

## **David Redger**

**Diana:** It's November 16th, 2017. What is your name?

**David:** David Redger.

**Diana:** And where do you live?

**David:** Sitka, Kansas.

**Diana:** What's your occupation?

**David:** I'm a contract cowboy.

**Diana:** Okay and how old are you?

**David:** Sixty-one.

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

**David:** 11:25, First page out. We were paged to mutual aid in Beaver County.

**Diana:** Where were you, and what was your immediate reaction when you heard?.

**David:** The wind was blowing 25 to 30. I was on my way to town, I was going out to lunch. When the page came off, I came to town to send my mutual aid trucks. I'm the local fire chief.

**Diana:** So how many trucks are for mutual aid?

**David:** On a mutual aid run, we sent two attack trucks and a tanker.

**Diana:** Is that all you sent?

**David:** That's all we sent. 45 minutes later, the second page, we sent everybody that was available. We sent two more grass rigs and called for the second tanker.

**Diana:** And were you at the firehouse then?

**David:** I was at the fire house at that point.

**David:** Okay, were you on a truck?

**David:** I took a grass rig at that point. I had no extra drivers.

**Diana:** And who was with you?

**David:** Tim Wilson, I think.

**Diana:** Where did you go?

**David:** We went to Frosty Ediger's, went to Englewood and ten miles west to Meade County. We were tasked with saving the farmstead.

**Diana:** Okay, so what was your first reaction when they first called for mutual aid? Were you expecting to

have to send everything out?

**David:** My first reaction was, "I'm glad I'm home. I don't have to go on that." Now, I knew it was going to be a tough day. But I really wasn't worry too much about it at that point, it was at Beaver.

**Diana:** How long did it take you to get to Frosty's from here?

**David:** Forty minutes probably.

**Diana:** And what did you see when you finally got there?

**David:** Smoke.

**Diana:** Had your plans changed?

**Diana:** Not at that point. At that point, we got in there and it was still... I mean it was smoky. It was what I would call a normal grass fire smoke. Now the radio traffic was starting to pick up. The boys that were south of us were basically saying, "Get the hell out of the way." But at that point, it really wasn't to us yet. We went in and foamed and put a wetting agent on all the structures at the homestead where we were.

We sprayed the evergreen trees along the inside border in the house that was north of the house. We had time to work. I think we had five or maybe six grass rigs there and two tankers.

**Diana:** Was it just Ashland?

**David:** We had a couple Englewood trucks there, I think. I believe they came in from the south. You know, they were in front of us, they didn't come back to us. All of my units were there that we had took with, us. We foamed everything but hadn't had a chance to re-water. And at that point, the horizon... Frosty's is in a bowl. At that point, the sky was turning black to the west, and it was midnight black. It walked across the two-mile bowl at us. It probably didn't take as long as I think it did, five or ten minutes. The sky turned black and it just walked across and shut off the visibility and it was horizon-to-horizon.

Frosty was in a tractor in front of us at that point, he was plowing out around the farmstead in front of the trucks. And somebody hollered at him and said he needed to get behind us or get back towards the house. But the black line had not got plumb to us. Looking way up in the sky, and I realized this after the fact, there was an orange line that was about an inch thick. It was far enough away and slow enough that we had a chance to get on the back, thump the hood, and say, "Look at that."

And then the whole world went orange and it blew over us the first time.

**Diana:** So, could you breathe?

**David:** Not really. It was due to the heat that had come across us.

**Diana:** Were there big flames?

**David:** No, it was orange. The whole world was orange. There really wasn't.

**Diana:** Was there a sound?

**David:** I couldn't tell you that. I have no idea. When it passed us, it went back to the smoky... it lightened back up.

**Diana:** It wasn't as dark?

**David:** It wasn't as dark, and you could see flames. Anything that we had not foamed... The tree that we were sitting beside was probably three foot, three and a half foot around, 40 feet tall. Whoosh, and the entire tree was on fire, all the way around it and all the way to the top, not a leaf left on it. Total fire. But as soon as it got by, we checked our fire fighters that were standing on the back of the trucks when this came across. Most of them kicked it to a fog canner (a spray nozzle the puts out a very fine mist). They had been trained well enough that nobody spooked, nobody bailed. When it blew over the top of us, we dropped them in gear and then we had spot fires. Lots of little... five gallon bucket, you know, spot fires. Went out knocked them down. We didn't use a whole lot of water at that point.

When the first wave hit us, it come across so fast that it just burned the top of everything. The second wave come through and cleaned up everything that was underneath that.

**Diana:** So the first one kind of came through in the air?

**David:** It kind of came through as a wall, basically.

**Diana:** Then the next one came through on the ground?

**David:** The next one took care of everything that was still, like a normal fire. But we got hit three times, because the second one come through and we fought that one. But when the second one came through, Englewood took off to go see if they could get in front of it to save other houses. They tasked us with saving this homestead. I sent the tankers back; I think they both made two round trips. We used that much water.

**Diana:** Where'd they go to get water?

**David:** They had to go to Englewood.

**Diana:** And they were able to get it before Englewood ran out?

**David:** They both came back with water. So they got it before Englewood lost power, I would say, because we didn't have any tankers in there till after the fact. At that point, the third go... Oh, Frosty's wife brought us sandwiches between the second and the third. She came out and emptied her house and took all her bread and all her meat and whatnot. I guess they'd had ham or something. Anyway, they brought it out and fed everybody that was still there. The third deal came through, and it pretty much had bypassed the house we were at, but came in on both sides around us. We got that pretty well knocked out, and basically at that point everything was kind of black around the homestead. There were still some fires. You know Frosty fired up his tractor and went to disking around some other things that were still afire. We pulled out of there and started to town, started to Englewood.

**Diana:** Were you behind the fire at that time?

**David:** No, we were in it, because we drove through smoke and fire. We'd have been maybe a mile and a half east of Frosty's. We were back up out of the bowl. I don't think we were past the Bill Barby pasture that borders Frosty's there. We run into about 25 or 30 head of cows walking down the middle of the road. We couldn't get around them, but we didn't see them until we were in them.

