

Mary Kaltenbach

Diana: Okay, so what is your name?

Mary: Mary Kaltenbach.

Diana: And where do you live?

Mary: North of Ashland, three miles.

Diana: Okay, and how old are you?

Mary: Fifty-seven.

Diana: And what's your occupation?

Mary: Rancher/farmer.

Diana: When did you first hear about the March 6 fire that became known as the Starbuck Fire?

Mary: Late Monday morning.

Diana: And how did you hear about it?

Mary: I think probably Facebook or maybe Kyle, our son, told me. I can't remember who told me about it. But you could see the smoke, so you knew there was one back there.

Diana: So what were your thoughts and actions when you first learned that it was coming your way?

Mary: I did not know it was coming our way until our house got black like it was night outside. I thought we were in the rocking chair. Fire was north of us and the fire was south of us and I didn't have a thing to worry about. I was babysitting our year-old grandson. It was his birthday. His grandma had gone to Oklahoma City and was training and his dad was out helping fight fire and move cattle.

Diana: So, did somebody come tell you the fire was here?

Mary: It got black outside. And I grabbed him and got in a pickup and left and the fire was 200 yards away from us. I had no idea it was near us.

Diana: So where did you go?

Mary: Went to town... Mark had... My husband had told me to go back into town and I looked

that way and it was just as black there as what I'd left, and I thought, "I'm not going there."

So, I was going to go to Coldwater, and he called and said it was fine to come back into town. I turned around at Sitka and I could see the flames going by Sitka Hill. So, nope not going that way. So I called a golfing friend at Buffalo and she said, "Sure, come on down." So I and three other cars headed towards Buffalo, and she called shortly thereafter and said, "Don't come here, the ashes are falling; they're going to evacuate Buffalo."

Diana: So do you know what time?

Mary: I'm thinking... it was still daylight out. So this had to be 4:30 or 5:00. I lost all track of time. It was still daylight when I left the house and it had just got dark by the time I got to Coldwater. We went from Buffalo towards Alva. And they said on the radio for Alva and Freedom to be ready to evacuate.

And so we went on to Coldwater and it was just dark when we got to Coldwater.

Diana: Where you go when you got to Coldwater?

Mary: Roy Hoffman had a rental house and there's a bunch of us went there. Some nice people took care of Wade while I figured out what to do. I ended up going back to Kyle's house. I got there about 11:00 or 11:30.

Diana: So did you go home at all?

Mary: We spent that first night at Kyle's house and then we went home the next day.

Diana: What did you find when you went home on Tuesday?

Mary: I still had a house and still had horses. I thought, when I left the house, the house would be burned down and all our horses. Kyle had brought his horses over and I figured they'd all be gone. And I did know the night before that they'd saved them, because of Mark... I called Mark and I said, "I just want to know if the horses are okay," because I had told him, I said, "I'm sure the house is gone."

When Mark and Kyle, and our daughter Erin

and her husband, Austin, and Rod Young... His house had already burned, and he came down and had water, the fire was two foot from our back porch, coming down a flower bed.

The fescue around the house didn't burn, but a flower bed had caught fire. And they put that out. The barns, we lost two barns and they were on fire. Then they were going to load the horses in a trailer standing there, but when they opened the trailer gate, the floor was burned out of the trailer. So we had a little patch of alfalfa, and they threw them on the alfalfa. Thankfully, they were fine.

Diana: So were you keeping in contact with them all night?

Mary: Yes, I kept in contact with Mark and I kept in contact with Carrie, our daughter-in-law, because I knew she'd wonder what was going on. She kept thinking she should come home and I kept telling her, "You can't get here. No need to."

Diana: So Tuesday morning. What were your plans for the day?

Mary: To see what was left.

Diana: Then where did you go from there?

Mary: We drove around and looked at dead cattle, and then found some live cattle. I don't know why they were alive. Then I went to shooting cows.

