

Gary: I'm ready!

Cara: OK.

Cara: When did you first become aware of the Starbucks fire?

Gary: Well, it would have that afternoon, we seen the smoke that morning really. It just kept getting heavier and heavier. And then somebody come around and said there was a fire coming our way. I suppose I would have first been aware of it nine or ten o'clock. You could see the smoke over towards Englewood.

Cara: When did you know that it was worse than they expected?

Gary: When they come around and said... That afternoon, somebody said that the fire was coming our way and they was talking about evacuating the town, and I thought, "Ooops!"

Cara: Did you agree with evacuation. Did you think it was necessary?

Gary: Well as close as that fire was. Yes. Because a lot of it is basically for the older people that can't get around. But even I wasn't too worried about it, personally, but with the smoke and stuff, it was better to get out of there than it was to be here, because of the smoke inhalation. You don't realize how quick it can get you unless you've been out there in it.

Cara: You kind of helped an older person that didn't have a good vehicle get out of town didn't you?

Gary: Oh yeah. He probably didn't have nobody to help him and I didn't want him to get hurt, Jack Hurd. I just went and got him and took him because he didn't know where to go or how to get there.

Gary: I sent Judy on with her car and I went and got him in my own and went ahead and got out of town. It was getting pretty bad. It was about dark when I left. There was already places between here and Protection that you couldn't see when I left.

Cara: So you left by ... Five o'clock or six o'clock?

Gary: Somewhere in there.

Cara: I think it was two o'clock when they told people to leave.

Gary: Well it was latter than that when they come by my house it was like three or four.

Cara: Ok. What did you pack up to take with you?

Gary: Oh I just tried to get to the important papers and stuff like that, valuables that you might not be able to replace. You don't realize how much stuff you need to have somewhere where you can get to it in a hurry.

Gary: That's just kind of an enlightening deal.

Cara: What have you changed since the fire?

Gary: Well, about the only thing I've changed is my respect for it. But I do have stuff where I know where to go get some of the papers and stuff. We got them to where we can just pick them up and go with them so we won't have to look. We had throwed things around for a long time, never expecting have to worry about it.

Cara: Did you think about trying to protect your house?

Gary: Oh yeah. I had got the hose out there... I suppose it was about three o'clock or so. They had blown the fire whistle three or four times by then, for the fireman earlier that day then and then that smoke started coming around town and they were talking about the fire so, I got my water hoses out and went to watering my grass around the house, thinking maybe... But, that was a lost cause. You couldn't water it enough to keep it safe, and they may need the water to put out a fire with instead of wasting it. But, if that fire had come to town there wouldn't have been much you could do about it. But when it went through Englewood, I was wondering just... You know most of the grass around had a little green in it and it was mowed. It might not have been that bad. And it went around a lot of houses in Englewood, it just burned the lawns off.

Cara: Why didn't it go through Ashland?

Gary: Well, I don't know. I can't see why it didn't go through. I suppose part of it was the wind and part of it was guys like Mike Harden went out and plowed some fire guards. Might of helped a little. I don't think they would have stopped it if it had come like it was. But we was just real lucky: I think God was on our side that day.

Cara: Or we were on God's side.

Gary: Well, hopefully.

Cara: Did anybody help you? Who came and told you about the fire?

Well, one of the cops come by about 4:00 and said, "You'd better get out of town, because they're going to evacuate everybody. They want everybody to leave." So I thought, "Well, maybe I'll stay."

Cara: Where did you go?

Gary: Well, we went to Coldwater to the school. But, the main reason I went was to take old man Hurd over there. Well, the way that fire was up north coming in, towards town, I thought maybe I'd better get him out of town because he wouldn't have a chance.

Cara: What was it like at the school in Coldwater?

Gary: There was just a lot of people there. Nobody knew anything. That's one thing they should have done better. They need a little better communication because they didn't know if we could go back or when we could go back. They should've had a communication center at that deal to answer questions. Public relations is a big deal.