**Diana:** Right.

**David:** We had, I think, four trucks behind us. We moved them cattle on down the road to the first intersection, which was probably a mile or two down the damn road. But they turned off to the south, and they stayed in the road, they didn't get off in the burning ditch. They stayed in the road. We got past that, and we were driving with the door open on the left hand side of the road, because the Kaliche road, you could see the white against the burnt black of the bar ditch. And everybody stayed behind me, because nobody could see anything but my brake lights, or my flashy lights. We come to town and I have no idea how long it took us to get from that point to town. We were probably two and a half to three miles west of

Englewood, and we drove through the fire again and we got front of it. And we're running along there, and everybody got through it. And we were...

**Diana:** Were you throwing water on it while you're going through it?

**David:** No. We were trying to get through it.

**Diana:** To get in front of it?

**David:** Yes, we drove through it. We didn't know where the damn fire was, the fire was everywhere. We got plumb through it and seen we were through it, and I was the first truck. And we were in the tree rows there, I don't know if it was Theances????? or Goodnight's or whatever there, just west of town. When we cleared the furthest west tree row, it was burning in the tree row. But we drove through and got by it, and I took the two front trucks, the one-ton trucks, and they were full of water. And I told them we could stop it. We turned around right there and pulled into the deal. We had a wheat field to the north and we had a wheat field to the south and it was coming up the bar ditch and through the tree rows. We put a truck on either side and stopped that.

**Diana:** Got the fire out?

**David:** We put that fire out, right there. Then we were out of water. We turned around and ran back to where we left our tanker, and it wasn't there. By then, the smoke was back to where there was no visibility again we followed the road into Englewood but had no idea where Englewood was. We followed it into town and at the church on the west side of town. The tanker was sitting there in the big blazing thing on the back, you know. It cleared off enough that we've seen it maybe 15 or 20 feet away from it. We hollered at him said, "We need water!" We pulled up there and we were full of water and pulling away, the second tonner was behind us pulled up to get water, when the north wind brought that fire into town. Because that fire coming from north. 56, 54 I guess was at Brenda's. There was a one-ton, I'm not sure whose, with it on the north side of the... whatever the street is going west out of town. Where the church is going west. They were back in there, they saved all those houses. I don't think they lost a house back in there. We were sitting there when the fire came over us. Wilson never get off the back. We fired it up and backside of Kay's house. Laurie and Chris. One of my fire trucks came around the front side of the deal. I don't know where it came from, but it came around the front side of this thing. We went around the back and foamed that. And then it was just house to house all the way south in the first block on the west side. I don't know if we lost a house. We lost a couple of sheds there that when we came back, after the fact, had burned down. But as it went through I don't think we've lost anything. But while we were doing that, is when the phone call came, or when the radio traffic came that Ashland was being evacuated and we needed to be home. At that point, we had to go tell Englewood that we were leaving them.

We left in strings, because the guys didn't leave until they run out of water and then they picked up water and started back.

Our attacker stayed, one tanker stayed there, because by that time there was no water. They'd stopped a couple semi's out on the deal, and our boys were filling it and then going back into the fire to do our trucks. When they finally got to the point where we had to have them, then they come out and followed us home.

But, we ran out of the fire at "W" road, at Mike McCarty's road, going north. That's the first time we seen any sign of daylight since 12 o'clock.

**Diana:** So you were actually completely out of the smoke. So you went back to Ashland going on the highway, you didn't go on the dirt road?

**David:** No. There was fire, as far as we knew, from Englewood all the way east. Yeah. So we went... because they told us to get back and get back quick.

**Diana:** Who's telling you this? Emergency dispatch?

**David:** It was coming on 800, so it was probably dispatch.

**Diana:** When you realize you didn't have radios? That they'd burned? Or that the repeater had burned.

**David:** Probably late Monday night or early Tuesday morning.

**Diana:** Because you're getting most things through the 800 radios?

**David:** No, we were talking truck to truck on Talk-Around. Because the smoke was so bad that radios weren't, well, it was probably dead was reason they weren't working.

**Diana:** Right.

**David:** You know, because nobody could talk farther than truck to truck, so everybody was on Talk-Around.

**Diana:** Did you use your cell phones a lot?

**David:** We used cell phones as long as they worked. Cell phones are kind of like radios. When you get a lot of smoke in the air, they don't work real well. So, when I left Englewood and come back here, we stopped in Ashland long enough to see how the trucks that were still in town... We had two trucks that when we were headed to Frosty's, Minneola was coming down, and they were probably at the corner south of Minneola at the curves, when they got paged to their own fire. So they called and told us that they weren't coming. We didn't talk to them again. I guess we still did, because I was still at Frosty's. We still had radio communication. I had three trucks left in town.

Two of them kind of worked. They were not completely out of service but they should've been. Minneola called for any assistance they could get, and I sent them two trucks. I sent them what I had.

**Diana:** Did they make it all the way?

**David:** They were on the west side of the lake, I believe, when it rolled over the top of them. And they were with Minneola when that rolled over. At that point, nobody up there really had idea how to do what they were fixing to have to do with two one tons and a truck that didn't run very well.

Our guys came back this way, and that one truck wasn't running real well, at that point. And I think they made it back to Bouziden's with those trucks, then they came on south and worked the north edge of town out to Buster Carter's.

**Diana:** They went down the dump road and put out electrical poles.

**David:** Yeah, but they did that after we were back over here.

**Diana:** That was later in the night. So when you got back to Ashland and checked on all the trucks everything, then where did you go?

