?

Mike: I don't have time.

Diana: Do you have someone helping you with your work?

Mike: Nope. Not now. I had a grandson get hurt this summer and it's really taken a toll. And it taking a toll yet today and it's going to take a toll for several years.

Diana: So what's the biggest thing that has changed for you from this fire?

Mike: I am having to re-evaluate where I'm going. Where I want to be in a few years. I think it's a reality check. It's not fun. Probably some major changes.

Diana: For a lot of people I think.

Mike: Yup. For a community I think there is going to be... well, there is going to be a lot of change of... I've already seen land changing hands. Sold. Leases. I think you are going to see a lot more of that. I think you are going to see, it's going to take a toll on everybody.

Diana: So especially some of the older landlords, did they get hurt somewhat with the fencing program?

Mike: I think so. You take some of these people that inherited some land and their living on it for retirement and now it's going to take several years of income of it to make payments on the loan for the 25% of the fencing expense. And that's why I felt like that those people probably, and I know that there's some other people that don't have the...

Diana: Financial wherewithal?

Mike: Yeah.

Diana: So how long do you think it is going to take you to replace your fences to where you want them to be?

Mike: Well I need to be done by next spring. So I'll have to give it up if I don't get it done. I've got another grandson that is going to be here in December, and the other grandson that got hurt, I think he's going to be able to help. And so we are going to work on fence in the month of December. You know with the weather cooperating. And so far it has. I'm hoping we can get a bunch of the corners set and start in on some of... I may have to give up and hire some of it installed. I just... this is totally overwhelming.

Diana: So are you repairing or are you replacing?

Mike: Both.

Diana: Are you using a lot of steel posts instead of wood?

Mike: All steel.

Diana: All steel.

Mike: Like I said, some of this burnt up till, this is the third... So I had an electric line fire up there a year ago where this went through and then that other fire ten years ago up in there. And that's what a lot of that new fence was. So I've been burnt up there three times in ten years. And I'm along the highway, so

what would you do? And, I hope this doesn't sound wrong, but the government is paying for three fourths of it, so you better just bite the bullet and try to do it right while you have some assistance.

Diana: And hopefully you don't have to do it again for another forty years or whatever.

Mike: I hope I'm here in forty years, but I don't think so.

Diana: Have any other thoughts?

Mike: Like I said, I just hope that nobody else has to go through this. Honestly I am lucky in comparison to a lot of my neighbors. So I am thankful for that. I don't know what I would have done if I would have lost my home. I don't know what I would have done if I had lost a hundred cows. It would have been tough.

Diana: Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences with us.