Diana: Did you find any that you could save?

Mary: No, we really... they were either okay/alive, or they were past saving. There was no line. We kept four, that we thought were going to be okay. It became pretty evident their feet were shot.

Diana: So what kind of injuries did you find on the cattle that you had to shoot.

Mary: Burned, the hair was gone. Noses were swollen up so bad they couldn't breathe. Eyes were swollen shut. You could see their feet hurt so bad they'd just rock on them back and forth. Ear tags melted in their ears and hanging on by a real thin thread of plastic. That amazed me, how hot, you know, just how hot it got.

We had a set of cows in a pasture and every bit of the grass, I mean, every bit of grass we had, burned. The majority of that set of cows did not have a scorched hair or bag on them, and I don't know why they were fine. Nobody knows. Can't figure out where they went or how they got out of getting burned.

Diana: No water anywhere close?

Mary: There was a pond, but there was no mud on them. So they didn't go to the pond. That's a mystery, how they stayed alive.

Diana: So how much grass, acres-wise, do you know how much you lost?

Mary: About 3,500 acres of grass we own and lease.

Diana: Fence?

Mary: Personally, we lost about three miles of fence. That was what we own. Landlords lost a lot more. I'm not sure, I've never heard a figure on theirs.

Diana: Cattle, do you have a figure on cattle?

Mary: We lost 77 cows, 70 baby calves, and 53 replacement heifers.

Diana: So did you have any of the baby calves that got to go to Meade?

Mary: Yes. We had five.

Diana: And did they all survive?

Mary: They survived. They showed them at the fair.

Diana: So do you have them back now?

Mary: No, they are going to keep them for hold-over bucket calves for next year's fair.

Diana: Sounds like a plan. So you evacuated to Kyle's, which is in Englewood, right?

Mary: Yes, north of Englewood.

Diana: Did you go through any fire on the way over to his place?

Mary: No.

Diana: Did you see any fire or smoke over that way?

Mary: When we went to Kyle's, we went from Coldwater up through Greensburg and Minneola and south. And as we were going south of Minneola, as you looked east, south of the curves, just looked east and it was just a line of fire, just a glow all the way to Kyle's.

Diana: Do you know about what time that was?

Mary: That would have probably been 10:30, when we left Minneola.

Diana: So did you spent all day Tuesday with cattle and making sure everything got where it needed to be?

Mary: All day Tuesday and Wednesday we shot cows and drug them to a pile.

Diana: So did you have to have somebody come and look at the cows before you could bury them? Is that how you disposed of them?

Mary: Yes, we did bury them. The vet clinic did a fabulous job getting somebody to do that for us. Now, you could tell. I mean, we called them and said, "If there's a borderline, what is it?" And they said if their feet are bad they're... and so, you could just tell. They were just miserable and in shock and weren't going to make it.

Diana: So how many death/burial places did you have to build?

Mary: They dug two holes for us in two different pastures.

Diana: So you took care of all the cattle that you had, that you needed to take care of.

Mary: Yes.

Diana: You said your barn burned. Was all your tack in your barn?

Mary: Lost all our bridles, all our saddles. Some bits that were kind of valuable to us, sentimental. You know, saddles and...

Diana: Did you find bits and pieces?

Mary: Yes, where we found the bits. Some of them had silver on them and it just melted in a big old glob, just a big old glob of silver. We still have that out of the house. We sent some of the bits off to see if they could clean them up. They cleaned them a little, but they're done, they're toast.

Diana: Just too burned?

Mary: Yep, too burned. They talk about the tensile of the metal. I don't know. I could get on my horse and pull and have it break!

Diana: The fire was that hot.

Mary: The fire in our pastures to the east of our house, there was absolutely no ash or residue left on those. It was simply dirt and cow pies. I noticed up the road, grass that had burnt, there was residue, grass residue. Those burned so hot, there was nothing.

