

Brenda Mills

Diana: What is your name?

Brenda: Brenda Mills.

Diana: And where do you live?

Brenda: Englewood.

Diana: What is your occupation?

Brenda: Caterer.

Diana: How old are you?

Brenda: Fifty-seven.

Diana: When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter called "the fire," that was on March 6?

Brenda: I first saw it about noon when I looked west. Couldn't decide if it was a dust cloud or a fire cloud.

Diana: What was your immediate reaction?

Brenda: A little concerned, worried.

Diana: Were you hoping... was Beth still there from the barn-quilt class?

Brenda: Yes, Beth-Ann was still there. We were standing where she was staying in that little house, and that's when we looked west and saw the big cloud.

Diana: So about what time was that?

Brenda: It was right about noon.

Diana: And then how did you find out the fire was headed your way?

Brenda: I just kept... I'd leave the house every once in a while and go up towards the fire station so I could see West. I could just see that it was moving, but one point I thought we were out of the danger zone.

Diana: So was it really windy?

Brenda: It was very windy.

Diana: Ash?

Brenda: At that time I didn't see any ash. That was about 1:30 when I really noticed that it was starting to move along.

Diana: Did you evacuate?

Brenda: I did.

Diana: Where did you go?

Brenda: I went south of the river and then there were several people came along. We all went further south till we ended up in a wheat field.

Diana: Where were you?

Brenda: I'm not really sure where we were. We were north of the Highway 64 junction.

Diana: Which is how far south of Englewood?

Brenda: We were probably 12 to 13 miles south.

Diana: Were you still in smoke?

Brenda: Oh yes. Heavy smoke.

Diana: Did you drive in any fire.

Brenda: No.

Diana: So when did you decide it was safe to come back from that wheat field?

Brenda: I'm not really sure how that happened. There were several people there and somebody must have still been in town and called somebody that was there with us. So they all said we could go back to town.

Diana: What all did you take with you when you left?

Brenda: I took a picture of Gayle, Gayle's dad's World War II books, an extra set of clothes, my medicine, and my Mary Kay makeup because I thought if I was going to lose my house I was going to look good.

Diana: So what were you expecting when you came back, and when did you come back?

Brenda: I had a friend that was close to the house kind of watching, so he had already called me and told me my house was still standing and had told me that the garage and all the buildings were gone. But I had no idea what to expect.

Diana: So how did you feel when you first drove up and saw what was left.

Brenda: I was relieved that my house was still there.

Diana: Was it dark?

Brenda: No, it wasn't dark because I can't really remember what time it was... 7ish maybe, I don't remember. Couldn't have been that late I don't think.

Brenda: But it was dark. I mean it was because of the smoke and all the fires and stuff. I don't even remember what time I left home, 3:30 maybe.

Diana: So where did you stay Monday night?

Brenda: Monday night, I stayed in the park in my car.

Diana: In Englewood?

Brenda: Yep.

Diana: Were other people there?

Brenda: Nope, not in the park. I was all by myself.

Diana: Did you see fire trucks?

Brenda: Lots of fire trucks, lots of cops, lots of little fires throughout the night.

Diana: Wind still blowing?

Brenda: The wind was still blowing, though not quite as bad.

Diana: Could you tell when the temperature dropped?

Brenda: Yes, it was early morning.

Diana: So when did you go back to your house?

Brenda: Well, I actually stepped into the house after we went back to town. I couldn't see 10 feet because the smoke was so heavy. Tuesday evening is when I finally went back to the house and slept.

Diana: Did you have electricity?

Brenda: No.

Diana: Did you have access to water?

Brenda: Not until Tuesday night or Wednesday I think.

Diana: Was Wednesday the first time you really got a good look at what had happened?

Brenda: Yes, it was when everything kind of cleared out.

Diana: Did you have lots people come help? What did you do?

Brenda: There were just people everywhere coming and going. I didn't really have anyone come help me right then, other than Eugene Woodruff and his son-in-law came and cut a tree down that was burning. They came on Tuesday to do that. But as far as anyone come in to help at that point, I didn't have anyone at that point.

Diana: So did you volunteer or did you mainly have to take care of your own stuff? Did you make food?

