

Jim Daily

Diana: Today is March 27, 2018. What is your name?

Jim: Jim Daily.

Diana: And where do you live?

Jim: Ashland, Kansas.

Diana: And what is your occupation?

Jim: Farmer/rancher/crop adjuster/county commissioner.

Diana: Hey and how old are you?

Jim: Sixty-eight.

Diana: So when did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire hereafter referred to simply as "the fire"?

Jim: I was first aware of this as I was traveling to Iowa for crop adjusting school. My wife called and showed pictures of the fire.

Diana: And did you make it to your crop school?

Jim: I made it to my crop school, but I was worried about my family. So I turned around and drove back home immediately.

Diana: So how long did it take you to get back and what happened in that time that you were gone?

Jim: It took me 15 hours to drive back home. In that time frame, I learned, that my son and my wife had pretty much taken care of things here. The fire was terrible, but most of everything around Ashland and our place was saved. We did not lose any cattle. When I got back home, the fires were still burning. And we just went on from there.

Diana: So did your family evacuate or did they stay in town?

Jim: No. My family did evacuate. They went to Meade, through Coldwater. I think they had to go clear back around Bucklin and back over to Meade.

Diana: Were you in contact with the other commissioners while you were gone?

Jim: No, I was not. I got back in a time frame where I didn't have to be in contact with them.

Diana: So all your cattle were okay. Did you lose a lot of fence?

Jim: Yes, I lost a lot of fence and a lot of grass.

Diana: And did you have someplace to take your cattle?

Jim: Well, actually we did. We didn't lose some grass west of town, and we moved all our cattle west of town.

Diana: Okay, so once you got back, were you having to be involved as a commissioner?

Jim: Yes, we were involved on a daily basis. We had a meeting every morning with the team at the emergency management center, and they informed us what was developing and how they were handling the situation. They asked for our approval. They were doing a great job.

Diana: Did you have to make a lot of decisions?

Jim: Not so many decisions, as to just make sure that we were there for them if they needed something and that we could get it for them.

Diana: Give me an idea of things that you would get for them.

Jim: Well, they wanted to make sure that the financial assistance would be there if needed and we could back that up. We said we could. Anyway, we could as long as everybody was safe.

Diana: So did you have to spend a lot of time taking care of your own stuff or did you go out and help look over the county to see what kind of damage was done?

Jim: We pretty much went out over the county and helped with damage that needed taking care of.

Diana: What were some of your thoughts or what kind of things did you see when you were going out?

Jim: Devastation. There are no words that can explain what this county looked like at that point in time. I hate to paraphrase everything, but it did look like a war zone. There's just no way to explain it. I mean it was terrible.

Diana: Did you travel most of the county? Did you like start on one end and go to the other?

Jim: Yes. We traveled all of it.

Diana: Did you do it as three commissioners together or did you do it individually?

Jim: No, separately. We couldn't travel together because it wasn't a formal meeting or anything. So we pretty much kind of did that on our own.

Diana: What type of help could you offer people? Or what did the county have to do? Like there were some burned bridges, there were different roads. Did you have to do some reconstruction?

Jim: Well, no. Actually, we lucked out on that part of it as being a county. The infrastructure is pretty well maintained, as far as what we can do as a county; we offered our services to anybody and everybody. We helped clean up Englewood after the fire and stuff because it went through there pretty bad. Anything else that we could do, we did for the farmers and ranchers.

Diana: Okay, let's go back to the fire. Was county equipment involved in fighting the fire?

Jim: Yes.

Diana: What type of equipment was used?

Jim: Our maintainers, which are road graders, personnel that wanted to go out and help with that were all involved. Our tankers were involved in that. Our dozer work was involved.

Anything that we could do, we provided.

Diana: So do you have one tanker?

Diana: Two.

Diana: How much water do they carry?

Jim: Approximately, 6 to 8 thousand gallons each.

Diana: And then you have one bulldozer.

Jim: Yes.

Diana: And then graders?

Jim: We have six graders. Now how many was actually involved, I do not know, but probably three of those were involved.

Diana: Are they like scattered out throughout the county? So would they have been in a place where they could have been possibly in the fire?

Jim: Oh yes, they were in it. They were right in the middle of the fire in Englewood while that was going on.

Diana: So no damage was done to the equipment?

Jim: Some damage, yes.

Diana: What type of stuff?

Jim: Well, the heat got so intense that a few lines were melted and things like that but nothing severe. We lost no patrols; we lost no equipment.

Diana: So you didn't really know there was fire coming but since your son was here and your wife, what type of things did they do to make sure that your property and cattle were safe?

