

Diana: What is your name?

Don: Don White.

Diana: Ok, and where do you live?

Don: 430 West 7, here in Ashland.

Diana: And how old are you?

Don: I am sixty-five.

Diana: When did you first become aware that there was a fire?

Don: I have a radio at my house, a fire radio, since I'm still on the fire department. So I heard the dispatch go out for the fire that was south and west of Englewood.

Diana: Do you remember what time that might have been on March 6th?

Don: No, it was maybe around 11:30 ish. Yeah, that's the best I can say. And I monitored that a little bit, knowing that we were, in fact, in a beyond-red fire warning, I think it is purple is the next one. Knowing that it was pretty bad and knowing which trucks went; I knew what was left here in town.

Diana: So did Ashland fire send mutual aid to the fire in Oklahoma?

Don: I don't know that they ever went into Oklahoma. By the time that they got there, it had already gotten into Kansas.

Diana: But they were called to do mutual aid first, right?

Don: Yes, oh yes. Englewood was called first. I'm sure that they were called a little bit before we were, and knew that they were going to need a lot more stuff there. Ashland ended up sending probably about three-fourths of our fire department down there. We're a rural fire department.

Diana: So when did you go?

Don: I went later. When they had dispatched, they blew the whistle again for the fires up north, up by the Mineola area, and I didn't respond right away. I waited to see what trucks left and thought, "Man, they've got about everything out of the barn". So I went down there, and the support truck, which was the... I kind of think it's fire 55...

Diana: Yes, it's the pickup.

Don: It's the pickup, and I thought, "Man, it's hot, it's dry, and it's blowing. If those guys didn't take water with them, they are going to need water". Dan Peirce and Russ Hensley were kind of hanging around too, so we decided the three of us to just mosey ourselves up there and take them some cold drinks.

Diana: So where did you go? Which part? Did you go north?

Don: We went north up towards the rock house.

Diana: Can you remember about what time that might have been?

Don: I think it was a little after two o'clock. At that point in time, the wind was still out of the south-west really strong. I mean it was warm.

Diana: Could you see the fire in the north when you were going up by the rock house?

Don: Yes.

Diana: Was it pretty large at that time?

Don: Yes. I mean, you could see it when you left Ashland. The smoke was pretty visible.

Diana: And you could see the fire out west too?

Don: When you got up in the hills. When you got up past that first big hill by Bouziden's, when you got up there, you could look back and see kinda what was going on. While we were up there, they were trying pretty desperately... I believe there was three Mineola trucks, probably three Ashland trucks and a tanker, and they were trying to stop it from jumping that road.

Diana: The Bouziden road?

Don: Yes.

Diana: The north-south road.

Don: Yes.

Diana: So it was west of that road at that time?

Don: If you went and looked further north, you could tell that it had already gotten by there, but they were still trying to hold it, because that was an edge and right there was some wheat field stuff of Bouziden's and they were trying to get it stopped there so that it wouldn't cut across toward the lake.

Diana: So when did the wind shift? How long were you up there, was it pretty quickly after you got there?

Don: We weren't there when the wind shifted. We knew it was going to shift, didn't know it was going to shift as fast as it did, or as hard as it did. But they had made probably three or four tries at wetting down both sides of the ditch right before the fire, and it was unsuccessful. I mean the road ditch was a fair ways from the fence row, and the fire just simply leaped the whole road without ever engaging the ditches because the fence rows were a little higher on both sides. It was just...

Diana: Went right over the top of it?

Don: It went over the top, carried across. There were fire tornadoes in that, but we got to watch and probably as close as a couple hundred feet. We were that close to the edge until we decided that we should move.

Diana: Because you were in a support vehicle, you weren't really in anything that had water.

Don: That's true. Now at that point in time was when they called for the evacuation of Ashland.

Diana: Which was about 3:30 right?

Don: Could have been, yeah. And I was in a position to where I could see that other fire, because we were clear up in the hills, and I called home and told Esther, "Don't wait. We've done everything up here that we can, and I'm coming home. There is nothing more that we can do." The only way that that fire could have been in any manageable mode, you would have had to have been clear at the southwest corner of where it started to put it out that way. There was just no way of stopping... we were in the middle and you couldn't stop it. A lot of times you can stop it at a road if it's not windy like it as, but it was just so overwhelming.