**David:** I went east. And how far... which way did you go east on the highway?

**David:** I started out on the Sitka Road on "U." Made it to the Road 22 (the three mile road, out there). I dropped south there on the Drops out around the Dome road and made it to Bonnie Swayze's old place. That's when I found out one of the Hazen boys was in trouble. I met a cop, one of the police officers there at the corner. He was evacuating people to the south. All of the lived-in homes, he was stopping them and making sure that they knew there was fire coming and making sure they knew there was no help coming,

they needed to get out. He was going to turn around and go back the other direction, I had a fire truck. We went to get Hazen. We turned and went back the way... well, we went up the road there by the old Graff place. Wallsinger's and in that direction. We made it to the Sitka Road, the "U" road. And at that point the fire caught us. But, at that point I also knew that Steve had come in from the other direction and got Stan out.

**Diana:** Who was with you?

**David:** Wilson, Tim Wilson. Tim, when we come out of the smoke, headed north out of Englewood, he looked at me and said, "I'm burned out. There ain't nothing left over there."

**David:** I said, "Do you want to go look. We've got time." He said, "It's done. Let's just keep..." You know. So when we come back and went around through there. I went past my house, across Sugar Loaf, over to Mosshart's. We were supposed to go tell them, because there hadn't been anybody over there. I guess Comanche County might have been there telling those people about it. But when I pulled into there, Sam's wife told me that Sam's pickup had quit and he was walking across the pasture.

So we turned and went to Jayhawk Road and a neighbor had stopped and was picking Sam up as we got there. They looked at us and said, "Just jump right in here and put this out! It's going to burn us out." We opened the gate, looked at it, looked this way, knew we had 300 gallons of water. And we wouldn't be able to do a damn thing. So we started on on west, to try to get across that. At that point, that fire was burning for the Jayhawk tanks, probably all the way to Highway 34/183. It was burning all the way across there.

**Diana:** So which way was it coming from?

**David:** It was coming from the northwest at that point.

**Diana:** Came down from Lexington? Came down across like Wilson's and Koehen's and was now going south?

**David:** That line is probably the first fire, the north fire, coming across. Because we couldn't get through there, we turned around and went back to Mosshart's road and went north across the highway two miles to our road.

**Diana:** That was already burned?

**David:** Well, it wasn't all the way burned. The people that bought the Randle Ranch were there with a dozer, a blade, and a couple of spray rigs, and they were fighting the fire line all the way back to Harden's.

**Diana:** North.

**David:** North, across there. That line was coming across. That fire line over to our place was just burning across our place.

**Diana:** Was it dark?

**David:** It was dark all day. I don't... I couldn't tell you. I don't have any idea. I'm sure it was, but you know.

**Diana:** But you're seeing flames?

**David:** But I'm seeing flames, and it's, you know.

**Diana:** Are they large flames?

**David:** Of course they are large flames! No, by that time most of these were were what I would call back,

the backside of the fire that's burning. They were something that were a large flame, but that they would be controllable, if we'd had something to control it with.

**Diana:** Has the wind died down?

**David:** No.

**Diana:** It's still blowing 60 miles an hour.

**David:** Yeah. It's still blowing. You know, I couldn't tell you.

**Diana:** Are you having fireballs in the air?

**David:** In places, we drove onto the highway and went down to the wreck, to the semi.

**Diana:** That was south of where you were, on "R" road?

**David:** I went by that wreck three times.

**Diana:** Were you there when the ambulance was there?

**David:** No.

**Diana:** That had already been there?

**David:** First time, second time, it wasn't there for the third one either. You know that the truck had wrecked, and the two vehicles had hit it. The first one didn't have anybody really hurt. They walked around from the back side of the truck, and the second one hit the first car. It didn't hit the truck, it hit the first car, flipped.

**Diana:** And those people had major injuries?

**David:** Not major injuries, they had injuries that they needed to be taken to hospital for. The ambulance picked up all these people, but I've no idea where they went with them.

**Diana:** Minneola.

**David:** Really. Through Ashland?

**Diana:** Yes, because it had already burned.

**David:** Yeah. I was talking to the Fish and Game, I suppose that was who was out there, because I don't think it was police officers. You know, and the truck was sitting there idling, there wasn't a thing wrong with the truck. The first time we went by there, there wasn't anything wrong with the trailer. They called us back within, I don't think we were 10 or 15 miles away, they called us back and the trailer was on fire. So we went back and put the trailer out.

**Diana:** Was the trailer still on the road?

**David:** Yeah, it was crossways in the road.

**Diana:** How'd they get it off the road? Was it there for a while? Before they dumped it in the ditch?

**David:** Yeah. It was there for two days.

**Diana:** So that road was closed. Nobody could go up that road or...

**David:** Yeah, I think it was Wednesday morning before they got a wrecker down here to move it.

**Diana:** So did you stay on the east side of town then? Around Sitka? Did you go to Lexington?

**David:** I did not go all the way to Lexington. We went up past Vernie Howell's across there. We started north and got called back to the wreck.

**Diana:** Could you tell what stuff was already gone?

**David:** As in?

**Diana:** Like Vernie's house.

**David:** It was burning when I went by it. Yeah.

**Diana:** And then did you go down south?

**David:** I did, once I got past the... Because we drove through the bar ditch and got around that truck to put it out. Then we went.

**Diana:** Are you a truck by yourself, or is there another truck with you?

**David:** Just me.

**Diana:** And Tim, and nobody else is on the truck with you. Tim's doing all the fighting on the back, and you're doing the driving?

**David:** Yeah.

**Diana:** So you went all the way to the state line. Did you see anything down there?

**David:** More fire.

**Diana:** Was it starting to come that way?

**David:** It was starting to come across pretty hard. At that point, it was all still east.

**Diana:** The fire that came down from the north is all still east of Highway 34. And it is going clear south. Did it get down to your place? Or was it close to Barby's?

**David:** Yeah. It burned them plumb out, but it was the second... Well, it was Tuesday before it actually did that.

**Diana:** So then, like Monday where that Jayhawk service road is, that's how many miles north of there. Like five or 10.