Jim: Well, they kind of maintained where the fire was. My son brought the cattle down to the pens and put them in the pens and stuff where there was no grass actually. And the fire just went like three or four hundred feet to the east of them, which saved their lives. It saved all of our cattle and basically that's about it. I mean, they just did everything they could do to provide safety for our livestock.

Diana: So once the fire was over, did you have hay come? Did you need hay?

Jim: We needed hay. We got a few loads of hay.

Diana: Did you get some of the fencing material?

Jim: Not very much of the fencing material.

Diana: Did you take advantage of the Community Foundation and the KLA that was offering help to people?

Jim: We got a little money from the Community Foundation; we got nothing from the KLA or anything like that.

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

Jim: I guess coming back and seeing a black, scorched county and not realizing how bad it could look

actually.

Diana: Which way did you come? Did you come from Bucklin or did you come from Coldwater?

Jim: Yes, from Bucklin. I drove all night and that morning when I got back, the road was still blocked from Bucklin. They had just opened it up, and I got through to get back home. We could not believe coming over those hills and looking down on the county, thinking, "This is pure hell."

Diana: So lots of cattle? Could you see dead deer or anything close to the highway?

Jim: Not very many animals were close to the highway, no.

Diana: So when you turned the corner and came west, and there were no houses... But you have some land out here too. Did you stop and check your land?

Jim: No, we had no cattle out there. I did not even think about that; I wanted to get home to make sure everybody was okay at the house.

Diana: Then driving into town, just on the east side of town, what were your feelings about that? Because you've grown up here, right?

Jim: Yeah.

Diana: Those places have been a part of your life.

Jim: They were all gone. You just couldn't believe it. I mean, there were no houses, no nothing, it looked terrible.

Diana: So you've been around here for most of your life, and you've seen wildfires before or grass fires. How does a typical grass fire act? Could you compare the two?

Jim: This was a range fire, this wasn't a grass fire. With the winds and everything that happened, this was like the devil coming out of hell. This wasn't a grass fire; it was terrible. I don't know how to describe it. There are no words that can describe it. It was just something that could not be controlled. The winds and with everything that fueled the fire the big grass and the CRP, the no-till farming and everything else and the winds, there was just no stopping this fire. It was like a rage. It was not a grass fire.

Diana: So the first meeting that you went to, had they already ordered the strike teams?

Jim: Yes.

Diana: And were they already coming in? Did you have anything to do with those people?

Jim: We just met with them every day and they coordinated with us, the county commissioners.

Diana: Did you go out and navigate with them?

Jim: No, we did not. It was just a meeting twice a day; one in the morning and one in the evening and not all the time in the evenings. We usually had two meetings a day.

Diana: What type of things did they have you talk about?

Jim: They were just telling us what they had done and how they proceeded in trying to maintain the fire, where the fires were still hot, and what they were doing to try to control them.

Diana: So was there fire for a lot of days and in a lot of different places? The original fire was on Monday, so did they still have big fires on Wednesday?

Jim: Yes. I can't remember the total days and how long the fires actually lasted.

Diana: They released them on Saturday.

Jim: So they went on for a week but then the fires are still burning after they left in some spots but not they were mostly trees and things like that.

Diana: Did you go out and watch them fight fire?

Jim: No, we didn't because we didn't feel like we needed to be in their way and we didn't know exactly where to be or what to do. So we left that up to the people that know what they're doing. We were just moral support back home giving them all the support we could where we needed to give it.

Diana: So did you take supplies out to people because Englewood didn't have electricity. So what type of things did you take?

Jim: Matter of fact, we took a lot of supplies to Englewood: water, food, and clothing. They set up a shelter down there in the high school, the old high school. Two or three times we took water down there to them and whatever they needed.

Diana: So they had trouble getting electricity back? Did it take a while?

Jim: Yes.

Diana: A lot of poles down?

Jim: Yes.

Diana: So all of the donations that came in, were you amazed at what type of things were donated?

Jim: I couldn't believe it; I mean there still are a few things around. There was so much donated that you couldn't believe the generosity of the people.

Diana: What were you the most surprised that people donated?

Jim: I think everything. Clothing was phenomenal I mean they just got rid of some of the excess clothing the other day there at the city building. So, clothing and water, anything like that. The fencing materials came in here by bundles, and the hay. There's a list that would go on forever and ever. I just can't believe what people brought.

Diana: Did you take advantage of the volunteers that came? Did you have anybody come and help you?

Jim: Yes, I did.

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

Jim: They rolled up wire. We had a group from Minnesota come in here that helped me. They were from all over, but the group that helped me was from Minnesota. Ten kids went out and helped me roll wire for two days, boys and girls. I think this story needs to be put out there. When they came down here, those kids had to buy their way to come down here.

Diana: Were they 4-H'ers or church kids?