Diana: So when you left home, Monday, when it was dark, how fast was the wind blowing? Could you tell?

Mary: No.

Diana: Do you have any idea?

Mary: No. Hard. I'm going to say 45 or 50, because I know what a 40 mile an hour wind feels like. It was blowing harder than that, and the flames were coming. And I thought, "Cripes."

Diana: So on Tuesday and Wednesday did you get all of the things that you needed done at your house completed? Like cattle buried?

Mary: Probably by Thursday. Let's see, I think it was Tuesday, I had gone to get a bale of hay over towards Kyle's. We have Jim Cox's old place out there rented, and we had cattle on wheat pasture. And that fire had... I was marveling that the CRP hadn't burned across from his house, and I'll be danged if it didn't catch on fire Tuesday, and burned around his house and off over into our corrals. Kyle and our son-in-law Austin Boggs went over there and got the cattle. The cattle would come out of the

corrals to them, and they'd try and keep them on the wheat and then they would just circle around and go back in the fire and the corrals to see what was going on. We didn't lose any of those, but that was strange.

So it burned Tuesday, too.

Diana: So then did you go help anyone else with cattle? Just family, or yourselves?

Mary: Just ourselves, because Mark and Kyle and Austin, our son-in-law helped people Monday. But as I said, I had Wade and I was frustrated I couldn't go help somebody somewhere.

Diana: So basically moving cattle so they were out of the fire and getting them onto...

Mary: Kyle, and my sister Kelly and her husband Steve, and their son-in-law, Dustin Walker, got a bunch of our cows off some grass out west of town towards Englewood. They put them on Mike McCarty's wheat and we saved those cows. I think it was after they got them over there on that wheat, two hours later, all that grass was gone. So I know they helped a lot of people.

Diana: So did you get help from the volunteers that came from other places?

Mary: Yes. Tremendous help.

Diana: Can you remember some of the places they came from?

Mary: Yes, there were some from Pryor, Oklahoma, and we had some from Missouri. Unionville, I believe, Unionville, Missouri. Two different bunches from there.

Diana: What kind of help did you receive?

Mary: Fencing help. And then, I should mention, one of Austin's friends and a bunch of his friends and father-in-law, came down Tuesday or Wednesday and picked up and cleaned up the barns that burned.

I was amazed. People just showed up and helped there.

Diana: Did you get any hay?

Mary: Hay, we got lots of hay and it was so welcome. I cannot tell you how much, because I can't... I'm going to say 300 bales of hay, at least. We lost like 500, but we got lots of hay.

Thankfully the rains came, and we didn't need as much of it, but we did use it.

Diana: So what do you think was the most vivid memory of the fire?

Mary: How black it got and how quick it got black outside. I just... I have seen fire, but I didn't know it was so black, like night, like midnight. Like somebody shut the lights off!

Diana: So did you have any electricity at your house?

Mary: Yes, there was electricity. When I left there was.

Diana: Did you have it when you got back on Tuesday?

Mary: I think so.

Diana: So what about food? What did you do for food Tuesday and Wednesday?

Mary: We were fine. We had food, and then a lot of people brought food. We were fine. Food and water; we were fine.

Diana: What's the biggest emotional part of the fire for you?

Mary: Losing the cows. I've told people several times that I'd trade the house and everything in it for the cows and the grass back.

Diana: So did you ever get a halter for your horse?

Mary: Yes. Jim Arnold made me a halter. He heard I needed a halter and he made me two halters. Bless his heart!

Diana: So what about people or agencies that proved helpful, not only during the fire but after the fire. Were there certain groups that came? You mentioned the vet.

Mary: The vet clinic did an excellent job

getting somebody to bury the cattle.

Diana: So they took care of that part too?

Mary: They sent somebody out to help fill out all the paperwork too. Yes, we filled it out. I'll say this, the government office was helpful.

Diana: The FSA?