Brenda: I took food to the fire department. I didn't really make any food because I didn't have electricity till Wednesday probably.

Diana: There was no electricity in town at all?

Brenda: Right, unless you had a generator hooked up.

Diana: If you're taking food it's mostly cold?

Brenda: Yeah, well I went to Minneola Tuesday morning and then when I stopped at the grocery store, I bought a bunch of sandwich food and stuff for the firefighters.

Diana: Had they had anything to eat before that?

Brenda: I don't think they had. Rhonda McKinney had brought stuff in about that same time I did.

Diana: Did she have electricity?

Brenda: I don't know if she did because she would have been...

Diana: Were they in the path of the fire where they lived?

Brenda: It came about a mile and a half from them.

Diana: So when you actually saw what damages you had, what were all of your losses?

Brenda: Well, building-wise I lost my garage and two old sheds, a gazebo, an old shed that was original to the house, and the pool house. All of those sheds held all of my tools, all of my mowers, and some catering equipment. So I lost every tool I owned.

Diana: Were there any of them salvageable?

Brenda: Yeah, some things like the end wrenches and things were salvageable, but I don't know if they would hold up now.

Diana: So what kind of catering things did you lose?

Brenda: I lost some of my chafing dishes and my folding tables and folding chairs. I had about 30 folding chairs and some dishes.

Diana: So what was the most interesting thing you found, since it burned everything up? Did you have like lumps of plastic?

Brenda: No, there wasn't any plastic left.

Diana: All ash?

Brenda: Lots of ash. There were things that I know were in those buildings, but there's no sign of them. Like my little push mower was just a puddle of aluminum. I know there were other things in there. Bicycles, I lost my good bicycles and they were just... The only thing left of them was the gears and the wheels. There was nothing else left.

Diana: What about your pool house?

Brenda: The pool house was where all the tables and things were. Gayle's little scooter was in there, and the only thing left of it is just where the battery sat and the frame for the seat.

Diana: Did you lose any vehicles?

Brenda: I did not lose any vehicles.

Diana: So did you have anything that was kind of interesting in that it burned around it instead of burning it?

Brenda: Out north of my house, I have a little place where I have a garden. It's like a little memory garden for Gayle and his mom and dad and my mom and dad and Josh. On the corner of that pool is a little rod that sticks up. I had a metal "G" for Gayle. Everything was burned around that whole pool area. It burnt the trees, burnt the grass, but that little blue "G" was not scarred a bit. Didn't have any smoke damage, didn't have any burn marks. Nothing.

Diana: Did you have to do a lot of cleaning in your house?

Brenda: Yes.

Diana: What type of things did you have to do?

Brenda: My sister came with a bunch of our friends, and they took everything down and washed it. They washed all the walls, washed all the floors, and cleaned out the windows. They didn't wash the windows though.

Diana: So you didn't have professional help? You had volunteers?

Brenda: It was all volunteer, which is fine.

Diana: And how long did that take?

Brenda: They were there for about a whole day. I helped outside to get the stuff outside taken care of.

Diana: So what did you do with it?

Brenda: Well, we just put it over in the old pool, since it's not usable anymore and the pool house is going to have to go down eventually.

Diana: So how did you find out... well, you said that somebody told you your house had been saved. Do you know how long it took them or if you know anything about what happened in Englewood when the fire came through?

Brenda: I don't know much about what happened in Englewood. I know that they had three tankers in my yard, but I don't know how it all happened in town, and I don't know how long they were at my house.

Diana: So what made you decide to go south?

Brenda: When the sheriff's department came by and evacuated us, I knew that we couldn't go north, couldn't go west and I knew we couldn't go east. So that's the only direction we could go. Then once we got south of town a ways, they had closed all the roads going south, so we were trapped in one of those wheat fields.

Diana: So you said there were quite a few people there?

Brenda: Yeah, there were several people.

Diana: Mostly Englewood people?

Brenda: Yeah, they were all Englewood people.

Diana: Did you all leave about the same time, or venture back into town?

Brenda: Yes, we all left about the same time and went back to town.

Diana: So what was your emotional response to the fire?