Cara: Is that what you would recommend them to change?

Gary: They need somebody that, if somebody needs to know something, they can tell them, or find out. I mean it doesn't have to be right now, but if they can just find out and let people know. It would take the pressure off of a lot of people. People worried about their homes and their families and whatever and they need that.

Cara: Did anybody help you?

Gary: No.

Cara: Other than letting you in the high school.

Gary: Yeah.

Cara: I heard some people spent the night in their vehicles.

Gary: I did.

Cara: Why?

Gary: Because I had stuff in my vehicle and I didn't want to leave it set out there. I don't know, I just thought maybe I ought to stay with it because I didn't have a way to secure it up, and I didn't want any of it getting stolen or anything. And it was probably better to sleep in my vehicle than it was in that gym.

Cara: I heard that there were a lot of children running free.

Gary: Yes.

Cara: You knew they were upset.

Gary: Well I mean the thing is, what do you do with them? I mean, this was kind of an exciting deal for them, not trying to make excuses or anything. That don't hurt nothing.

Cara: Yeah.

Cara: So, what effect did the fire have on you? Did it hurt you physically, financially?

Gary: No. It didn't. The only thing is, a person don't realize how fast it is. I've seen fire, but after forty or fifty years, you forget just how fast it can move, and it kind of renews your respect for it. And you see things that I feel like you ought to pay attention to.

Cara: Like what?

Gary: Just like when you're burning trash and stuff. We've had several fires around here that got away, and they had people there that were supposed to be putting them out, but it's so dangerous, especially when it's dry.

Gary: But we're lucky it wasn't as dry as it was a few years back. It would have burned a lot faster.

Cara: Yeah.

Gary: I don't know if there was anything to burn then or not. There wasn't any grass or anything else.

Cara: That's it, we had a good year last year, so we raised something to burn.

Gary: Yeah.

Cara: Were you afraid? Although it sounds like you're just respectful now.

Gary: No! I am not afraid. It's not going to be something that you should have to be afraid of. Well you just got to learn. Well, just like that smoke ahead of the fire. People want to stay in town, and they think, "Well I can fight the fire, if it gets too close I can get away," but they don't realize the wind blowing smoke ahead of the fire.

Gary: And in the matter of a minute you can be disabled. And it's things like that, you know. "That fire ain't gonna hurt me any." But, it may not be the fire that will get you. Heat. Maybe fumes off of something. You never know. Especially around town here. You just don't know. But it does kind of renew your respect for it when something like this happens. I know what you ought to do, from some years past, but you kind forget about that and it kind of brings it to life.

Cara: Can you think of anything positive that's come out of all of this?

Gary: Yeah, I think people will be aware for some time around here. Every time somebody smells smoke they go and look and see where the fire is a little more. People will be pretty jumpy for a while. Still, when you see smoke somewhere, you wonder, "Who is burning today?"

Cara: Are you more or less likely to burn your trash now?

Gary: Probably less likely to. The way I understood it, that is what caused this, is that somebody was burning in some limbs and stuff from the ice storm we had last winter. And they went off and left it, which is what started the fire.

Cara: So do you know where that was supposed to have been?

Gary: Somewhere down by Beaver, north of Beaver and north of the river somewhere. I'm not sure whether that is right or not but that's what I heard.

Cara: Had you actually been around a range fire before this one?

Gary: Oh yeah.

Cara: So you had to fight fires before?

Gary: Yeah, several of them.

Cara: Did they ever threaten your home?

Gary: Oh no. They were just... they get started out there in Colorado there ain't nothing to stop them. They are just kind of out there in the open. There aren't many people who live up there, but when they get started up there there ain't nothing to stop them. And they don't have the people to help put them out like they do here.

Cara: Did we have enough help here?

There is never enough help when you're dealing with something like that, but there's so much of it you couldn't do. That fire was just growing on itself to the point that it almost... If they could get far enough ahead of it to really plow it, but just a hundred yards might not stop it. You might need a half mile fire guard to put it out.