Diana: So you came back to town to the firehouse?

Don: We came back to town to the firehouse. I went home for a little bit, and at the time we were up there, they had old fire 56. The 79 Ford truck and they had called us to bring power steering fluid, that was another thing that we did do. So we put power steering fluid in it, but we found out later that the leak was so bad that we weren't doing much good. While it was up there, we saw them coming down the road with it, and the wheels were shaking, which Dan and I experienced late when we got in it. And we knew it was going to, but it was the only thing left.

Diana: So they quit using it?

Don: When they got it back to Ashland, they parked it. They said they weren't driving it anywhere. In a reasonable way you couldn't take it far.

Diana: So how often did people come back to the firehouse with fire trucks?

Don: Well, I'm not sure what Mineola did up there, and we didn't stay. We were the first to come back. We delivered the water and that's when they were calling about the evacuation of Ashland, and I said well, let's just go back. When I got home then, my wife said, "Well, the car didn't have a whole lot of gas in it and this and that, and she was trying to catch animals and that's when I said, "No, don't worry about it." Our neighbors Larry and Candy Park was at my house. So I gave them the information that I had and I said, "That fire from down there is going to run into the wheat fields from around Gardiner Ranch and stall out. That's not going to threaten Ashland for a long time, but the one from up north is a whole different thing. I'm not sure what's going to happen". The wind hadn't changed quite yet, even at that point. But when it did, then everything... the whole fire scene changed dramatically. Up until that point we had farms that were in danger in that area of the county. We were losing a few, doing the best that we could, but when this other one came down... gee, it was like I didn't know if we could save anybody's house.

Diana: So when did they lose communication? When did the radios go dead because of the tower being burnt, or the repeater? Do you know?

Don: That had to have been later, because the fire wasn't there until later...

Diana: Tuesday afternoon, or Monday afternoon?

Don: Yeah, and that would have been... well you would have to get with dispatch to know that.

Diana: Because they were still talking to each other when you went back.

Don: When I was in, and I got back on, let's see... they parked 56. So I went back to the firehouse because there wasn't anything for me to do, and it was the only vehicle left in the barn.

Diana: So they took 55 back out? The pickup?

Don: Yes. The guys that was in 56 took 55 to investigate. The wind had changed at that point. By the time I went down to the firehouse the wind had changed, because we hadn't been there too long and Kit came by and said that his dad's house was in danger. At that point that 56 truck was the only thing that was in there. So Dan and I took it and went to the Bouziden farm and it was really sad. We got there and the house was just barely on fire on the roof. But we could only get so close to the house because of the trees that he had planted around the house. When I tried to... at that point in time probably the wind wasn't directly in the north, it was kind of about like that, and it was so strong that the shooting fire hose at it... and I wasn't... I was less than twenty feet away from it, and it could have been less than fifteen. The water I was shooting out never touched the fire because of the wind blowing that strong. So we went around to the other side and I tried arcing over, but it just wasn't doing any good.

Diana: So where did you go...

Don: So we called for other trucks... well we were calling for other trucks anyway, and they finally did show up with a pumper and we made a pretty gallant stand with a pumper and a tanker, put on a lot of water on something that was out of control and did not... didn't gain on it.

Diana: So did you come back to town after that or did you go east.

Don: After that we were empty, and we were losing the house. So Dan and I, we pulled up on the hose that we had spread out, and we came back to town and the steering was shaking, it was like this, and ten mile an hour was about as... Honestly when we drove there to Bouziden's, I'm not sure we could have driven there any faster than that. The smoke and dust and dirt and everything in the air was so strong that you just about couldn't see the road.

Diana: So did you have any thoughts about what you might lose personally when you saw that fire out there? Did you think that it would hit Ashland?

Don : I knew also that Ashland was protected by the Bouziden wheat fields.

Diana: Still...

