

Max and Marge Meuli

**Sidebar quote: "The only one thing I wanted out of that house is your mother, and I got her."**

Diane: Today is February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018. What is your name?

Marge: Marge Meuli.

Diane: And yours?

Max: Max Meuli.

Diane: Where do you live?

Marge: We live at 3046 U.S. Highway 183, 17 miles southeast of Ashland.

Diane: And what is your occupation?

Marge: I'm a retired rancher/homemaker.

Max: I'm a retired banker and rancher.

Diane: How old are you?

Max: I'm 82.

Marge: I'm 81.

Diane: When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as "the fire?"

Marge: When I got an alert on my telephone that said, "Evacuate Englewood." And I thought, what in the world?

Max: That was the 6<sup>th</sup>.

Diane: Yeah, on the 6<sup>th</sup>, Monday the 6<sup>th</sup>. Yes, and how did you first become aware of the fire?

Max: Same time.

Diane: You got alerts. Did you go outside and look to see?

Max: I don't know if we did right then, did we?

Marge: I don't know. Probably.

Diane: And then did you get the message to evacuate Ashland?

Marge: That's right, we did, on the phone, yeah.

Diane: And then did you start thinking, "We should do something?"

Marge: Well, yeah, we should start looking. And that's when we drove up and down the highway to see what we could see.

Diane: So, from where you live, there really wasn't any reason to evacuate yet, right?

Marge: Not yet.

Diane: Did the police officers, county sheriff come by and tell you about the fire on Monday?

Marge: No.

Diane: When was the first time that you saw smoke and fire? On Tuesday?

Marge: On Tuesday, about mid-morning.

Diane: And where was it from your house?

Marge: It was west of our house, across the highway, and it was coming from the west.

Diane: Okay, so you live on the east side of Highway 183?

Marge: Right, about half mile down the lane.

Max: You said it came from the west, we could see it on three sides. We could see the west, maybe that was later in the evening, but we could see the north and we could see the east.

Marge: Starting on Tuesday.

Diane: But on Monday, you could see all that, right?

Max: You could see it on Tuesday.

Marge: Yeah.

Diane: You could see it, but it wasn't anywhere close, right?

Marge: No. On Monday, we kept driving up and down the highway.

Diane: How far north did you go?

Marge: Oh, almost to Sitka.

Diane: And then how far south?

Marge: We didn't go south. There wasn't a fire there yet.

Diane: So, and you could see the fire that was over by Ashland, by Pike's and Randall's?

Max: We couldn't see the fire at Ashland. We could see the smoke and we could see the fire north of Sitka. We didn't feel like going clear to Sitka. And then we could see east, way over on the horizon we could see nine fires on the horizon over there.

Diane: Were some of them, do you think, in Oklahoma?

Max: Probably. Could have been. Although, we're only 2 ½ miles from the Oklahoma line. It could have been, but it wouldn't be very far into Oklahoma.

Diane: So on Tuesday when you started seeing fire, you saw it on the west. Did you also see it to the north and the east? Because there was fire to your east?

Max: Yes. We got up Tuesday morning, and we saw it on three sides and nothing to the south of us. We didn't have electricity for a while and we didn't have any water. So, we went to Buffalo and ate breakfast. We thought we were safe.

Diane: Do you have any idea when you might have lost electricity?

Marge: Sometime Monday.

Diane: Early, in the evening?

Max: Probably all day Monday.

Marge: Yeah, probably most of the day.

Diane: Do you have a generator?

Max: No.

Diane: So, you went to Buffalo. Were you able to come back?

Max: Oh yes, there wasn't anything south of us at that time.

Marge: Yes. We came back and there happened to be a highway patrolman sitting up fairly close to our driveway. Max stopped and talked to him, and I began to see these clouds in the west, you know. I got a little nervous. And then he had some kind of a radar screen on his dash that could tell where the fires were. He told us, "I have a new fire coming up from the west and no one to fight it because all the firemen are still trying to save Ashland and everything else." So, he said, "You'd better get out of here."

Diane: Is that when you decided to evacuate?

Marge: Yes. We ran down to the house and grabbed some clothes and things, which we should have had all packed, all packed and ready. We had a few things ready. But anyway, we took off.

Diane: Do you know what time it was Tuesday when you did that?

Max: Probably 10:30 or 11.

Diane: Could you see the flames coming toward the highway then?