It was going so fast. You don't dare get in front of one like that. I've seen people almost lose their lives because they was in front of a fire like that.

Cara: Were any lives threatened in our area?

Well there was a lot of threat there. I've heard of people that left with fire burning under their vehicle when they left the yard. I guess they call that "threatened." They stayed to the last minute, with that smoke almost getting them and they couldn't see to drive. They drove through fences and into posts and stuff trying to get away from it because they waited too long. And that's the thing that gets people dead. It just takes one or two minutes to make the difference between life and death. If they'd have been a minute sooner, they might have got out of there without as much trouble as they had. But we all... "Well I can just wait a little bit longer."

Cara: Were you raised anywhere near this area?

Gary: Oh no. I come from Colorado.

Cara: Have you ever been involved in range burning?

Gary: Yeah we were. Several years ago, I helped Richard Degnan burn some CRP down here. We had it pretty well under control, and it still almost got away from us a time or two.

Cara: How did you get it stopped?

Gary: Oh we had some spray deals on a truck and went around put it out. But it wouldn't have took very much... Well, if the wind had come up a little more we've been gone. We were just lucky. But we had a bunch of people out there, and it still... it could have got away from us so fast, because the wind came up. The wind is a big deal with fire. If the wind comes up and blows hard, you're kind of lost. Because to put it out, you almost have to get in front of it. And if you get in front of it with the wind blowing, you're in trouble.

Cara: Did your dad use range fires to clean up ground?

Gary: We never used it out there, when I was in Colorado. The only time there was a fire was when one just got started, lightening or whatever. But everybody was pretty careful about what they did with fire out there, because there was no way to stop it.

Cara: Do you think CRP has made fires more dangerous?

Gary: More common.

Cara: Why?

Gary: Because there's more fuel. That grass is so thick, and if nothing eats it, man, you talk about a fire now. That CRP is the worst thing there is. It's good it's bad, but as far as fire, the CRP has made it a lot more dangerous. There's a lot more CRP than... most of what burned was CRP. There's a lot of that down through here that that's all it is, is old CRP. Or it's some of that old Soil Bank; they used to have a Soil Bank program.

Cara: Are you doing anything to try to make sure this doesn't happen again? What preparations can be made?

Gary: Mainly just to watch what you burn! That's the main thing. And if there is a fire, having your stuff to where you can go. And if you wait till the last minute to gather things up, then the fire can get you before you can get away. You have to be able to get out there before the fire gets there. And, a lot of these guys that had wheat around their house, saved their house because the wheat turned the fire.

Cara: Because it was still green.

Gary: And there's things that if they can do something like that with their farming practices that would protect their buildings and stuff.

Cara: Gary, why didn't you go to Buffalo?

Gary: Because they said everybody was supposed to go to Coldwater.

Cara: OK.

Gary: When the police come around that evening, they said to go to Coldwater.

Cara: OK. So you never heard that they sent people to Buffalo and they sent the hospital to Buffalo.

Gary: Well, most of the rest home people were at Coldwater.

Cara: OK.

Gary: They had them in a room down there. So maybe they took the hospital people to Coldwater. I don't know if they had any patients in the hospital. I don't know what they did. But they told everybody I know of to go to Coldwater.

Cara: What was the drive to Coldwater, by the time you left?

Gary: Well, when I left here, there was several times when the smoke... There were times when you couldn't hardly see across the road. We got over there and when we come back the next day, there was poles lying on the road and there was wires lying in the road. But they did cut the wires and there wasn't no electricity in them or anything. The only thing was to not get wrapped up in them or anything. I just drove over them and went home.

Cara: What time did you come back?

Gary: Well, it was about eight o'clock in the morning when they told us we could come back. I almost left earlier, but I thought I'd better wait.

Cara: What was it like coming home?

Gary: It was everything was all cleared up. There was still a little smoke around. Everything was burned. There were places that there was still stuff burning, but they were done gone when we got there. They were still hot. I'd never seen that much devastation in on place. That's the biggest one that I ever saw. Hopefully the only one.

