

Karen Maris

Diana: Today is February 6, 2018. What is your name?

Karen: Karen Maris.

Diana: And where do you live?

Karen: Ashland.

Diana: And what's your occupation?

Karen: I'm retired.

Diana: What did you do before?

Karen: I worked for the City of Ashland for 38 years.

Diana: And how old are you?

Karen: I'm 75.

Diana: When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire here often referred to simply as "the fire."

Karen: When the whistle blew at lunch at the community center at say about noon (11:55). That was our first knowledge of a fire.

Diana: So what did everybody think down at the senior citizens?

Karen: Well, having known how the wind was blowing and all, we knew it was going to be pretty serious.

Diana: So did you evacuate?

Karen: Not at that time. We had lunch, and everybody went home not knowing yet what was coming.

Diana: When did you find out that you were going to have to evacuate?

Karen: I believe it was a little after two. My neighbor Janet Harmon and I were visiting on the phone, and she was picking up things. The possibility was that Ashland was going to be evacuated a little after 2:00.

Diana: So did you make plans on what to take and where to go?

Karen: I wandered around for a little bit but Janet did happen to tell me she had a suitcase out and I thought, "Well now, that might be a smart thing." So I did get a suitcase, but then I was contemplating, "Well now, what do I put in it?"

And at the current time, my husband was a patient in the nursing home at Meade, and one of the first things that came to my mind was I needed all the information I could gather on him and take with me. So I did that. And I did get a few clothes, medicine. You know, I began to just kind of gather up money that I knew was in the house, checks.

Diana: So when you evacuated, where did you go?

Karen: We were told to go to Coldwater, and because I have a brother and sister in law living there, that is where I ended up.

Diana: Did your family know where you were going?

Daughter in law Kala had called about 3:00 to say, "You know we are about to be evacuated?" And I said, "Yes and I am preparing." And she said she had been instructed by her husband Kevin to hook onto the camper and head to Coldwater. She told me to come to her house, and we would travel together.

Diana: So did you take your vehicle or did you just go with her?

Karen: I took my car because I had it loaded and I had my house cat with me.

Diana: So about what time did you leave Ashland?

Karen: I believe it was 4:10.

Diana: Did you see any flames when you left?

Karen: Not flames but I was amazed at how dark it had become very shortly from leaving town at the Gibson place and looking south. You know it was amazing already with a steady stream of traffic exiting.

Diana: Were there lots of people at that time?

Karen: There were quite a few people.

Diana: And when you got to Coldwater where did you go?

Karen: To my brother in law's house.

Diana: Did you stop in Protection?

Karen: No. There were people at that intersection that were discouraging you from coming in and wanting you to go on. I think at that time they were probably evacuating Protection too.

Diana: So since you stayed at your brother's, did you have any contact with the Red Cross up at the high school?

Karen: I only went to the high school to see if Janet Harmon would like to come on down at Ronnie and Talma's because she had a big dog with her and the animals weren't allowed in the school you know. But I did not go in and see anybody from Red Cross.

Diana: So did you talk to people that had evacuated when you were at the high school?

Karen: No, I just simply got her located and had her follow me to get out of there and back down to my brother-in-law's house.

Diana: So when you went up to the school, what was the sky like at that time?

Karen: It was just like evening here. I wasn't seeing much fire content that I could tell because I wasn't looking either.

Diana: Was there a lot of dark smoke?

Karen: I can't say that I saw dark smoke. No.

Diana: Could you smell it?

Karen: No, I didn't get out of the car, and I didn't notice it even down at my brother-in-law's.

Diana: So how long did you stay in Coldwater?

Karen: Until about 7:00 a.m. the next morning. It was coming over TV that we were allowed to come back home.

Diana: And so you caravanned back with a lot of other people?

Karen: No, no, it didn't seem like I was in much of a caravan. Janet and I traveled together, but there wasn't a steady stream of traffic then.

Diana: So when you came back down 160, was it a lot different from when you left Ashland?

Karen: Of course, the first thing we saw was the Koehen place, or we used to call it the Mockery place, on the south side of the road. That was gone. That was my first shock, and then just seeing what was burned and all. But the tear-jerker was coming over the hill to see the two Wilson houses absolutely gone.

Diana: Completely surrounded by black?

Karen: And nothing there. I mean, it was just amazing to me how it just wiped out... You know, you might have seen the furnace or the washer and dryer or something, but nothing else.