Mary: The FSA. They did what they could. Surprisingly, the government paid quickly on the cattle losses. I think it was two weeks, three weeks. I was shocked. Much better than the insurance, a lot quicker than insurance did anything.

I don't know who fed all the people in town, but that was an amazing deal to do. They fed them for a long time, and I know some of the people that were there. But that was something amazing that town people did for the agricultural community. They're to be commended highly.

Diana: Did you have any physical effects of the fire? Did you get burned, did you...

Mary: No.

Diana: Nobody...

Mary: Everybody was fine.

Diana: No smoke inhalation or anything?

Mary: Nope.

Diana: Nothing that was major?

Mary: No, health-wise we're fine.

Diana: And financial is mainly the cattle.

Mary: Cattle and the fences and the rent grass that the cows we still have are on.

Diana: Did you have to truck them a long way to rent grass?

Mary: We got some grass over at Greensburg, so that's 60 miles.

Diana: So what have you been able to bring them back home now?

Mary: We just got some back the other day, and we kept some. We were dragging deads, and our grandson was helping me, he is ten. I guess he was nine then. We started in the morning, and towards evening he said, "Look Grammy, there's green grass already coming!" and so that was kind of cool.

Diana: Yes, it was.

Mary: And then the rains came and grass came back quicker than you'd ever... than we thought it would.

Diana: Do you have any places where the grass didn't come back at all?

Mary: No. There's a patch or two of alfalfa.

Diana: Didn't have anything that was blowing after the fires from the wind?

Mary: Oh, we had a little field that blew a little bit, and the pastures did, they didn't have anything on them to hold them!

Diana: Do you have any memory of smoke or how long it hung around after the fire? I mean the smell of smoke?

Mary: I swore a month later, when you opened the garage, you could smell it. Honestly. When you drove over the hill, coming to Ashland, where started out, you could smell it for a month, I think.

Diana: Different every day, how it smelled?

Mary: Nope, just the same ole nasty, damp, smoky smell. It came out of the vents in our grocery-getter. I hadn't driven it in a while and got in it to drive it, and ugh!

Diana: Are there any stories in your family about prairie fires? Did your dad ever tell any stories about fires or anything that he'd experienced?

Mary: No, really.

Diana: Is there anything that you remember when you were little?

Mary: No, we had that one. Was it 2011? I think, that burned up north of our house. It

started over, I think, at Vernon Howell's and came across. I can remember watching all the firefighters then and thinking how many firefighters there were then, that had come and responded and got it put out just right there north of us.

Diana: So Tuesday when you were moving cattle and getting stuff situated did you see any firefighters? Do you see any trucks?

Mary: Yes, in different places. I think it was Wednesday night, just north of our house there were some trees and I could see some flames in a tree stump. I didn't have any hoses left to go out and put it out! So I called and I said, "If anybody's up this way with a fire truck, could they just come squirt that out because the wind's out of the north and our house is still here. It's what we got left." You know, we were laughing on the radio. After she hung up, I remembered I had a water trailer out there that had water. So I went out and put it out. Bless those guys' hearts, they showed up. Scared the bejeebers out of us about midnight, to put it out. They had been busy putting out other things.

Diana: Was it local people?

Mary: It was local.

Diana: Did you have any experience with the strike teams that came?

Mary: No, just visited with them at the cafeteria.

Diana: Did you go eat meals in town?

Mary: Yes, we ate at the cafeteria a couple of times.

Diana: What do you perceive as being positive coming out of the fire?

Mary: The response. This was a terrible, horrible, awful thing that happened, and it made the very best in people come out. You can't ask for more. I mean, the grass will grow back. But to have your faith in people, oh what do I want to say, reinforced. That's the best. There's people everywhere.

Diana: Did you get to talk to some of the volunteers that came and find out why they

came or tell your story to them?

Mary: Yes. We talked to some of them.

Diana: What's your impression of the people that came?

Mary: Boy, they're giving, because I don't think I want to go to your house and fix your fence for you. That's, you know, that's work!