Jim: FFA. They had to put up a hundred dollars, but when it was all said and done, they got enough money donated that they didn't have to give their money and when they got down here and we got done rolling up that wire, these kids tried to give me that money.

Diana: So how long were they here?

Jim: Just the weekend. They got here on Friday evening. They helped me on Saturday and Sunday morning, and they left Sunday afternoon.

Diana: Were they part of the kids they took on a tour of the county?

Jim: Yes, they were.

Diana: And where did they take them?

Jim: They took them to Gardiner's; they took them up by the Clark County Lake, the basin. I think that was only three places, I can't remember. I think those are the only three places they took them. They toured a little bit of the county, of course.

Diana: What were some of the comments? Probably none of them had been to Kansas before.

Jim: No. They couldn't believe what it looked like down here.

Diana: As in flat?

Jim: Yes, but they loved it! They really like the territory and everything, and of course, those kids up there had heard about the deer and stuff that were down here. They didn't get to see them, of course, but they thought about that and things like that. But they really liked the area, they really did. I still stay in touch with two or three of the boys that came out here.

Diana: Any plans for them to come back?

Jim: No, I don't think so.

Diana: Were they high school kids?

Jim: Yes.

Diana: So who were some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful to you as a farmer or to the county or to the whole community?

Jim: Well, as a farmer, Ashland Feed and Seed has to take credit for kind being the head of that and taking in the donations of the feed and stuff. I don't think we can overlook the Ashland High School and their staff. They worked hard. The school provided a home for all those people and fed them. And of course, our emergency management team did a great job. Our firefighters did an excellent job.

You just can't praise them enough, I don't think, and all the firefighters that came in here. I think our three fire departments are probably the best in the world.

Diana: Did you go take advantage of the meals at the school or at the camp?

Jim: No, but whoever ran the camp did an excellent job for those people. I don't know who provided all that service down there. All the food that was donated down there was excellent.

Diana: They had lots of food come in.

Jim: Oh, God.

Diana: What kind of effect, physical, financial, or emotional, has the fire had on you or on the community?

Jim: Well, I think the financial part of it. If it wouldn't have been for the assistance; it would have been devastating. A lot of people wouldn't have been able to rebuild. The mental portion of it is, you know, it's terrible, especially for the people that lost their homes and a lot of cattle. That will always be with them. Every time you smell smoke, you're going to be sitting on the edge now for quite a while.

Diana: So did you help bury cattle?

Jim: We went and helped bury cattle at Bouziden's and stuff, but I didn't bury a lot of cattle.

Diana: Did you shoot any?

Jim: No, I did not.

Diana: Had the game wardens taken care of that pretty much?

Jim: Game wardens, and I think some other people assisted them. I'm not sure exactly who all did that.

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

Jim: Anything? Well, with all the negatives there's always going to be a positive. I think it shows that there are people that care and probably agriculture is one of the greatest industries to be in because of everything that was donated and to help people survive and everything. There is nothing better than that.

It's just a mainstay of America. Agriculture is it because people care so much about one another. So there's a positive in all of that. That would be it, I think.

Diana: So how much, do you think, the volunteers coming in so quickly, even while the fire was going on, helped the people of the communities deal with the aftermath of the fire? Do you think that was a positive thing?

Jim: Oh, yeah. I think that helped a lot. There were some groups who came here that talked to people and helped them with their mental abilities and stuff to deal with something this devastating. I think they did a great job. I think a lot of people appreciated it and it helped them a lot. I know some people that really thought about that.

Diana: So have most people got most of their fences rebuilt? Is the county moving forward?

Jim: Oh, it's moving forward in a whirlwind. The fences are probably 95 percent done. So everybody is moving forward and trying not to look back. Hopefully, this drought will be over, and everybody can get to going really good again.

Diana: We recently had another fire on March 5th that kind of started out the same way as this fire a year ago did. What were your first thoughts when you heard about that fire?

Jim: Well, the worst part about this deal is, a year ago on March 5th, I was headed to Iowa for a crop adjusting training. The last school, I was headed to Missouri for some more training/school when I got the notice of the fire. But they had it under control; I found out because I turned around and started heading home. They said, "No, forget about it. We've got everything done."

You know, one year later and you get another fire on the same date, almost, and at the same time, you don't know what to think. You think, "My goodness, what else could happen to this community to tear it down."

Diana: Do you think we were more prepared for this one? Things worked a little bit better?

Jim: I don't know. I think we're prepared better. I just think we got lucky and this was the type of fire that we could control very quickly. I think we're prepared a lot better than we were. And I think the state is prepared. They've learned what they need to do to help the people in rural communities to fight fire.

Diana: So have you been involved in a lot of seminars or conferences or just meetings where they've talked about the aftermath of the fire and how things could go better? Or what needs to improve?