Diana: Were the cars still sitting there?

Karen: No, I don't believe so.

Diana: So they had already taken the cars. So as you went west of Sitka Hill, how had that changed?

Karen: That was just amazing and on the way over, it was amazing how close to the south we saw evidence of really bad smoke.

Diana: So when you came back on Tuesday, did you see any flames? Was anything close enough that you could see flames as you came down the road?

Karen: No, I don't believe I saw any flames. Maybe smoke but no flame, I don't believe. There might have been a little at the Wilson place, but I really can't recall that I saw anything significant.

Diana: So when you got back to Ashland, did you go home and stay or did you help volunteer?

Karen: No, I did come home and check things out and kind of just... We didn't sleep at all hardly that night. And I had my house cat that I had to let out, and my outside kitties were still there. I can't imagine what they'd gone through. The porch had little silty black stuff all over it.

Diana: Little ash over it?

Karen: Yes.

Diana: So did you notice any damage around town when you came in or was it mostly on the outskirts?

Karen: Not just around town. You know, just topping the hill and seeing that we still had a town, that was just amazing.

Diana: From all of the reports you'd heard the night before?

Karen: That was the real kicker of the whole thing, to know that we were over there and people were back here still and you could see a picture within a minute of what they were looking at. Peewee out at the roadside park and the sign was in sight, so you knew where he was exactly shooting to the Cemetery Road and then up on the highway where the crossing sign is where pedestrians could cross the highway for school. And then the one that hit home was how it lit up the light plant, how close it was to the light plant.

Diana: On the north side of town?

Karen: Yes.

Diana: So did you see a lot of those videos throughout the night?

Karen: Yes. Everybody had a phone that was shooting pictures, and we were passing them around.

Diana: Were you hearing a lot of information that wasn't quite accurate at that time?

Karen: No, we didn't have much communication with anybody. There were people there also from Protection that had to come from there. Later that night, they tried to get back home but were turned back and had to come and stay the night too.

Diana: So were there a lot of people staying at your brother-in-law's house?

Karen: There were seven of us. Well, Kevin and Kala, with their camper, they did go on out to the lake, but they stayed there until 10:30 or 11:00 or so before they went on out to the lake.

Diana: So they mingled with everybody else.

Karen: Yes.

Diana: So did you do help with any of them volunteering after the fire?

Karen: Yes, I did go to school and help feed the firemen.

Diana: So what kind of things did you do when you were up at the school?

Karen: We had hamburgers and just helped serve food.

Diana: So how many days were you up there?

Karen: I went two different days, I believe.

Diana: Were you there the day that the UMW decided to use the beef they were supposed to have for their meeting?

Karen: No, that was after I was there. I was there, I think, more like the weekend when we were still feeding the firemen.

Diana: Did you go help with the camp?

Karen: Yes, I did that too. I made a casserole for it and then went down when the Methodist ladies were serving food two different nights.

Diana: So what was your job when you were down at the camp? Did you help serve or clean tables?

Karen: I helped prepare some of the food and serve it.

Diana: So what kind of food did you serve?

Karen: We had some Tyson chicken and hamburgers that we fixed both nights. We fix those with some cheese on it and put on a bun. That went over really well, the chicken did.

Diana: Did you make sides to go with them?

Karen: There was lots of food brought in and things that we did drag out to set out with them.

Diana: When you were down there volunteering, were there a lot of people from the town that went and helped make sure all the volunteers were taken care of?

Karen: Well there was always a good number of volunteers.

Diana: So what would you guess, about how many people a night were there?

Diana: Oh, I would say anywhere from 12 to 15, 18. I don't know.

Diana: So it is a kind of a mixture of ages and gender?

Karen: Yes, and if people had company, the company came too and helped. It was fine to get to visit with all of those people.

Diana: Did you meet a lot of them and find out where they were from?

Karen: Yes, we had one young woman and her children that were there. And I'm not sure if they were from Michigan, Ohio, and she had told that the kids were out of school and they'd even spent one day visiting at the nursing home and they really liked it here.

Diana: So did you see that caravans of hay that came to town?

Karen: Yes, there afterward.

Diana: Did you also help with the clothing that they had?