Marge: Yeah.

Max: We saw them coming towards the highway and by the time we got – I took a suitcase out to throw in the trunk of the car, and it was at our yard and got in our yard. Of course, the grass isn't very tall, so it came around our house on three sides. I went back in, and I said, "Marge, grab everything you want. We're getting out of here." And she says, "Okay."

Diane: So, had it pretty much surrounded your house before your left?

Max: It hadn't got on the east side yet. We had it on two sides, on the north side, it didn't get clear to the house.

Diane: Do you have trees around your house?

Max: We have them on the north side. What saved our tree row, though, we had an ice storm last winter, and we just had it all cleared out. Stan Hazen came, and he cleared it all out, so there wasn't a bunch of brush down there. We didn't have much damage in that tree row. Now there's another tree row that's not close to the house. It's on the south. We had a lot of damage there.

Diane: So, when you evacuated, you went south, that's the only choice you had?

Marge: We went south. We knew that that was clear and so we turned south. But the fire was jumping the highway at that time. So, we drove through flames of about 30 feet or something, you know, because it really was coming in. Then we were safe and we stayed in Woodward a couple of nights. Some people thought that our house had gone because they saw some sudden poofs of fire. It was probably a woodpile or something; we didn't have any damage to our house.

Diane: So, when people told you that they thought your house wasn't there, what were your thoughts that went through your head?

Marge: Well, we had already called, I had already called Mark Luckie and asked him what was going on and he said it was okay. In fact, he and Jim Barth and his son-in-law and maybe Jesse, and I don't know who all, came and watered down some things at our house after the bulk of the fire had gone through. When that fire crept up to our house, it was like a black, just black on the ground. It was just like something you see in the movies that just kind of comes in fast, you know. And we thought, oh, my goodness.

Diane: So, it was mostly small flames, not really the big jumping flames like they had west of town?

Marge: Not around the house, but it was out in the pasture and down when we crossed the highway.

Max: We don't have any bushes near our house. We took them out for the wrong reason, primarily, just – I don't like varmints under the bushes near the house. We did that a long time ago, and that saved us.

Diane: So, did you have any cattle that were yours that were in your pastures?

Marge: No.

Diane: Do you have any wheat fields around your house?

Max: Yes. Nearby, about a mile away.

Diane: So, did you not come back until you had electricity? Is that part of the reason you were down there?

Max: We came back home before we had it. Or we thought we'd get it pretty soon. I don't remember.

Diane: So, what were your first thoughts when you were driving back from Woodward and saw all the burnt...

Max: You know, we had an interesting thing – we had a real perspective on that fire that most people didn't have. Eight o'clock that Tuesday morning our son called us and said his grandson that was married to Kathrine Everett, and her brother was one of the kids running up and down...

Diane: That got caught in the fire in Texas?

Max: Yeah, those three people. And we got that call at 8 Tuesday morning. So, I didn't give a rip about the house. My daughter called when we were in Woodward and said, "Well, you should have made a list."

I said, "The only one thing I wanted out of that house is your mother and I got her." So, we weren't concerned when they said our house went. It was okay with us. Wherever your perspective is, and ours was – "We're just dad-gum fine. They can have our house." And we didn't lose anything. The main thing that kind of surprised us is that the house wasn't smoky.

Diane: It wasn't?

Marge: No. We didn't have any smoke in the house, or smoke damage, or smell. Not in the closets. It was amazing. Our house is kind of tight. It's stucco and cement blocks.

Diane: How close did the fire actually get to your house? Was it right to your doorstep?

Marge: It came right up to the foundation on three sides. Right up to the cement porch.

Diane: Did they have to fix, like, electrical lines to your house or anything like that?

Max: You know, the only damage we had was the TV line that came down and went underground. It burned the cable about six inches. We didn't have any TV. They came out and fixed that. That's the only damage we had at the house.

Diane: But nothing to like, a water pump, so your water and your electricity came back fine, just not the TV.

Marge: Yeah.

Diane: Now, what's your most vivid memory of the fire?

Marge: I think mine is that rolling smoke. Rolling and boiling. Just boiling, you know, brown and orange and white, and coming in on us that day. That's probably my most vivid memory.