**David:** Oh, maybe three or four. Maybe.

**Diana:** And that had all burned on Monday?

**David:** Yes.

**Diana:** Okay, and then there's this little piece around Sitka that didn't burn, right? Like your house and Randal's.



**David:** Yeah.

**Diana:** Did you talk to Jule Hazen?

**David:** Yes, I did!

**Diana:** Was he keeping a watch on all that there?

**David:** Tuesday. I believe it was Tuesday, it was after the sun came up. I went by Sitka again and Jule's out there, well, Jule wasn't out there at that point, and the post pile was on fire. Actually, it was almost burned down.

**Diana:** Think it was on fire when we left.

**David:** Well, I'm sure it was, but I called Jule and asked if he lit it, because it wasn't burning the first day.

**Diana:** Something was on fire Monday night.

**David:** The Crane house burned; all of the stuff around that way burned.

**Diana:** The flames were halfway up the side of the elevator on the south side when we left Sitka at 5:30 or a quarter till 6:00, Monday night. On the south side, you were watching a smoke burn.

**Diana:** I don't remember seeing the smoke there, I remember seeing flames and then as we went down and went where Eldora lives, and going around that corner, there was smoke coming in and it was rolling across and looked like dirt coming in. And there were cattle standing down there in the corner, just munching away and thinking it was fine.

**David:** They'd never lived through something like that. They'll be kind of tough to be around another one. But they'll know better the next time

**Diana:** So were you out running around all night long in different parts of the county or mostly on the east side of the county after dark?

**David:** No, I was pretty much all over. But I ended up... I sent trucks out to Gib Krier's. That line that was up there from north of, well it came out of Denton's. It cut across all the way to Bisel's, probably.

**Diana:** And that's what came in to Bouziden's and Spare's?

**David:** No. It ain't, because that one... well, it was, but the top side of that fire come across. It would have been.

**Diana:** Like what was up at the lake, coming down?

**David:** Yeah, the one fire went across the north side of the county, and ran hard across and then the other one kind of dropped south. It was more into the draws there, the northwest wind brought it south. Well, at five or 5:30, the winds switched straight out of the north. And at that point, it turned a fire that was probably two or three miles wide into a 29 mile head fire headed south at 70 mile an hour. They said it was burning a mile every three and a half minutes, 29 miles wide.

**Diana:** And that's what came in toward the north side of Ashland?

**David:** Yes.

**Diana:** And then the one coming in from Englewood came in to the west side and to the southwest?

**David:** The one coming from Englewood come across. You need to go out McCarty's and look out there. It dropped south and picked up. That northwest turned it enough that it dropped past Krier's, south of Pat and Jerry Krier's. It just caught the southern edge of the Gardiner boys, but it didn't burn out Shaw's did it?

**Diana:** It got didn't get Shaw's. Then it came back Tuesday picked up where Cunningham's live. Is that the Rhodes' place?

**David:** Yeah, I call it a fight from being up in that area, a little more than we probably should have. But we stopped that fire there, which saved everything from the old Hulstine place across this way. There ain't no fire through there. There would have been.

**Diana:** When did the first help actually show up, besides Comanche County? And Meade, did Meade County come?

**David:** Well, Greeley County sent four guys, no truck, just four guys in a vehicle. They got here, oh, 7:30 to 10:00, sometime. Monday night or Monday afternoon, whatever. Sometime Monday evening. When we finally got them into town and checked in and back to us, I didn't know what I was going to do with just four guys and no truck or nothing. We loaded them up and hauled them out to Gib's, and peeled four guys of the back of the trucks and put fresh meat on the back. I put one in with George on the tanker, and then the other three on the back of the trucks. And you said well, we broke down. We brought it to town and got it fixed. Which took most of the night, but it also took two guys that could have been out the rest of the time. The Greeley County boys stayed a long time. I think they were still here when the burritos came down. That was our second meal, whatever time frame that was! That was our second meal. The ham sandwiches that we got at Frosty's was the first one.

**Diana:** When did you find out that the strike teams were coming?

**David:** I suppose, when they came over the hill. I knew they were coming, but I didn't know they were here. I didn't know... We were down to a one-ton and a tanker.

**Diana:** Did anybody get to go home and go to bed?

**David:** Yeah.

**Diana:** Did you send people home?

**David:** There was probably four or five of the younger ones that went home Monday evening, Monday night. Sometime before Tuesday morning. Then went home, got a shower, and got two or three hours of sleep. They were back shortly after daylight to relieve some other people. It really helped to have them get little sleep. And then Tuesday afternoon, was that was Tuesday afternoon or Wednesday? That they allowed us to pull the plug and work on trucks.

**Diana:** Wednesday. Tuesday's when the first strike teams came in and you.

**David:** We went out and did all that neat stuff down there.

**Diana:** You did the back-burn at Snake Creek and that type stuff.

**David:** They told us we could go home and take a nap, and we did after midnight. We started, we got back to the barns probably 10:00 or 10:30 Tuesday evening, and then the last of the bunch came in, I think Jessie and Greeley and Cowley County boys, it was like 2:00. But, Jessie got to miss the first part because he was out of the country.

**Diana:** What did they do there?

**David:** They told us everything that was going to happen during the day, everything that happened that shift before, what we were going to try to do on the next shift. They gave us a map of what was taken care of and what we were going to work on today in the next 12 hour shift. Then they told us that the units that we would have, or the teams, I guess I should say. A strike team is five brush trucks, a tanker and a command vehicle. They told me that a task force is five strike teams. They told me that being as Ashland is the biggest district, I would have two task forces. Englewood would have one, and Minneola would have one. Oklahoma, they didn't need one. They were pretty much out at that point.

**Diana:** Right.

**David:** They had planes up there. They brought the planes in Wednesday or Thursday. They got to fly a little in Minneola on Wednesday. They didn't do anything here till Thursday or Friday.

**Diana:** Right. So what did the planes mainly do? Were they putting out places you couldn't get to?

**David:** We'll bring that up later. They come in. They work with a ground team, and they come in and lay wetlines for hotspots that you can't... we used them on the river because we can't drive down there once it's black. You can't, with the sand and whatnot, you just can't get through it. They didn't like our suggestions. I suggested they use napalm and be done with it, just black all the way around.