Karen: I was out there at the 4-H Building one day, and we helped Kala, and we fed hamburgers to the hay haulers one Saturday. No, I think it was a Sunday that they brought loads in down for Feed and Seed and then trucked them on to wherever they needed to go. By that time, they could tell where to take the truck to the farmer or the rancher.

Diana: So when Kala was in charge of all of the clothes that came in, can you describe or tell what type of and the amount of clothing that came in?

Karen: It was of a horror story. It might have looked like somebody had come in and taken their dirty jeans off and shipped them to us. I don't know, but there were also some very nice brand-new things, everything imaginable. You couldn't believe how things came in and the paper products and the water and the canned goods and clothing, clothing, shoes. It was unbelievable.

Diana: So where did they store all of that?

Karen: Well, later on in time, they made contact with some couple out of Oklahoma or Texas, and they came in were getting things to serve the people down there, the Indians or people they took care of. So one hot Saturday afternoon we were helping load a semi that came from Englewood first and then loaded at the

4-H grounds and then even went to the Vam House and got more. We filled a semi that day with donated clothing.

Diana: Were there canned goods too?

Karen: I don't think there were canned goods.

Diana: Mostly clothing. So did the people who lost their homes take advantage of the clothing that came in?

Karen: I can't speak totally for that because I wasn't there all the time. But yes, I think some people did and even yet today at the VAM house. Recently, I ran into a lady planning some holiday cooking, and she picked up some Christmas things, you know, pretty glass trays that when you have nothing, are appreciated.

Diana: When you lose your house, you kind of need that stuff?

Karen: Right.

Diana: So about how long did we have the clothing out there and the extra water? Was it a couple of weeks or a month?

Karen: I would say even more than that because I know some of it even ended up at city hall. I know the girls had food out in the old fire bays for a long time. Quite some time later, my sister Ann had a friend in Wichita, or Yates Center over in that vicinity, that wanted to bring clothing, and so she rode out with a lady. She was an airline hostess. She brought a whole carload of very nice kitchen things and some clothing and some canned goods.

Diana: Did you see other people that had done that that had brought in like Tupperware and different things?

Karen: Yes, when I was at the 4-H building, a gentleman came in and told he was from Texas. He brought up quite a few paper products and water.

Diana: Lots of water?

Karen: Lots of water. At the school, you know, we had a whole wall in there full of stacked water.

Diana: So what's your most vivid memory of the fire?

Karen: The heartbreak of coming over the hill.

Diana: You've lived here in this part of the country most of your life, all of it, and you've seen grass fires before. Is there any way that you can compare this fire to what regular grass fires are like? How did that color your perception of how this fire would go before you found out that it was a large fire?

Karen: Well, at 11:00 that morning, I'd been at the courthouse. Coming out, I met Mike Harden. We stood, and we had a visit, and this would have been about 11:00 and that wind was kicking up. We just talked about how serious a matter probably was going to happen or could happen. And then, when the whistle did blow, it was just tremendous. Nothing I've ever compared or anything compared in my lifetime.

Diana: So all those years you worked at city hall, you had a way to keep in touch with the firemen when they were out.

Karen: I can't imagine what we owe that group of people and then to think the few that did stay here and keep our town. You know we could have been wiped totally out. It must have been a long night, and they were all over the perimeter. You could tell that in the pictures being sent to Coldwater and what we were

hearing. But I don't think people can think well enough about what those few people and the firemen... I can't imagine how they had the stamina and that we didn't have any serious loss except the one truck driver. How lucky we are.

Diana: So who are some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful either during, before, or after the fire?.

Karen: Well, I think there were just so many volunteers that gave and gave and gave time and food. It was just amazing to hear the firemen that we were feeding from as far away as Colorado and who knows wherever. A lot of the trucks, you didn't know where they were from until you could see it on their truck. But also they telling us that they had never been treated like they were treated here. That spoke very well of us. It wasn't anything that we thought we had to do; we didn't have to do it, it was just what we would do. It's the way we are.

Diana: So there were a lot of volunteers here. Were you amazed or surprised at the number of people who came? You said you got to talk to some of them, did they mention why they decided to come?

Karen: Most of them were just out of the kindness of their heart. They didn't have much, but maybe they could do something.

Diana: How did most of them hear about the fire and its consequences?