Max: When we were driving out, before we got out of our yard, we were driving through smoke and had to see outside. Once we got out of our yard and we went a little farther south, the road from our house to the highway, is mowed. It wasn't like a lawn, but the grass was only 4 or 5 inches long, so it wasn't a lot of smoke once we kind of got south. But I guess what got me was the speed with which that stuff came. When I saw it up at the

highway patrol, and he pointed it out, we looked over there and saw it and I thought, well, we've probably got 15, 20, 30 minutes. I'm not kidding you, we had five minutes, whatever we threw in our suitcase and I went out and put one suitcase in and looked. Man, it was there.

Diane: So, how was the wind? Was it blowing as fast as it was Monday? Was it picking up?

Marge: The wind was really blowing hard, yes.

Max: It was blowing – our house, we lost our shingles on the house, by the dozens. You know, we've lost a shingle or two in the 30 years we've lived there. But when we drove out, and we looked back, the shingles that didn't go off were up like this. Instead of down, they were up. Not the whole thing, but what, 20% of our shingles were up, and probably 5% ended up on the ground. And so, it was blowing hard, or we wouldn't have lost that many shingles.

Diane: So, did you have anyone come help you? Volunteers that came? Did you lose fences and stuff?

Max: Afterwards? Yes. One day we had some people come and help.

Marge: I think we had two different times that we had some people that came and there were a variety of ages. A mother and a young boy and some teenagers. They helped in the tree row a little bit trying to clean out some of that stuff.

Diane: So, you guys have both lived out here a long time and seen lots of different prairie fires or grass fires, and probably seen some controlled burns, too. Is there any comparison between this fire and what is traditionally a prairie fire?

Marge: No. I think this was so much worse because the wind was blowing so hard and it was rolling so fast. And this – it's something we've never seen, it moved so fast.

Max: I don't know either. I'd have to say when you look east out of our house, you look a long way and there's the horizon, I don't know, you can see what, 5 miles, 4 miles, I don't know?

Marge: Oh, no, probably 10.

Max: A long way, and just to see those fires, there was nine of them. And then there would be a space. I'll just tell you how far, we've seen a glow when Beverly York's daughter called her mother one time, maybe just a few months before that, or something and said, we may have to evacuate over here. She's about 20 miles from us, and about the same distance from the Oklahoma line. So, Beverly called and told us. We looked out our window. We could see the glow. We didn't see any flames. Now, this time, there'd be a fire, then space, and a fire, and there was nine of them that we could see on the horizon.

Diane: And you could actually see the flames instead of just the glow?

Marge: You could see the flames.

Max: You could see the flames; nine different spots. I don't know what was in between them, but there they were, and it was kind of amazing.

Marge: Yeah, we took turns Monday night kind of staying awake, and we'd go drive up and down the highway and look out and see it. We took some pictures. Also, we met some of our neighbors along the road that were

also watching, Jenny and Jamie Hart. We saw one fire that was coming down the ditch a little bit south of Sitka. And it wasn't too far from Beverly York's house. So, I called it in, and I said, "Does anybody know that we have a fire coming down the ditch?" And she said, "Yes, we do, but I don't have anybody to fight it." We found out later that Kenny Dome and Jamie Hart got their tractors and disks and plowed around and saved it. Beverly has a propane tank sitting in her yard, so I thought, "Oh my goodness." But they took care of it.

Diane: So, Monday evening, you're seeing all these fires around and everything, and you're staying up and watching it. How did that affect your emotions? Were you too "up" to sleep, or did you think you were gonna have to leave? What were some of your thoughts?

Max: I was a little naïve as to how bad it was. That seems silly, but I never was panicked about it. Never was concerned other than... I was more concerned about having electricity and water. I mean, I knew it was bad. I didn't know it was this bad.

Marge: We were watching it, you know. But our kids had called us and said, "Evacuate. Go to Buffalo." Well, we found out later that Buffalo evacuated. So, we were probably all right just to stay where we were at that time.

Diane: Tuesday, when you went to Woodward, did you have any trouble getting down there? Because they had those fires over by Laverne and May that were coming that way.

Max: We saw where they were. We saw where they were when we went to Woodward, but the fires were east or someplace. We didn't have any trouble after we left the ranch, did we? Except right there just a quarter mile from our entrance. We went through – the only time we went through flames. And the flames, like she said, it wasn't a big distance. We could see the other side. We weren't going into anything; we just went through it.

Diane: So, when you returned, did you see any of the strike teams that had come to help? Were there any fires still burning down in your area of the county?