They work well, it's just that the State of Kansas, when we went into this one, had nothing in place to pay for this stuff. So they had to wait, basically 48 hours, on government to get their things working, to figure out who was going to pay for it and where it was coming from. Then they okay-ed them to send them.

**Diana:** So the State of Kansas is paying? Or the Forest Service.

**David:** The Forest Service is actually what...

**Diana:** Picks up the tab for everybody. So Wednesday you got some time to work on trucks. There was engine down.

**David:** We had a pump to redo. We had a transmission that wasn't right. We had truck that lost a rear end, or a torsion bar. We had a mechanic come in from the wind farms that brought a crane down and picked it up and put that back together for us.

**Diana:** Did you go through a lot of foam?

**David:** Yeah.

**Diana:** So what kind of things did you foam?

Actually, we foamed everything. We foamed even on grass, we put foam on everything.

**Diana:** How does that help?

**David:** It holds moisture to keep it... You only have to go over it once. It holds the moisture to the plant. It knocks the fire out and it holds moisture there to make it where it won't rekindle quite so fast.

**Diana:** So did you have a lot of trouble with cow patties rekindling?

**David:** No.

**Diana:** Were they just pretty much gone?

**David:** There was nothing left.

**Diana:** So when the fire came through, it just went "whoosh" and that was it?

**David:** I would say that every every fire that came through, burned twice. The wind took the dry off the top, but the top come across so fast that it was drying out everything that was green or whatever underneath it. The second fire, it was all one fire. You know, the first part of it blew across the top, and then the second was slower burn coming across.

There may not have been three mile an hour difference between the two. You know, it just meant you had to drive through it in a hurry.

**Diana:** So did you lose anything in the fire?

**David:** Not particularly, other than fence and pasture. We lost all our... Every pasture that I take care of, burned, and the fences are off of all of them. No, we didn't lose any mother cows on any place.

**Diana:** Did you lose any calves?

**David:** The jury's still out on that.

**Diana:** So what about your horses?

**David:** My horses weren't a problem because my place didn't burn.

**Diana:** So were they a pasture or a corral?

**David:** Well, they were in there in their paddock, or their trap.

**Diana:** So it didn't get close to where they were at?

**David:** No, across the road in either direction. There was a wheat field north of my house that was clean, it wasn't no-tilled, it was a clean field. It did not burn more than about 30 feet into that wheat field. That wheat field split the fire. I believe Hardens had a wheat field up on the Sitka Hill there too. That one split it and pushed it on to the west, and the one north of us pushed it east. There was a full mile there that nothing burned out of it until it went down there across from Wilson's, because that part that's Randal's. On the one side of the road that goes up to the north place, they said that burned. They had a heck of a time keeping it from blowing all summer, because it burned everything off.

**David:** Anything that burned, had trouble. And we'll probably have a bigger problem this winter, because there was a lot of cover crop that came back with nothing but weeds. When the frost here a week or two ago, it killed the weed. The weeds are dead, and now the wind will make it move.

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

**David:** Probably just the wall-to-wall flame with no way to get out of it. You know, it has just been... I've been on the fire service for 30 years. We've been on what I thought was large fires, but there was always there was always a flank. There was always something, you know, you could get out of the smoke.

**Diana:** So like you said, you've been around. You've seen different wildfires. I mean, we've had several through here in the last couple of years or maybe ten, that had consumed thousands of acres. So can you compare those, how you fought those to how this one?

**David:** Sure. Those, the wind never switched. You know, we fought fires in 60 mile an hour wind before.

But it was a straight way. You know, it might be three, four or five miles wide, but you put flanks out and you run up caught it when it slowed down.

**Diana:** And you've had help when you needed it.

**David:** There were twenty-two counties on fire on March 6th. There was no help in the state of Kansas. Everybody that we would normally have called in was already on fire in their own county.

**Diana:** Okay, so when the strike teams came, how long did they stay? About how many people do you think were here?

**David:** I'll bet there were 160 trucks, with two men to a truck. Some of them had three or four. Lots. I couldn't say, I couldn't put a number, you know. I think they had a 160 or 170 staying at the schoolhouse. But I know that ain't all of them.

**Diana:** So you had people bring in stuff and you got water and that type of stuff. Do you know who all brought stuff in?

**David:** Yeah, kind of. I had oil companies bring pallets in. We had church groups. We had people off the street just show up with a pallet of water.

I mean, there was there was trucks coming from everywhere.

**Diana:** Did you have enough food or know that there was enough food to take care of everybody? Did you have enough supplies here at the firehouse for people?

**David:** I think so.

**Diana:** What were some of the things that kind of... There weren't any major injuries, right?. Of any of the firefighters?

Not major injuries. We had a guy step out of a truck and fall on his face.

**Diana:** What about eyes?

**David:** Not that I, you know, not more than normal. We had, we still have gallons of eyewash and wet-wipes. We'd never had those before!

**Diana:** Come in handy?

**David:** Yeah! We carry them in the trucks now. We carry the eyewash, and we carry some other drops, I don't know what that other drop is. We carry the wash/baby wipes.

**Diana:** Do you carry Chapstick?

**David:** Yeah.

**Diana:** Do you carry lotion?

**David:** Some. The lotion in the firetrucks gets thrown on the dash, and then it gets really hot. Then it's just gooey all over.... Most of our fires are not big enough, long enough, to worry a whole lot about.

We supply goggles and masks for all our guys. I know a lot of these boys that came in, didn't have that. A lot of the strike teams that come from Colorado and whatnot, really liked our foam because it was different than theirs. It actually put foam.

**Diana:** So did you get to talk to the strike team people a bit?

**David:** Oh yeah, they were here for three or four days.

**Diana:** So what kind of things did you all talk about? Did you share ways that you fight fire?

**David:** Oh yeah. They think we're crazy, we think they are. You know, there ain't a prairie that would go up like a forest fire. Well, after coming down and looking at this, they're not really sure they want to come back to this country.