Don: There is two of them there just beyond the golf course, and I thought, "Yeah it's a good thing those are there, because that's the main protection from this fire. But it could have been that point in time when we got back into town that I think Mike Harden had already started disking ditches. Because I'm pretty sure that ditch by the school had been disked already, and when we came back in I thought... I didn't know that's who had done it. Actually thought that maybe that's who had done it, but I didn't know at the time. I thought, "Yeah, that's a good idea, I don't know who thought of it, who did it, where that idea came from," but at the time, that was a really good idea. So we filled up with water and we parked the truck.

Diana: Then did you go back out?

Don: Yes. We might have... we probably got drinks, and we cleared our eyes out, they were terrible and by that time then the fire had jumped 160 and...

Diana: Going which way? Going from the north to the south.

Don: North to the south, yeah. It had jumped 160 and we knew that there was fire up around the dump area. At that point in time we were the only truck. So Dan and I and the shimmying truck went out there because we knew we didn't have very far to go. We thought, "You know, we could probably go out there, and then when you're fighting fire, you're only moving four or five miles an hour and that's fine. Dan was really fighting it because now power steering is Armstrong steering and that's just... he was really fighting.

Diana: Did any other trucks show up when you were out there at the dump?

Don: Not right away. We were the only truck for quite a while. Once in a while a truck would come in and make a pass at something and then leave, and because we were getting... didn't really have much mutual aid, but the stuff from down southwest, our fire trucks from down there, were coming back to Ashland. They knew the town was threatened pretty bad. They were having trouble getting back because of the smoke; they had to go through some pretty bad areas just to bring trucks back.

Diana: Did Englewood's trucks make it to Ashland.

Don: Not that I ever knew of. They still had so much fire in their area; I don't believe that a single Englewood truck came back.

Diana: And then Comanche County went on...

Don: Comanche County was here early, and it was when the wind shifted, they went home because it had... somebody had reported that it had jumped highway 34. Well, we were at Bouziden road and I thought, "By the distance between that and 34 highway is like ten or twelve miles." I don't know, didn't look at a map later to see, but I knew... I said, "Oh, my Gosh, all of that has become a head fire coming our direction," and it did, and that's why that really come down so devastating from that area. It had made that long line across all pasture area. There weren't hardly any wheat fields up in that area to slow it down.

Diana: Did you go home and go to bed?

Don: I did. We had one... we worked that... it was a mile long at the dump, and it was just about the length that that truck, 750 gallons would go. So we get almost to the end, and we have to quit. Run out of water. So we would come back down and get another load, and by the time we got out there, there was lots of fires again. And we would put them out again, and then we would go back and fill up. We done that at least three times.

Diana: Where did you fill up at?

Don: We had to go down to the power plant.

Diana: The power plant?

Don: Yeah, that's when the sheriff said, "I seen you in that truck with the shaking wheels".

Diana: So was that the only place that they were filling up, or did they have other places to fill the fire trucks?

Don: No, they were filling up at the fire station at the hydrant that was there. Quite a few trucks just used that. I think every time we were kind of in that vicinity, there was already a truck parked there, so we just ran on down to the light plant and filled up where we were used to filling up there.

Diana: What about the high school, that hydrant up there? Didn't use it?

Don: I never seen anybody use it. I definitely didn't go there. Didn't even think about trying.

Diana: Was there anybody else... was there anybody at the light plant just...

Don: Well, there was... I don't know if there was anybody in the light plant itself. There was nobody there when we were getting water thought, in that area that you would see. I think it was about the third time, this

would have been around probably about 11:30 at night that... Dan would know who, well I thought it was one of the city employees. I was sitting on the passenger side and I couldn't see who he was talking to. So he talked to them and then they left and he says, "They are telling us that the main power coming into Ashland, the light poles, were on fire, and that would be the road that goes past the dump, the U road. It's the only road in the whole county that goes straight across the whole county. Used to be the old highway 160. We thought, "Well, it's not too far, and we are the only truck available, let's go see what we can do." So we went down there, and sure enough, I think there was at least seven of them on fire. Now, these are like 12,000 volts, they aren't that big around. They are regular power poles, which is about a foot. But they hadn't been on fire for very long. You could see that we was going to have to get off of the truck and pull hose to go down in the ditch to shoot straight up because if we shot straight from the road, the fire was all on the south side of the pole, and you couldn't put it out that way. We knew that the pole wasn't in danger of coming down on us yet, and hadn't got clear up to the tie part of it. It was just the pole started from the ground and was kinda just working its way up slowly. The wind was so strong, it was just blowing on the one side of the pole. Dan and I put those out one by one.