And those poor people, the people that first came out from Oklahoma, the first day they got there, it was dirty and windy and warm. I mean, they came in and their faces were just nothing but dirt because of that old ash blowing. And I think the next day or the day after, it went to raining and cold and windy. They got the full gamut.

But they just hung in there and did it.

Diana: So, have you thought about what you would do to prepare for the future if something like this happened again? Have you made some preparations or thought about what you would take if your house burned?

Mary: Yes, I've thought about it.

Diana: What have you been doing?

Mary: Pictures. I've got pictures, and I've had them set in a place where I could just grab them, but that happened so quickly that I didn't grab them.

Diana: Did you grab the diaper bag?

Mary: I grabbed the diaper bag and I grabbed some formula. No, wait a minute. I grabbed formula. I did not grab the diaper bag, because we were without diapers. I had to stop at Dollar General in Coldwater and get diapers. And bless Dianne Humphrey's heart. She and John took Wade because I didn't have a car seat. So they put him in their car.

As far as preparing for it, it is what it is. You know, it's just... If it comes again.

Diana: What about the community or the area? Do you think there's some preparations that we need to do in case there is something like this comes again?

Mary: I think our volunteer fire department staff has done everything possible. They are up to date. They do everything they possibly can. The State of Kansas needs to step up and get some more fire support. It is ridiculous how poorly we are funded and how poorly they can react to it. And I am extremely disappointed in them.

Diana: We didn't have any of our usual mutual aid. That's why they brought in the strike teams. They fight fire a different way than what we're used to fighting. But what about the other stuff that went on around town?

Mary: I got so tickled when that came on TV, that they were getting ready to evacuate Ashland, and that they were to go to Coldwater and Englewood was to go to Oklahoma.

Oklahoma's on fire too, people! I mean, where were people going to go? I felt a little sorry for Englewood people.

Diana: I think it was tough because there wasn't any place they could go.

Mary: Yes!

Diana: So, you said you went down to Buffalo. Did you stop in Buffalo at all? Or did you just turn turn left and...

Mary: I turned left and went east. There was a highway patrolman parked alongside, and I was following John and Diane by then. And John pulled in there to talk to him and he said we could get on to Coldwater.

Diana: So you didn't see any flames down that way?

Mary: No, just smoke. It was smoky. I don't know where we ran out of smoke.

Diana: It was hard to tell, wasn't it? That's kind of bad. Do you have any other thoughts about this experience? Is there anything that stands out in your mind or something that really touched your heart?

Mary: No. It's just the fact that we're going to be okay. We will be okay. I do not like the term "victim", because that indicates that we got

injured or we were affected by it. But I don't feel I was a victim at all. I was affected by it, yes, but it's not the end of the world. There's a lot worse things that can happen. We've got each other. Everybody still alive.

Yes, the cows. You miss them.

Diana: Do you think it would've been different if we'd had some loss of life or some injuries?

Mary: Oh, definitely. Definitely. Where those kids died in Texas? We had bought cows from that place and had been down there. And I can understand getting trapped in that mess. I feel so bad for them. The people that lost family members. But we're going to be OK.

Diana: What about your horses? Did you go have breathing treatments for your horses? How did that work?

Mary: I wasn't there for it actually. But we've got a niece that does it to her horses all the time. A lady came, I'm not sure where she was from, she came and gave all our horses breathing treatments and said there's a lot of black, they coughed up a lot of black stuff, one horse in particular. Her eyes were mattered a lot. She's okay now. They're all okay.

Diana: Is there anything that surprised you about the whole thing?

Mary: Why the horses were there. I guess it's because they were in corrals. We had some horses in a corral that had a round bale feeder and probably half or two-thirds of a round bale of grass hay in there. And that grass hay burned to the ground, and the horses didn't have any singed hair on them.

Diana: How'd that happen?