**Diana:** Different ways of fighting?

**David:** Different tactics. The fine fuel and whatnot that's out here. You can't walk along with a rake and a flyswatter and put it out. Up there, you couldn't drive where they have to go. They really impressed us when they finally got into the trees rows and the whatnots...Stuff that would have taken us days to do, they did in 30 minutes. We had some three and four foot trees that were burning and burning inside, burning down. They had chainsaws on their tracks with 36 inch blades.

They took their rakes and their little pressure pumps and they walked through there and moved all of them leaves and weeds and whatnot underneath, and they wet it and turned it over. They put out a tree row that would have took us a week or better.

**Diana:** So how did they navigate the county, not knowing where anything was. How did they get around here?

**David:** We put a tour guide with them, it was the easiest way to do that. We put one of our guys with basically every one of their command vehicles.

**Diana:** Take them where they needed to go, and to make sure they didn't fall into the canyon?

**David:** Took them where they needed to go! Most of what they got sent to, they could fight. You know, this stuff that... Every group that came in to assist us, got to fight fire. Got to fight probably a larger fire than.... They got to fight fire that they could go home and talk about. But by the time that most of them got here, it was basically back-burn.

**Diana:** So, what were some of the people or agencies that were most helpful?

**David:** The IMT's. Incident Management Team, because they came in here and did all the paperwork for us, or 99 percent of it. They told us what needed done. They didn't take control, they didn't take ownership of this. But they assisted and kept us out of trouble.

**Diana:** So, how would you describe your emotional response to the fire? And what have you done to help yourself cope with it?

**David:** This isn't the first one, but this one we brought in the after action, after incident, teams. We brought in the shrinks a time or two.

**Diana:** A lot of overwhelming things for everybody that they saw and had to deal with?

**David:** Yeah, and you know, it wasn't so much this fire. Most of my younger guys didn't have a big problem with it. But the older boys that have been here and been through, been through, and been through. This brought a lot of stuff that they needed somebody to talk to. Beings as we took our beer away from everybody, and we don't do that here anymore.

**Diana:** So you need to talk about it?

**David:** You need to talk about it.

**Diana:** So did you bring somebody to the firehouse then?

**David:** We brought the southwest region, what's he called? We brought three doctor people from St. Catherine's. They are the Regional Fire Counselors. They got a name, and I can't pull it...

**Diana:** Did the firefighters find that very helpful?

**David:** Yes, every one of them.

**Diana:** Do you feel that you might need to do that again?

**David:** I have their numbers. Probably not for that fire, probably not for that. Most of that fire, everybody's talked out of.

**Diana:** Maybe another fire?

**David:** Yeah, if something was to happen along that line. You know this was the first grassfire that we lost structures in. I caught a lot of hell from the boys, because we weren't even there. There was no way to be there. I caught a lot of this, "Well, if you'd had more trucks." No, if we'd had more trucks, we'd have got somebody killed because we'd have had somebody in front of this that couldn't have got out.

**Diana:** Did a lot of the firefighters in the trucks get personal calls from friends asking them to come help?

**David:** More than you realize. Most of them.

**Diana:** Was that was hard to deal with?

**David:** Yes, because there is nothing you can do.

**Diana:** And these people don't understand that?

**David:** No, not at all. "You're my friend, you need to come, you need to come save me." It doesn't work that way. A lot of parents, you know.

**Diana:** Of the firefighters, wondering where they're at?

**David:** "You need to be here, helping me, instead of..."

**Diana:** Fighting fire?

**David:** "I've got fire here. You need to be here." There was a lot of that, that should have... You just reach up and shut your phone off. You know, my deal... My wife and kids left.

**Diana:** Did you know where your family was?

**David:** I knew they were headed south!

**Diana:** Because Linda called you, when we left. And then I called you about 10:30.

**David:** Did I answer it?

**Diana:** Yes, because I told you we were spending the night.

**David:** Yeah. Okay. At that point, I think I was at Krier's.

**Diana:** Did you talk to any of the rest of your family. I mean besides your wife? Did you talk to your brother? Did you talk to your sisters?

**David:** No.

**Diana:** Did they call you that day?

**David:** I have no idea. If they did, I ignored it because if it wasn't a fire service person calling me, I didn't answer the damned thing. And I was plugged into my charger, when I came back from the east side and came back into here, I switched vehicles. I got out of a fire truck and got into 55, or 57, maybe.

**Diana:** Were you ever with J.D.?

**David:** I took his truck away!

**Diana:** Because he had 57.

**David:** He had it until whatever time I come through town. The first time I thought we had a chance of surviving this or getting through it. (It really never bothered me. You know, I just didn't figure we was ever going to get through this mess.) It was daylight Tuesday morning when the sun came up. That's the first time I figured, "You know what? We're going to whip this one."

**Diana:** Were you part of them talking about moving the command center? Did you hear any of that?

**David:** No. That didn't bother me. And like I said, when they finally got the IMT's in here, and the guy that was in charge...

**Diana:** Did they come Monday?

**David:** Sometime. Yeah. They were here in time for Tuesday morning anyway. But anyway, the guy that was in charge, I don't know what his name is. I can picture him, but I can't give his name. He called me when he took over the command center, or got to the command center, anyway, somebody was talking in the background. And somebody was talking to him in the background. And he turned around and told them to, "Shut up. He was talking to the commander, that we are here to assist this man."

**Diana:** Did the other person shut up?

**David:** Yes, and I have no idea who it was or anything going on there. He told them, "This man's in charge."

**Diana:** So what kind of things did he ask you or tell you?

**David:** "What do you need?"

**Diana:** At that point, did you know?

**David:** I needed foam. I was out of foam. I need foam. I'd already ordered. I'd called and ordered 25 cans from emergency.