Diana: So did you get them all put out before you ran out of water?

Don: Yes, because a pole don't take much water. We were able to shoot up there for less than a minute. Just soak it good and we were done, probably about fifteen seconds per pole.

Diana: And then the wind kept it from burning on the other side because it was blowing so fast. So then when you got through with that, where did you go?

Don: We went back to the station and filled up with water and that was when I told Dan I was done. I don't think it was one o'clock in the morning. Probably when we went out there it wasn't 12:30, it would have been more around 11:30. We was out there a good hour. My arms were so shot and I was so beat. I told Dan, "I think I've gone as far as I can go." So I kind of retired from it. You would have to ask Dan whether he went back out.

Diana: Did you see any other firefighters at the station besides filling up trucks? Did anybody get anything to eat?

Don: There were people in and out all the time. By that time, we had quite a few volunteers that were doing some things. So there was some activity there.

Diana: So when did you go back on Tuesday?

Don: About eight o'clock in the morning. They had a crew that was going up to Gilbert Krier's to fight the fire in the canyons.

Diana: Do you know what trucks went?

Don: Well, we took 56, but we had looked at it and found out at that point in time there was a loose fitting on the power steering.

Diana: So you got that fixed?

Don: Me and Evan Burton got that tightened up and got fluid put in it, and so we put that back online.

Diana: And who went up on the truck? Who were the people?

Don: On the truck at that time?

Diana: Yes.

Don: It was J.D. Redger on 56.

Diana: That went to Kriers?

Don: Yes.

Diana: So how long were you out there fighting at Kriers in the canyons? Most of the day?

Don: No, it had a breakout. We were down in the canyons putting out little spot fires here and there, and trying to work our way as best we could, because getting down into a canyon took some finesse. Getting a big truck down in the canyon is tough, and usually, you can only find one way down there and hopefully one way back out. And we were doing ok, we were doing some good down there, and then a fire broke out a little further South, and it was about that time that the power steering quit again. This time it was like a hose blew, so there wasn't anything to fix.

Diana: So who was driving? You?

Don: I was, and I still to this day don't know why, but I was able to drive back to town at about 45 mph. I got clear back to town, and then turned and went down Main Street to take it to Feed and Seed to have 'em look at the power steering, see if they could make a hose for it. When I got down to 10 mph, I couldn't go any faster again. Hitting little bumps in the road started it shaking, and once it started, you almost had to stop. So we got down there, and we had a tire that was flat too, and so they fixed the tire, but couldn't fix the power steering, and so we parked it.

Diana: So when you were out at Krier's, did you hear any of the other fire trucks chatter?

Don: No.

Diana: So did they have people that went over that way? Maybe I should ask, when did the relief trucks get here? Did they get here on Tuesday?

Don: No. I don't think so. I think about Wednesday they were coming in from all the places. If there was any trucks that got here Tuesday to help, it was after I quit, because I parked 56...

Diana: Do you know about what time that was?

Don: Probably around 2:00 in the afternoon, and thought there was nothing more that we could do with this truck. I don't even know if our repeater tower was working back yet because if they were clear down there and we were there, we would not have heard any of that conversation. We had good truck to truck...

Diana: So was there another truck up there with you?

Don: Yeah, there was a small truck, it was 58, and...

Diana: Do you remember who was on it?

Don: No, could have a month ago, but probably not now.

Diana: It's on a sheet.

Don: I know Francis was up there, and we had a... and George was up there. George was there with the tanker, so I'm not sure who the other person was. That's about all we had up there at that point. We called Jessie; we needed something. I think we called him about some power steering fluid too, just in case we needed some if it leaked a little, but it was pretty major.