Cara: Is there anything else that this experience made you think about?

Gary: No, except how vulnerable we are. You know, we don't ever think about it. We're sitting here and all and everything good. But after that fire, you know, we could've been without water. If it hadn't have been for the city having their own electricity, there's people who would've been without electricity for two or three weeks.

We don't think about that stuff anymore. I've still got an old coal oil lamp or two.

Cara: I like air conditioning.

Gary: Well yeah. But we don't realize, you know... some of our stuff we take for granted. And food. I was surprised that there wasn't more shortages and stuff than there was.

But, you get in a car. We've got mobility now. You get in a car and you can go 100 miles north and be back home in a day. You can get whatever it is you don't have. But a lot of the people that live out in the country lost everything. I didn't lose anything. A little time is all I lost, maybe a little sleep. But I don't know what it would have been like to lose everything. I'm glad I didn't.

I might have been inconvenienced for a few hours, but other than that, I didn't lose... my whole life wasn't burned up in the fire... I didn't lose anything. So, I'm pretty lucky. I've got no reason to complain about anything. And all these guys that have lost their cattle... I went out the next day and drove around seeing the dead cattle laying around and fences burnt down and houses gone. It's just total devastation. It was worse than a war zone, because it burned everything. There wasn't nothing left. So, I don't know, but you see the some of them people are pretty tough to put up with it. I couldn't speak for it, because I didn't have to live through it.

Cara: You could've, you lucked out.

Gary: Well, I could've. We come pretty close, that fire was about a hundred yards from getting into town. When I left town, I had Jack take his car out to the school and park it in the middle of the parking lot so the fire couldn't get to it. So if it burned his house down, he'd still have his car maybe. And the ashes were falling on us. The hot ashes were coming from the north. The smoke was blowing. It was clear when I pulled in the parking lot, and we was there about five minutes. And the smoke was coming across the parking lot when I left. I didn't know... I couldn't tell where the fire was, or how far north. But it come down across there and got in that... some of it was that the wheat field of Bouziden's north of the golf course probably stopped a lot of it. It turned it and got it to the west of us. To have two fires come across right out here was something. But the wind changed. It was a terrible deal. The worst is the animals. I mean, the only people I know that got hurt in the fire was them three that got killed down there by Beaver. They was out moving cattle and got caught. They was trying to move cattle of the way and get caught in the fire.

Cara: I had heard there was a semi-truck driver.

Gary: Oh yeah. Out here. I don't know if they had a wreck or something in the road up there and he... That was another one. I'd forgot about him.

But. There is no way to prepare for a fire, other than we got fire departments and they train. The training, it will change the training for fire and the emergency management people.

Well, some of that was probably the guys need a sharp learning curve. They will learn to do it better next time. But a deal like this is really, really... They've got programs but they don't know how to use them, and I think that fire opened some eyes. But the emergency people had their operations and they were sending people here and there and they didn't know where they were sending them.

Some people need to learn more about the country. They just tell somebody go somewhere and they don't realize that there's a canyon between them and where they're supposed to be going, or something like that. There is a lot of things that need to be paid attention to, or a creek or whatever. Or the fire had already got there before they got there. And they're sitting in a building behind four walls, and there's a lot of stuff that needs to be worked on a little. But they've done a pretty good job with what they had. Because it was just like that, and OK, we've got a fire. What do you do? They go fight it. If I had been in better shape, I'd have been out there trying to help them. But I'd have been in the way. I had no business being out there with them, I can't move fast enough to get out of the way.

Cara: I'm not sure anyone could.

Gary: I know some pretty young guys that just about couldn't get out it. They waited too long before they left, trying to get cattle out of the way and stuff. But they did pretty good with what they had to work with. It makes tempers kind of short sometimes, I think.

Cara: People are afraid. Is there anything else than you would like people to know about your experience with this fire?

Gary: I don't think so. I didn't experience that much, I just lost sleep.