Jim: We've been involved in two or three meetings, and we met with the general from Fort Riley who's actually head of the Emergency Management Team. What they learned, they had no help for us out here in rural America with like choppers and stuff that could drop water. I think we're better now, and I think we learned that from the last fire. I think that in Oklahoma they learned that through those fires here in recent times. They're getting that help quicker and faster where it's needed. So yes, they've learned a lot from this fire here in Clark County. The Starbuck Fire, I think, opened everybody's eyes that they needed to get on the ball.

Diana: So what can you do, or have you done, to prepare for another fire as a citizen and as a commissioner?

Jim: Well, as commissioners we're helping the volunteer fire departments with better equipment. Everything we can do for the volunteer fire departments.

Diana: Like what kind of stuff? Did you get them new equipment?

Jim: They've bought two new trucks now, and to help just maintain everything in a better fashion. Other than that, we were just behind them 100 percent.

Diana: So what about as a community person, as a farmer, what type of things can be done to prepare for another fire?

Jim: Well, I really haven't done all that much, other than try to get the FSA and the NRCS to let us graze the CRP or do controlled burning maybe to help, so there isn't so much fuel out there for a fire. I think that's really, really important. They either let us graze that or hay it or get the stubble down where it's not so tall because I think that was one of the major factors in the fire. That really hurt us, and we couldn't control it. There was so much CRP, and it was so big.

Diana: And it's back up there now.

Jim: Yes, and back up there now.

Diana: So what about the cattle? Because they have some plans or programs to replace cattle, but they all had caps on them. Have they kind of changed those?

Jim: They have changed caps.

Diana: If you were to have to evacuate, if you weren't here and your wife needed to take certain things, have you spoken about what type of heirlooms you'd want to take?

Jim: No, we have not. Just get out and save your life. Forget the heirlooms. I mean, if you haven't got time, don't worry about it. You can create more memories; you just can't bring back life.

Diana: So when you were traveling back home, what type of thoughts were you having? Were you keeping in contact with your family?

Jim: I was keeping in contact. Thoughts were rapid, I mean, not knowing what to find, not knowing what to expect. It was probably the only thing that kept me going. I drove 15 hours one way and came back 15 hours.

Jim: Without stopping?

Jim: Well, I have to stop for like five hours because there was a tornado in Iowa and they wouldn't let me leave the town! It's crazy, but I left and went home.

Diana: So did you listen to the radio on your way home or anything?

Jim: No, I did not. I did not want to listen to the radio because I thought that would really upset me. I just kept in contact. I'd stop when I had to stop for gas; I'd call my wife to see what was going on and then I just drove.

Diana: So was it better or worse than what you expected?

Jim: Oh, it was worse, a lot worse. There are no words to describe it; It was terrible. You could still see the fires and stuff blazing around when I get home.

Diana: Did you get home in the dark or did you get home in daylight?

Jim: I got home in the evening, and in the dusk you could still see those fires down south.

Diana: There was a lot of smoke in the air still?

Jim: Oh, terrible.

Diana: Smell?

Jim: The smell lasted of course for a week or longer until it started raining. That was ten days after the fire, even after the rain. It affected you driving up through those pastures and looking around. You'd come home and just cough. It was terrible.

Diana: When you were building fence or tearing down fence, did you stir up a lot of ash?

Jim: It was terrible. You were just black at the end of the day.

Diana: So what about those kids that came and helped? Did they have extra clothes or shoes? Were they prepared?

Jim: They were prepared. And what they didn't have, we got for them. Anything we could, we got for them.

Diana: Did they stay at the camp?

Jim: Yes.

Diana: I know they had lots of gloves and stuff there. Did they take advantage of that?

Jim: Oh yes, there was an abundance of that, I mean it was crazy how much stuff was down there.

Diana: Again, all donated stuff?

Jim: Yes.

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

Jim: I hope I never see it again. Like everybody else, I don't want to go through this again in my lifetime. Other than that, I'm just glad nobody was killed. Animals can be replaced. It was bad. It was terrible. I knew there was one life lost, but it could have been a lot worse. A lot of people were very, very lucky and I'm grateful for that. I just wish, the next time, if it ever does happen, I hope people don't take the chances they took because we may not be that fortunate again.

Diana: Do you think it was wise to evacuate the town?

Jim: Sure.

Diana: Do you think it should have been a longer evacuation than what they had?

Jim: Oh, I think they pretty much had a handle on it. I think they were all right in doing what they did.

Diana: Were you amazed at the number of people that did evacuate?

Jim: Yeah. I was. I figured everybody would stay, or more people would stay. I'll put it that way.

Diana: A lot of people were antsy to come back early.

Jim: Oh gosh, yeah. Sure you would be. You wanted to see if you still had a home. So I can't blame them for that.