Mary: Yes, good question. I don't know. I mean the barn is burning, the barn was one side of the corral, and it burned down, and those horses, they were there. They didn't have a place to go. When I left, I probably should have turned them in the alfalfa. I didn't have time. I had no time but to get out.

Diana: Were they big flames, or were they across-the-ground type stuff?

Mary: I'm going to say there were two or three foot high flames coming at us.

Diana: Lots of smoke in the background?

Mary: Yes. Lots of smoke. Just black.

Diana: When you went to Sitka, were you driving through the fire?

Mary: I did not drive through fire. I know other people did. I did not. But I did see it go by Sitka Hill. And I called Steve Hazen. He was over there, and I said, "Get your stuff out of your house, it's coming your way."

Mary: Was he home? Yes, he had just gone home for some reason. Kelly was over at Sitka helping Heidi get her stuff out, somewhere in there. She said the same thing. They were out getting their horses and whatever, and that all of a sudden it was black. And she said, "We got to go."

Diana: Isn't it interesting, that all of us, when we saw the black smoke, decided it was time to leave. Until then we didn't feel like it was a big thing.

Mary: Yes, Kelly and Steve had come out to the house an hour and a half before I left and said, "We heard it was coming this way." We looked west, and I said, "I don't see anything coming at all." You could see the smoke north of us and you can see the smoke south of us. There was nothing to the west of us. Nothing! I said, "Go on and help somebody that needs it. We don't need it here, we're fine." An hour and a half later, we weren't.

Diana: That quick.

Mary: That quick. We had three dogs there, four dogs. They're fine. It didn't hurt them in the pens.

Diana: You have a gas plant south of you?

Mary: I didn't think about that, we do have a gas plant south of us.

Diana: But it's chat?

Mary: Yes, so there's no grass right around or anywhere close. There's oil wells. It just must

have burned through there. I think one of them burned some flame for a while. We could see it coming up out of the ground. It had a leak or something, but there wasn't anything to burn around it, so just let it burn away! Just knock itself out!

Diana: Is there anything else you can think of, that you'd like to include?

Mary: No, I think that's it. I had a lot of help come drag dead cattle. Kelly, Heidi, and Erin and a friend of hers. You know, everybody just came over and said, "What do you need done?"

Diana: So when Erin was over here helping, was she picking up calves that needed help or should that come later?

Mary: That came probably a day or two later. I think, is probably when that started. No, at that point in time she wasn't picking them up.

Diana: Whose idea was that?

Mary: I think that was her idea. I think she had an idea to help do that. And there's another lady there in Meade that had the facilities. She knew her and called her and bounced the idea off of her. Together, they said, "Yes, let's do that." Like she said, "We figured, you know, like ten or twelve calves." I think they got 106.

Diana: And how many survived out of the 106? Do you know?

Mary: She said something the other day and they did lose six or seven or something like that.

Diana: Did all of them become 4-H bucket calves?

Mary: No. Just a few, and it was not a 4-H project.

Diana: Right.

Mary: 4-H kids pitched in, but there were a lot of other people that pitched in and helped. Neat story that came out of it was, a little boy over at Meade. And I guess he has A.D.H.D pretty severely. He had his games and stuff. I think they live on the edge of town and they wanted to try a bucket calf. I think several people said, "No, they can't have that."

Erin said, "Yes, if it doesn't work we'll go get it. Who cares?" And I guess this little boy got up every morning and went fed this calf and every night went and fed this calf. He understood the responsibility of caring for an animal, it got him kind of out. He showed it at the fair! You know, his mom, I think, cried a lot of tears over how much it affected him and helped him.

Diana: So he's going to be a holdover?

Mary: I don't remember if they... I think so, I think they got to keep that calf. So with that part, there was a good thing. It taught a lot of kids a lot of responsibility and taking care of an animal and also helping people. It was good.

Diana: A win/win all the way around.

Mary: Every bit, every bit.