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

Don: Well to start with, watching them dump that load off, I had never seen them do that. Go that far in the air just carrying flaming debris because that would have been half a football field, like 50 yards.

Diana: So what do you think that the wind was blowing at that time? How fast?

Don: From the southwest, I would estimate it probably around 50 mph. And that's just a guess at it, and then when it turned and blew from the North, it was the same speed, only when it picked up the fire, it went faster because the fire kind of makes its own wind as it burns. So that movement, the time that that went from clear up by the rock house to clear down to Dave Bouziden's house. It had to have been less than 30 minutes. So it was moving 70 or 80 mph or something like that. It was phenomenal, blowed me away that it had blown that far that fast.

Diana: So did you see it when that fire was burning all around Ashland, did you see that?

Don: No, because I wasn't up in the hills anymore. That probably would have been the only way that you could really see that.

Diana: So who were some of the people that were most helpful? Do you remember any specific people that came and helped fight fire or volunteered?

Don: Well, I remember Mrs. Luerman being at the fire station on Tuesday when we came back, and... trying to think if this was Tuesday, or if this was the Monday deal.

Diana: I'll bet it was Tuesday because there was a whole bunch of people there on Tuesday. Because they had shut the courthouse down.

Don: Well anyway, I wasn't expecting that, and it choked me up for a minute.

Diana: To see all of the tables full of food.

Don: Yeah. At that point we had firemen there for 25 hours, so they were pretty shot. I hadn't put in that many hours myself, but I ended up being pretty wore out over the whole deal.

Diana: But no actual financial loss in the fire?

Don: No, later when the out-of-towners came in, I happened to be up at AV Energy just making sure the pumps were working. We were using them pretty hard, and one of the guys in a rather late model General Motors truck asked if I knew anybody that had some orange antifreeze, and I said that I did. He said, "I've got a small leak on this and I could sure use some." So I said, "You wait right here, and I will be back in less than five minutes." Out of the whole thing, I think that was my only loss; I donated a gallon of antifreeze to those people.

Diana: But you didn't have to work on a lot of trucks, right?

Don: Well, we all stayed one night, there was about five or six of us that worked really hard to change out a pump that had went bad. That was Wednesday. We didn't fight any fire Wednesday that I was involved with.



Because by that time we had so much support help coming, and the rest of us were pretty wore out. So if we got called out, it was pretty minimal, mainly to just show people where the fire was or something. But I wasn't involved with anything; I was putting that pump on. We had had a... my son was driving a truck that they had hit like the edge of a ravine, and the entire tank shifted forward. I think that was old 58. It didn't break a whole lot of stuff, because on the pump itself we had a soft hose in between some things. So it wasn't a real difficult repair, and we took it down to Ashland Feed and Seed, and they worked on it all of Wednesday morning pretty much. They had it serviced by noon; so we were pretty impressed.

Diana: Do you know of any major injuries that anybody suffered from the fire?

Don: No, and I mean that was amazing because you could make missteps, you could get tangled up in hoses all day. There were just a lot of things. One of the few injuries Frank had, he had come in and went actually to get stuff out of his eyes.

Diana: But nobody had burns?

Don: No. My son told me later that when he was in Englewood, they got overrun with fire while they were there. He said that it was bad enough, he said, "I had to stop fighting fire and put my head into my coat to try to breathe."

Diana: Can you perceive of anything good that came out of this fire? Just one thing.

Don: I guess probably that it showed us what we can do and what we can't. I mean you can't win everything and don't necessarily have to lose everything either. I mean there was some places that they did some pretty outstanding work, and there were places that we lost before we even knew that they were lost. Places like Howell's out there; I didn't hear about it until later. Later, they got a handle on the communication part of it. It was really pretty good as far as we couldn't still hear the dispatcher out of Ashland because of the shortness of the range, we would need the repeater.

Diana: But they did get that fixed pretty quickly didn't they?

Don: I think they did yeah.

Diana: So are there any stories in your family's history about big fires?