Marge: Well, like I said, Mark Luckie, and the Fosters and some others came and kind of watered down some things. When we came home there was a group that was watering down the tree row south of our house, and we stopped, and I asked the man where he was from, and he said Emporia. And he said, "I went around and felt all of your trees north of the house to see if there was any fire or anything burning and there wasn't," so he said he thought we were safe.

Diane: So, did you go to town and eat, like at the high school when they offered meals, or go to the camp when the volunteers were there?

Max: We were at the camp when the volunteers were there, but not to eat. We took out something to help.

Marge: We took some things.

Max: Ours is kind of a deal – we kind of had a few people left over, and the younger people were out doing a lot of stuff. We had a lady that was in her 60's, and she had her grandson, and he was seven. But they were kind of close to the house and wondered if they could come in. And I said, yeah, you're not too far from our house and our house is in good shape. You can come over there and rest. Then we had a couple of teenagers. I don't know how they got with us. And her daughter was gonna be with us, and she went with another group. She said we had two groups. If we did, there were two guys that were working, they did a lot of work for us and went someplace else the next day, I know that. Because I told them, "If you get a chance to go someplace else, go to them because our tree row – that's not a big deal."

Diane: So basically that was what they were doing was working on your tree row? Did you have any fences close to your house that needed to be taken down?

Marge: We lost almost all our fences and pastures.

Diane: And were there cattle in your pastures?

Max: Yes. But they weren't ours.

Marge: They weren't ours, they were Mark Luckie's. I think they had moved them. I think they'd moved them off to the wheat.

Max: He didn't lose any of them.

Marge: I think he had 13 cows, older cows on our place, just out behind the house. And we had three horses at the time. I don't know where they went, but they were all fine. Probably went to the wheat field, maybe.

Max: They had been up by the barn. The barn didn't go.

Marge: No, the barn didn't go.

Diane: So, you didn't lose any outside structures, just shingles off your roof and electricity.

Marge: No, we didn't. Yes, and all the fence posts.

Diane: When they were feeding people in town and at the Christian camp, they closed that, and then they moved to the Methodist Church, did you get in on volunteering to help make some of those meals, or donate food or anything?

Marge: No, we took some cookies and something else. I can't remember. At one time we went...

Max: We went to Dodge for some reason, we brought back a ton of doughnuts. Two big boxes of doughnuts. That's about all we did up there.

Diane: So, who were some of the people or agencies that were most helpful during the fire, or after the fire, that you know about?

Max: We got some financial help from the foundation.

Diane: Did you take advantage of the Community Foundation and the KLA?

Max: Initially, and I said, "Well, I can take care of it." And they said, well it was the Kansas Livestock Association and the Ashland Foundation. They said, "That's what everybody tells us. These people that donate, they don't want it going all to one person, so put your name in. If you've got six miles of fence, somebody else got 100, they're gonna get more than you are, but you ought to get something." So we did. We got some from both foundations. From the foundation and from the Livestock Association. After we got paid for the fence and everything, I sent that back money back to both of them. I mean, I appreciated what they'd done, I had enough money to pay it, so I just sent it back.



Diane: Did you take advantage of any of the donated barbed wire or fencing material that came? Did you use any of that?

Max: I think maybe – when we built the fences, we hired Mark Luckie to do it because he was having to do his, too. I think he put some posts in ours that I hadn't seen before and I said, "Where did you get those?" And he said they were donated. But, I just hired him to handle it. He had to get people to handle his own and he had some of his ranch that wasn't damaged. But he had about three crews working. I don't know that they got any hay, but if they did, Mark never told me. Not that he would have. But I know he got some posts because I asked him, "Where did you get those posts?" And that's what he told me, so that's about all I can tell you.

Diane: So, you've been able to replace all your fences, and you're back 100%? The pastures have kind of come back?

Marge: Yeah. They came back and the weeds have come back, too. Everything is dry again.

Diane: Can you perceive of anything positive that resulted from the fire?

Max: I think it gave everybody a new perspective on community and life. It's a pretty hard lesson to learn, but I'll tell you, there are lots of places in the world that have it a lot worse than we had, and were very – you know, it really didn't matter to us, whatever happened, just so we didn't lose a life.

Marge: And our story is very small compared to others that lost, like the Giles' three houses, and the Gardiner's livestock and everything. Ours is just a very small story, but it was kind of scary at the time. One thing that impressed me, though, is all the hay that rolled into town, and all the volunteers and where they were from. You know, way off, and it was just amazing.