Karen: I don't know. In December, I did take a trip to Boston with a sister and that was a group from Kansas City. One night in Boston, we were sitting around a table, and I had a sweatshirt on that said, "Ashland" on it. A lady across the table said, "Where are you from?" And I said, "Ashland, Kansas." And she said, "Oh, where you had the fire." I said, "Oh, you knew about that."

And she said, "Yes, I was in Wichita that weekend or shortly after and saw the trucks of hay coming through with the American flag strapped on and all." She said she had seen it on TV but also a former teacher of mine in high school called recently to tell me that he knew about it and called David George and said, "Hey what's going on." And David said, "I don't know what you're talking about." He said, "I think you're on fire."

And David was amazed at how he could be told that. So you know, if you pay attention or you're looking I guess there's everything on the news.

Diana: It's true. So this fire had a toll on people and cattle and just the community itself. What are some of the effects physical or financial or emotional that you've noticed?

Karen: Well, I think we've always been a caring community. But I think we're much more aware of what our fellow ranchers and neighbors have gone through. To have so many people that lost their households and what-have-you. We have so much to be grateful for and take so much for granted.

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

Oh yes. The good in everyone and there were a lot of people that probably didn't have a whole lot of means of being here but yet they came, and it was the least we could do to feed them and give them housing for all they've done for us.

Diana: So have you or can you do something to prepare for a future fire?

Karen: Well, I could, but am I going to?

Diana: Yes.

Karen: But I do think it makes you mindful of how quickly your life can change. You know a flashlight or a pack of water or whatever you could pick up in a hurry and take cover somewhere.

Diana: So what do you think the community could do?

Diana: Are we well-prepared or have we made better preparations since the fire?

Karen: Having just heard how all these people in charge got through this and accomplished all they did, it's just a miracle how that all came together. The people that came in here to help the Ashland people to do what they needed to do. I'm sure it's a learning experience. It's a learning experience for all of us but to think how we came through that in such grand fashion I think is pretty miraculous.

Diana: Have you shared your experience with other people?

When I told my sister Ann in Wichita about it, and she's very emotional, she belongs to a quilt guild. She went to the quilt guild, and they have been very generous in giving quilts, you know, quilts of valor and everything. So she told her story, which I had told her, and after that, a lady in charge came up to her and said, "Ann, we want you to pick out a quilt for your sister." Ann said, "Oh no, she didn't lose anything." And they said, "No, we want you to pick out a quilt for your sister." And so she did. I have a beautiful quilt. It's on my bed, and I can't forget about how I got that and what transpired in that that was just miraculous. You know they didn't need to do that.

Diana: But it's kind of them to do that.

Karen: Ann was here not so long ago, and we were out in public and ran into a lady who happened to lose her home. So we were telling her this, and she said, "Oh I got a quilt from that group too."

Diana: Oh, cool. So there were quite a few quilts that came to town. Do you know how they were shared?

Karen: They were put in churches for anyone to pick up. Yes. People were very generous there.

Diana: And I hear there's a few more left that they're storing still for other tragedies.

Karen: Yeah, that's a good thing.

Diana: Do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd like to share?

Karen: Well, my favorite story is that in thinking about what you should take and what's valuable to you, I didn't pick up a photo album! Your mind is just so muddled. As I said, I took up the important papers that I thought I needed, and somewhere down the road, I thought, "Well, I didn't take my sewing machine!" And that's a pretty valuable thing in my mind now that I'm retired.

Diana: And your quilting.

Karen: Yes, but I hadn't given it a thought, but fortunately it was there when I got home.

Diana: You talked to your sister Ann, but what about your other family?

Karen: I purchased a firebook from Loree Krier for all of my sisters and my brother.

Diana: Did they all know that you were safe during the fire? Did they know where you had gone? Did you have any correspondence with them?

Karen: I don't know that they did and I didn't communicate with any of them at that time.

Diana: Did they know about the fire at the time it was going on?

Karen: I can't say that they did right at that time.

Diana: But later, did they call you or did you call them?

Karen: A little bit of both. I have them scattered all over, so some of them I could tell about it.

Diana: So what would they think with the firebook?

Karen: They were impressed, and they'll be more impressed with this next production.

Diana: We hope. So anything else she'd like to share?

Karen: Just that it was something I probably could have lived my whole life without it. I'm amazed I handled it as well as I did! And not being touched anymore, I feel for the people who lost so much.

Diana: Thank you for sharing your experience with us. We appreciate it.