Don: My dad once fought a fire in town. It had started on the side of the street where his garage was at, and at time it was maybe kind of like the Main Street of Belleville. Got building, building, building, building, all about the same height and everything, and the fire was burning the roof area, and it was getting to the other roofs. I don't know if they had breaches on the walls in those to do maintenance up in there, or just how they was doing it, and he and another guy went clear up there. They were used to working on ladders because they would get antenna work, T.V. work and such. Him and another guy went clear up in there and says, "Now we put that out, of course, it was burning on the underside of the roof," so putting all the water on the top of the roof isn't any good. So yeah, I've been there and done that. He said, "Yeah, it was starting to get pretty close to my place." But that's the only fire story that I think I ever heard from my father.

Diana: So is there anything that you feel that you would do to prepare for a future fire? Or is there something that you would do different, or want to do better?

Don: Well, we've kind of went around and reinforced the fact that we don't have any water at this point.

Diana: Like where the wells are in this country.

Don: Yeah, and...

Diana: Like your family, things that you would do different with your family. Would you have had them evacuate if it was worse?

Don: I would have been pretty scared to because at a certain point in time, being on a fire truck I know this, you can't drive through that smoke. And if you don't hit the window of opportunity, you are better off not going. Because it's more dangerous for you out on the road, not seeing, and hitting something, or driving off the road and having a wreck, than it is staying in town. I always thought from the standpoint of that point, that the evergreen trees were still going to be a problem, the other trees were not a problem, and there were pretty minimal grass fires around houses. Mowed lawns just make pretty minimal... you can stomp 'em out with your feet.

Enough water pressure is coming out of your hydrants that you can just... Now what would have been bad for Ashland was those wheat fields not being there, and that fire hitting that grassy area between the golf course and the high school, and the big tree rows there. We would have put a lot of burning embers up in the air that would have come across the town. That would have been a problem. We would have had so much stuff on fire at the same time that the town would have been overwhelmed. There wouldn't have been a refuge to go to. Try to find a place where it wasn't burned, but that would have been the biggest fear. I knew that area... knew that with the road ditch getting worked up by Mike Harden and his disk, had bought the town a pretty big safety area. It proved to be true; we didn't hardly lose anything here in town. Surrounded us completely, still look at the East part, and don't know why it didn't burn through that creek, it kind of stopped right at the edge of it. And Edmonston's house, it survived, but I don't know why.

Diana: So do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you would like to share.

Don: I'm just glad that somebody's writing it down, because there is a lot of stories that might be a little bit interesting. I thought at the time that I felt really good about getting those power lines out, because at that point, it was around midnight, there was a lot of people that were still awake, and knowing this fire was all around Ashland. If we had lost the power, and of course it's always 30 or 40 minutes for it to get cranked up again, it would have been... It would have put people in a pretty panicked state if the power would have went out. So putting those power poles out, I thought was pretty... yeah, it kept the lights on in Ashland and that was a good thing. I don't know why it was just that one stretch in there where they were on fire, and I was hoping that it wasn't farther west at that time, and it wasn't. It hadn't went any further west. So I thought that we did a good thing getting those out.

Diana: So do you have anything else that you think you might like to include?

Don: I was amazed at how well the fire department did perform, under the hardest circumstances that I've ever seen. And like you say, nobody was injured. Some of the farmer ranchers that were in it, there wasn't a loss of life out there, or major injuries because of things that could have happened to them. So we got kind of lucky in that area. I think that it could happen again, though. I mean there is nothing... the weather don't change much in Kansas and the grass up there is going to be... there is going to be a lot of grass up there, and it could happen again. Hopefully, it wouldn't be that every county around us was involved in their own fires. I know Ford County, up around Dodge, they had fires. Bucklin was working on that one that was up north on their side of it, and Mineola kind of stayed up there working on that one too, and they had some real stories up there. That one was tough. In Comanche County, Meade County, south of us, nobody could come help. One of the few time when a call to mutual aid didn't get us anybody. And they... most of them had to come from three or four counties away. At that point, everybody kind of... with the wind blowing that strong.