**Diana:** Where's emergency fire at?

**David:** Mayfield, Kansas.



**Diana:** Okay, so he's close, but he's not real close.

**David:** He wasn't even sure he could get it to me. But he said, "I will. I've got (I think he said 17, 13 or 17, whatever.) I'll throw them in the truck and will be headed that way. I will get there.

He got there at 8:30 or 9:00 Tuesday morning. Got unloaded and said, "I'm out of here." About an hour later, I get a call that Wise Fire and Equipment is down here with 25 five-gallon cans, and where did I want them?

I said, "Stack them in the yard, right there." When the fire started, I had eight, five gallon cans sitting on the floor, and eight strapped to the trucks. Plus, the foam tanks are still full. By the time we got back here Tuesday morning, we had one bucket left, and I come to town and took it off of 53.

**Diana:** Did you have somebody here in the barn, in charge, that if you needed to call in and say, "Do this," or "Do that," or that could tell you what was going on? Did you have somebody like that in charge? Or did you need somebody like that in charge?

**David:** I don't know if I needed it not, but I had an old an old farmer here, and I'm not sure I can tell you who it was.

**Diana:** Jerome Berryman was here Monday, doing stuff like that.

**David:** Yeah. Actually, it seems like it was somebody our age. Well, it might have been Don White who started it, but he ended up on a truck. Him and Dan ended up on a truck. I don't know. Alan LeClear was here.

**Diana:** You had lots of people hanging around here on Monday. Were you aware of that? And Tuesday? Were they a problem, or....

**David:** Well, they weren't to me, because I wasn't here. But Tuesday was a problem. Well, it wasn't a big problem, we had a whole bunch of kids. They were running giving water and sandwiches to every truck that came in, but they weren't letting them stop. They were running out to them. I don't know, it was probably 10 or 11:00 before we got that taken care of. When was that house fire?

**Diana:** On Wednesday.

**David:** Maybe it was Wednesday before I got back here.

**Diana:** Bill said they got that taken care of, because he told them. It might have been Monday night, when there were kids here, but Tuesday, yes, for sure.

**David:** I'm sure I was through here a time or two Monday night, I just don't remember there being anything brought up that needed major attention that I needed to deal with.

**Diana:** Somebody else was taking care of it? Or there just wasn't anything.

**David:** I just don't know if there was anything. There was somebody here on the radio.

**Diana:** I think that was Jerome.

**David:** But like I said, every time I called in and needed something, it would be sitting there at the door by the time I got here.

**Diana:** So can you see anything positive that resulted from the fire?

**David:** We didn't kill anybody. We had good enough training and everybody that was on the department at the start of it, is still on it today.

So we didn't lose anybody, as far as, "I can't take it anymore."

**Diana:** Has it increased the camaraderie, or the family part of your firefighters together? Do they trust you more?

**David:** We never had a problem before.

**Diana:** Did it make you closer together?

**David:** You know, I don't know. You really can't tell, because most of these guys have been family for a while. We've been through more than one incident.

Did this fire? Yeah, it encompassed the entire county, but I'd almost tell you I've been on worse fires. I don't think that this was any worse than any other, other than the wind switched three times.

**Diana:** It took homes and destroyed lots of property.

**David:** Yeah.

**Diana:** So what effects, physical and financial or emotional, do you think the fire has had?

**David:** The emotional part is quite a bit. We've still got guys that will tear up just talking about it, or listening to stories from the time, you know, from going back and looking at the videos and whatnot. They may not be able to talk to you, and I'm one of them. But the physical part, I don't think it's really changed a whole lot. We've got another six or eight gallons of smoke and dirt in the lungs that we have to work out!

**Diana:** What about financial?

**David:** Financial. We got a lot of donations through the general public, that has helped considerably. They've let put our stuff back together without, you know. We don't have much of a budget to start with, and that fire blew our budget in two days. We didn't have anything left to fight with the rest of the year, let alone put our trucks back together. We've got enough through donations given by people from all over, that we are back up. We will make it through the year fairly decent.

**Diana:** Did you have any volunteer help getting trucks back together, or was it mostly what you did here in-house?

**David:** I think it was mostly our people.

**Diana:** So what about financially for the county? How do you think that stacks up?

**David:** It's going to take a long time to get over this wreck. There's a lot of government talk of funding 70 percent. You know, if a mile of fence costs you ten grand, and they cover 70 percent of it, there's still a hell of a lot of dollars there that has to come out of somebody's pocket that wasn't making it before. Let alone now.

**Diana:** So what about the grass. Is it coming back?

**David:** You know, I really thought the grass came back real good, with the rains and whatnot, but after the killing freeze here, in October, no. We had ground cover, but the grass is not back, and it's going to take a long time for that to get where it needs to be.

**Diana:** So what can you do or have you done to prepare for future fires?

**David:** I put my trucks back together! We've had wildfire classes put in here, we're working on a strike team for the area. But if it comes up like this fire, everybody that's on the strike team will be here anyway. They'll either be on it or be home fighting their own.

**Diana:** You were lucky that your house didn't burn, or that type of stuff. Did you and your wife talk about what you would take if you were in danger of your house burning? Yes. The dogs.

**David:** Yes. The dogs. They left the cats in the house.

**Diana:** In the basement!

**David:** And my horses. You know, there's lot out there, but it's all stuff. I'm sure we don't have the insurance to cover a third of it. No. I mean, if it happened again, we'd just be without.

**Diana:** Your daughter was worried about the horses.

**David:** I know, and so were my neighbors. But you know, at the time, there wasn't a thing I could do. I mean, I had three people tell me my house burned.

**Diana:** That was common. They thought a lot of houses had on Facebook.

**David:** When the picture come up from the elevator, with the flames up on the elevator, the two, the old Social Club and the Sunrise Building they thought was my house.