Brenda: At first, when I first found out that I had to evacuate, I was hysterical because I figured my house would be gone. When I left the house, I just said, "Let it go." I just figured that I wasn't going to have a house left when I came home after the fire.

Diana: What about when you were sitting down in the field and the wheat field?

Brenda: Oh I was hysterical.

Diana: Did you call anybody or anybody call you?

Brenda: I called Rene, my sister, before I left home, because I didn't know what was going on. Then when I was headed south, after they closed all the roads south and we were trapped in the wheat field, I called her back and she prayed with me. She's the only one I called but...

Diana: You said Beverly called you?

Brenda: Beverly called, hysterical, and told me I had to get to Buffalo but I couldn't go. I couldn't go anywhere.

Diana: Was she in Buffalo?

Brenda: She was in Buffalo. I don't know if she ever left or not.

Diana: So you said Renee didn't know anything about the fire at all?

Brenda: She didn't. I called her, and I was hysterical. She was like, "What's going on?" and I said, "I have to leave home; they're evacuating." She wanted to know what was going on and I said, "Well, there's a huge fire west of us." I said, "It's coming right towards Englewood." I told her, "I don't know what to get." She said, "Just grab what you think you need and get out, we will worry about it later."

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

Brenda: The Ashland Community Foundation helped a lot financially. I don't know who brought all the water and stuff. All those people, and I don't know that there was just one agency. The Lions Club brought tools.

Diana: The Lions Club from where?

Brenda: I don't know where they were out of. They brought shovels and buckets and that kind of thing.

Diana: So how many people besides family came and helped?

Brenda: Mike McCarty had a group of Travis's friends that came shortly after. I think they might have been there on Wednesday or Thursday. They actually came down wanting to help clear up my stuff, but I wasn't

ready yet because I hadn't gone through it. So they ended up cleaning up the trees from the ice storm with all their equipment. Other than that, I really haven't had any help.

Diana: Did you have any of the volunteers that came to town come and help you?

Brenda: No, I just didn't really need it. You know, I just felt like there were other people that needed help more than I did.

Diana: So mostly friends that came and helped?

Brenda: Friends and family.

Diana: So did you have any physical effects from the fire?

Diana: No.

Diana: Mostly financial from the things that you lost?

Brenda: Yes.

Diana: Were there financial and physical losses to your neighborhood? Were you the only one that lost sheds in town there? And even your neighbors close by, did they lose stuff?

Brenda: No. Just across town.

Diana: How did the fire come in?

Brenda: From the West. When Charlie Salisbury was monitoring it, at one point he said that it was about 200 yards from my house and that's when he told me that they wouldn't be able to save it. So it was kind of straight west. But it wasn't coming... I think it was going maybe northwest a little bit.

Diana: How close do you think it was when you left?

Brenda: You know, I've gone over that in my mind. It had to have been about 200 yards because as soon as I left town, Charlie called. I was at the state line when he called and said it was about 200 yards from my house. That's when he told me that they wouldn't be able to save it.

Diana: Were you surprised? I mean, when you saw that it had been saved?

Brenda: I was surprised when he called, because at one point he thought that it had burned. He even told one of our other friends that it had burned and he was going to have to find me and tell me. Then the smoke cleared a little bit, and he could tell that it was still standing. So he called me back and told me it was. He never did call me and tell me it burnt, he just called me and told me it was still standing. But it came about a foot and a half from the corner of the house.

Diana: How did that make you feel, that your house was still there?

Brenda: Gosh... So relieved. So blessed.

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

Brenda: From my perspective, I had really been worried about the garage roof because it was leaking. The pool house roof was leaking, and I was worried sick about how I was going to get those fixed. I don't have to put roofs on now. The other stuff, it can all be replaced.

Diana: So have you replaced any of the things that you lost?

Brenda: I replaced my garage. It's not a garage, but I have a little shed and some of my tools.

Diana: Lawnmower?

Brenda: Yes, lawnmowers, weed eater, yard cart.

Diana: Have you set up the outside landscaping again?

Brenda: Yes I have... some.

Diana: Can you tell where the fire went through?

Brenda: Just by looking at the trees in the creek because everything else looks pretty good.

Diana: What does the creek look like?