Max: We had them from Pennsylvania and Michigan, weren't they? I think they were Michigan.

Marge: I think Michigan. And we had the other group that was Nebraska, I think. Anyway, but, you know it was a nice impressive story that Steve Hazen took a load of hay to Montana when they had their fires, you know, reciprocal. And I thought, "People are just good." I wanted to write to Donald Trump and say, "America is great out here!"

Diane: What effect, physical, financial and emotional, which one, or all of them, have impacted the community the most, and what's the long-term effect of the fire, in your opinion?

Marge: Physical, emotional or financial.

Diane: Do you think we're gonna have the effects of this fire around for a long time?

Max: I think the physical will be taken care of. So, you're talking emotionally. I don't know.

Marge: To those that lost the most, probably emotional.

Max: When I've talked to people, they are positive. Our life, and you've got to go your way initially, and then, well, let's dig in, and it's done.

Marge: And I don't know about financial for other people, what they had. Ours turned out pretty well.

Diane: But what about the community? Do you think financially we'll be okay?

Max: Oh yeah.

Marge: Oh yeah, yes, I think so.

Max: We've got a lot of other things affecting the economics of the community other than that. The drought, for example, right now and some other things. So, everything's gonna be okay. They're close. And I don't want people to think that we're a special community because I know, Sheriff Ketron and stuff where they had a lot of damage in the city, people pulled together. I've got a cousin in Houston that called me during this, and I called him when he was underwater down there. I mean, there was a lot of help every place. People pull together in a disaster. They're all together. So, it's nice to see it, and it's there.

Diane: Unexpected though, wasn't it, to have all those people come from different areas?

Marge: It was.

Max: Oh, yeah. I guess most of it got picked up on social media. Facebook and that kind of thing they got the word out. Otherwise, you know, there's lots going on at that time and the world wouldn't have even heard about it, you know, hurricanes and other things. It was amazing. And some of their tales, you need to talk to some of them. You probably will, I suppose, I don't know where you go to find anything.

Diane: We're hoping. So, what can you do, or have you done, to prepare for another future fire or emergency? Some things have you said, next time, we'll do this?

Marge: Next time, I think, if we have any lead time, we'll probably have our suitcase better packed to go. But, I double-checked to be sure I was still on the emergency list to call on the phone. Because where we live, when we're without electricity and water and everything, we are not sure what's going on. That gives me the perspective. They do a weather call, too, so that's neat.

Diane: So, what about the community preparing for another emergency?

Max: Well, I think, in talking to the people, the firefighters, they're saying on TV that they're learning that when they get a fire, they're gonna hit it with everything. All kinds of communities are coming in, that's what I'm picking up. They're not gonna have just one community out there, particularly in this dry deal we have now. So if we get a fire at our house, I expect Buffalo will show up, and Ashland will show up, and Englewood will show up, and maybe Protection. I mean, the whole world's coming to get that out before it gets out of hand. I think we learned something there, and they did. We've had a fire at our place one other time, though, and Buffalo was there, and Ashland was there, and I'm not too sure that Protection wasn't there, but I know Buffalo was because I know one of the guys at Buffalo. And it was a windy day. If it had gotten away, it could have been a disaster, too. They never figured out how that started. So, I think communities are better prepared. I mean, nobody wanted that to happen, so, the best way to stop fires is to get them when they're small and hit them hard.

Marge: And then, I'm sure the people that were in charge of EMS and the Christian camp, and so forth, they've learned some things and they're gonna be ready next time. They did a good job this time, but they'll be more ready next time, I think because now they know what's going on and what to do.

Diane: Better prepared?

Marge: Better prepared, yeah.

Max: It was kind of interesting, though. We used to live in Canyon City, Colorado, and we have a son that's there. So, I saw two fire trucks from Canyon City, Colorado. Just saw them go by, you know, didn't know anything about them. I thought, well, if I catch them someplace I'll talk to them, but I never did. I told my son about it, and he didn't know who was there, but he bumped into one of them someplace and he called and said, "Those people who fought this said we're the greatest community in the world." He said, "They were well treated. They said they wanted to move there."

Marge: They were taken care of and well fed.

Max: Yeah, man, they thought that was fantastic. They said, so. They were used to fighting forest fires, not these kinds of fires. I heard that directly from other people.