**Diana:** So what about the community? How can they prepare for a future fire or incident?

**David:** I would tell everybody to go look at the Wild\_\_\_\_\_ interface deal in the forestry website. Mow your yard, and keep it watered. Get the evergreen trees away from the house. Move everything out to where it will not fall and touch the house. You got shake shingles? Get you a sprinkler.

**Diana:** So did you take advantage of any of the hay that came in. Did you need that? Did you get any of the fencing stuff.

**David:** I didn't personally get the hay, but the hay that came in saved my job. We got 11 loads in a day.

**Diana:** What's a load?

**David:** A load is about 42 round bales. Maybe. Something like that, 40 something. But I was feeding a load a day.

**Diana:** So they didn't have to sell any cattle or... Did they keep them in there in the black or did they take them somewhere?

**David:** We had nowhere to go. Literally, we had no place to go.

**Diana:** Did you have fence or did they have to put fence up quickly?

**David:** They put fence up very quickly. All of the ranches that were in the area got as many crews together as they could get, and started stringing wire. After we got fence up, then we sorted.

**Diana:** Got everybody back where they belong. So, were they having some illness now or death that might pertain to the fire?

**David:** We weaned in October, and I believe we culled 10 percent that were probably fire related. Lung problems, problems with... I mean fire-related problems.

**Diana:** Did you have to kill any?

**David:** No.

**Diana:** Didn't have helped bury any?

**David:** Not on our place.

**Diana:** Did you go down to the camp and meet with the volunteers or get to interact with anybody that had come?

**David:** I did very little, actually. Being a contract cowboy, I had three different ranches that I was looking at, I really didn't have time to be in town.

**Diana:** Go down and do that. But you didn't get to meet with some of the volunteers that came because of being fire chief.

**David:** I got to meet quite a few people that came to town and talked to them. Most of it was 15 or 20 minutes or an hour or something, you know. I just it's been a lot of time after hours. We did take advantage of the posts and wire that came in.

**Diana:** There was a meal, wasn't there, an appreciation meal for firefighters down at the... a steak dinner or something. Melanie Hink did on a Saturday or something, she invited you all down.

**David:** I don't think I did. The one I made had sandwiches.

**Diana:** So you did some counseling with the firefighters. Were there any meetings afterwards with all of the emergency people. To kind of.

**David:** After action report? Yeah, there were probably four or five of those.

**Diana:** And who all participated?

**David:** All of the fire service personnel from the county, EMS, we had road and bridge, I believe. Anybody that carried a radio. The sheriff's office was there, dispatchers were there.

**Diana:** You come up with some pretty good summaries? I mean, what was right, what was wrong, did you get some ideas of what could be done for next time? Or are you still meeting on that? Is it such a wild thing that it's hard to plan?

**David:** It's one of those deals that we didn't do a whole lot wrong. You know, most of what happened, there wasn't anything screwed up real bad.

Like the evacuation, there's some things that needed to change. The plan that we had to start with was ruled. A while ago.

**Diana:** Needed some updating?

**David:** We're in the process of that. The PC is going through now, going through the standards and going through the whatnot, bringing that up to where it will be different if something happens again.

**Diana:** So any other thoughts about this experience?

**David:** Yeah. I think February 15th, I'm going on a cruise, and not coming back until the first of May.

**Diana:** How many people are going with you?

**David:** I'm not sure, it's still open.

**Diana:** Are you are you anticipating something like this might happen again?

**David:** Of course. We had Anderson Creek last year. We had the Starbuck Fire this year. What has changed?

**Diana:** New fence.

**David:** Nothing. We are still on Oklahoma line. Of all of our major fires come out of Oklahoma. Because we live on the Oklahoma border but they have come out of there. We've chased them all the way to Pratt, and we've done that since 96. It is basically an annual or an every other year event. We have a big fire somewhere. It's going to happen again.

**Diana:** Do you feel like you're more prepared? Or can you ever be prepared?

**David:** I have two tankers and five grass rigs. We're buying a new grass rig. I have enough people to run all of them. They are training in process. We are as prepared as we'll ever be.

**Diana:** Do you think going through the Firefighter One and Firefighter Two continuously, like you've been doing, to get everybody up to speed has helped?

**David:** Oh yes. I do. I think it's helped.

**Diana:** Even the older guys?

**David:** I'm sure it has helped them with much as anybody, because it's ingrained in them what needs to be done and and how to do it. You know not necessarily the Fire One and Two, because that's mostly structure stuff. But it gives them the incident command systems and it gives them the thought pattern to stay alive.

**Diana:** So this wildfire school you just had, what what kind of things did they pick up from that?

**David:** The wildfire classes teach them you how to fight wildfire. Basically, that does the same thing as the rest of it. It refines your thought pattern. Don't go to the head and jump in the middle of it and split and make two fires. Find you an anchor point at the back of it and work the flanks. Put the flanks out, work yourself around it and pinch the head off. It may take awhile, but you don't have anything coming up your backside. This fire, we didn't have that option because it outran us to start with, and then the wind switched and brought it back on us.

**Diana:** And they didn't really have any way to stop it when it started in Oklahoma, right? They didn't have the crew there either.

**David:** No. We have the National Weather on board now, and they have a couple of new satellites. Last year, 68 percent of all wildfires were reported by satellite, before it made 911. So, we have a new satellite going up this year that will take the northern part of the country.

**Diana:** It will help a lot.

**David:** Forestry is in the process of looking at ways to assist. The State Kansas seems to think maybe they could tell forestry how to help out in situations. They want to know why they don't help more. Our

legislators found out they don't pay forestry anything.

**Diana:** Do you think that will change?

**David:** I think so. I think there will be some... I don't know if it'll be in time for fire season next year, because fire season actually starts oh, the first of February. Our season will go from now till the first of April. The western wildfires start in April, the forest fires and that shit. Nobody expects it out here, because for years, nobody reported to forestry that we were having grass fires.

**Diana:** But we are now, right?

**David:** Yes. They actually realized that Kansas has more fires than almost any other state in the country.

**Diana:** Pasture fires?

**David:** Fire. Just fires.