Brenda: It's full of noxious weeds and brush. Where the trees are trying to grow back from the ground, it's an awful mess.

Diana: Did you have any experience with wildfires before?

Brenda: Not really.

Diana: Or any experience in your family with wildfires at all?

Brenda: No.

Diana: So if we were to have a disaster like this again, what can you do to prepare? What comes uppermost in your mind that you need to do before the next time happens or what can the community do to prepare?

Brenda: I think every community needs a committee, some kind of a disaster committee, and pray that it doesn't happen.

Diana: And what would you have that disaster committee be in charge of?

Brenda: Designating where things need to go as far as who needs what and where it needs to go and figuring out what they need. I had people calling me like about health and stuff, "Do you need volunteers?" "No, I don't need volunteers." "Who does?" I didn't know, because I wasn't in the know, I guess.

Diana: What kind of things would you do to prepare yourself? Is there something that you wish you would have taken with you when you went in case your house had burned?

Brenda: Yeah, my pictures, Gayle's pictures from this farm. I don't know of anything else that I would have.

Diana: Did you come over and eat over in Ashland where they had the camp and stuff?



Brenda: I did not.

Diana: Is there anything that really sticks out in your mind? Something that you will remember about the fire that you'll never forget?

Brenda: Lot of things. The moment I saw my house standing was pretty emotional. I saw one of the trailer houses in Englewood go up in flames. It took about two minutes, and it was completely gone. When I went north on Tuesday morning to Minneola to get coffee at 6 o'clock or 6:30, whatever time it was, the sandhills were completely bare.

Diana: Were they blowing?

Brenda: They weren't blowing at that time, because the winds had died down. But there wasn't a blade of grass; there wasn't anything. It looked like the Sahara Desert.

Diana: Did the Englewood Cemetery burn?

Brenda: Yes.

Diana: All of it?

Brenda: I think the north-west corner was spared... barely.

Diana: So, when you were going north, when did you run out of the fire.

Brenda: Oh gosh it was probably about eight miles north, maybe nine.

Diana: So how long did the smoke smell hang around?

Brenda: Oh gosh, I can still smell it sometimes when it's wet.

Diana: Did the smell change?

Brenda: The first rain that we had, it was a sickening smell when it got wet. Once in a while I can still smell it when I walk into the house, but it's nothing like it was.

Diana: And outside?

Brenda: Outside, I can walk through the grass and it's still black in places. That black ash. Well, it's not ash but dirt. After all the rain and stuff, there's still part of it that's still black.

Diana: So is your lawn come back pretty good?

Brenda: My lawn's coming back really good.

Diana: And the park?

Brenda: The park looks really good.

Diana: Did you lose equipment in the park? Is most of the facility still there?

Brenda: Yeah, because the park didn't really burn. There were just a few places in the park that burned.

Diana: Then most of the houses that burned at Englewood were west of town?

Brenda: Actually, there was one east of the highway that burnt and there were two properties.

Diana: And where's the pheasant farm?

Brenda: That's east of the highway.

The pheasant farm and Donna Jones's is east of the highway. Bessie's trailer is the one that I said took about two minutes to burn. Gary Woods's house burnt and that's east of Englewood quite a ways. Hans Ediger's is Northwest, Kenneth Bouts is right on the highway, and Mary Cox is north and west; Debbie Isenbart is east of Englewood.

Diana: It kind of just jumped around?

Brenda: Yeah.

Diana: So when you left town could you see the sun?

Brenda: Yes. I could still see the sun.

Diana: Could you tell which way the wind was blowing?

Brenda: Yeah, it was blowing from the southwest.

Diana: So do you have any other thoughts about this experience? Anything that stands out in your mind?

Brenda: Just how scary it was not to know. At one time I thought I was going to lose my life.

Diana: What was that experience like?

Brenda: It was...

Diana: Where were you?

Brenda: We had been south and they turned us around. We were headed back north trying to find a wheat field.

Diana: Who is "they"? Who turned you around?

Brenda: The Oklahoma Sheriff's Department. I was following Joyce and Harry Walker and Rick Walker. They were in two separate vehicles. I was following them. At one point I just about called my sister and told her goodbye.

Diana: The smoke pretty deep?

Brenda: The smoke was really bad. I didn't know where the fire was; you couldn't see anything.

Diana: So what would you compare it to? Driving through fog? Could you see the front of your car?

Brenda: Yeah, where we were, it wasn't... when we were in the wheat field, the smoke started coming in pretty bad. But by the time we came back home, it wasn't clear by any means, but we could see pretty well there. But I can't imagine what it was like in the depths of it. They couldn't see in front of them.

Diana: So anything else that you can think of that stands out in your mind that's very vivid?

Brenda: It's all pretty vivid, but no, not really. I just remember that we drove around all night. I never did sleep; I just drove around all night. But all the little fires everywhere, just trees burning, just little places burning.

Diana: Because you're in Englewood and there were lots of reporters around, did you get interviewed?

Brenda: I got interviewed on Tuesday evening.

Diana: By which station?

Brenda: I can't even remember which one it was.

Diana: Was it Channel 12?

Brenda: I think it was Channel 12, and that just happened by chance because I was headed back to the house. It was the first night I was going to stay at the house. I looked south and I knew there was another fire. I don't know what was burning, but it was really close to Englewood. I thought, "Oh heck, I can't go in the house yet." So I went south, down to the convenience store on the south end and the reporter was there. So he came to my house and interviewed me.

Diana: What kind of things did he ask?

Brenda: He asked where I went if I was by myself and then when we went to the house he asked what was in the buildings that I'd lost.

Diana: Was he by himself?

Brenda: He was by himself.

Diana: Did the camera and everything?

Brenda: Yes.

Diana: So is there anything else you can remember?

Brenda: Not right off the bat.

Diana: Anything you miss?

Brenda: This is the craziest thing. I want to say this: Gayle took his air compressor and he worked really hard to put it on an old push mower base. That's one thing I miss a lot.

Diana: Yeah.

Brenda: I mean just because he worked so hard at it, and he was so sick when he did it. I used it a lot. I do miss that a lot. The other stuff you know, once in a while I'll say, "Oh I need to go get this or that," and it's not there. It's kind of a silly thing to miss, but it meant a lot.

Diana: Memories are the best.

Brenda: Yeah.

Diana: Do you have any other thoughts about this experience.

Brenda: That I hope I never have to go through this again. I wouldn't want anyone to go through that. You know there's always a blessing in some things. I got rid of a lot of stuff that I really didn't need. Stuff that Gayle had wanted me to get rid of for 25 years. For a while, it cleared out all the weeds in the creek bed. But man, they're bad now.

Diana: Were you amazed at how quickly the grass came back after the fire?

Brenda: I was very amazed. I thought it would take forever.

Diana: Did you have lots of volunteers over in Englewood.

Brenda: I think the ranchers have had quite a few volunteers, but right in town there haven't really been that many volunteers.

Diana: They didn't have it like a place where they met?

Brenda: No.

Diana: They just went out to the rancher's place?

Brenda: Yes.

Diana: Did you see the large trucks of hay come through town?

Brenda: Yes, most of those we kinda got to see.

Diana: Were they just passing through?

Brenda: Most of them stopped and unloaded hay north of the Co-op on the highway there.

Diana: Who was in charge, do you know?

Brenda: Greg Goodnight was in charge of the hay, I believe, and he also stored fencing supplies out at the headquarters for them.

Diana: Did they have a lot of cattle lost over in Englewood?

Brenda: Bernie Smith lost a lot. I don't know that Greg lost any. I'm trying to think who else would be out there. I don't know about Isenbart's or if they lost any of theirs.

Diana: Is there a lot of wheat fields west of Englewood?

Brenda: There's some are some stretched out west. I think when you get out there a little bit further away to the west, but there are some right there close to town.

Diana: Did you know that it was safe to be in a wheat field?

Brenda: I didn't until I about lost my mind and Eugene Woodruff told me that it would be okay, that the fire couldn't get to us. But we could have still died of smoke inhalation and that's what I was worried about. But I did not know that I could be safe in a field until then.

Diana: I didn't know that either. It's interesting what you learn, isn't it?

Brenda: Yes, it is.