

**Sidebar Quote:** First time in my 39 years as a volunteer fireman I'd ever experienced a head fire that took three minutes to burn over the top of us. And that's what it took. It was three minutes.

Bill Neier

Diane: What is your name?

Bill: My name is Bill Neier.

Diane: And where do you live?

Bill: I live in Ashland, Kansas.

Diane: And what's your occupation?

Bill: I'm a banker. I work for Stockgrowers State Bank. I'm a Senior Vice President and I deal mostly with agricultural loans.

Diane: Okay. How old are you?

Bill: I am 62 years old.

Diane: So, when did you first become aware of the fire that's now the Starbuck Fire that started on March 6<sup>th</sup>?

Bill: Well, a few minutes before noon on Monday, March 6<sup>th</sup>, I heard Englewood Fire Department paged out to go to Beaver County, Oklahoma, straight south of Meade at the Meyers Ranch to meet a fire that was coming up out of Oklahoma. As I started towards home my first thought was, "With this kind of wind today and these conditions, we need to be getting to the barn, too." I just left the bank and went directly to the fire station and they paged us at the same time, then, and said, "Go assist Englewood." At that time, we took one tanker, three brush trucks, 50, 51, 54 and 58. We took two small brush trucks and one large brush truck. The tanker operator for the other large truck was in the northeast part of the county and it took him a while to get there with the other tanker.

Diane: So, which vehicle are you in?

Bill: I'm in what we call Tank 51, it's a 2,000-gallon 6x6 Tanker.

Diane: Were there any other firefighters in the truck with you?

Bill: No. I was all by myself. I have no firefighting capabilities, only just a transfer pump to fill the brush trucks with.

Diane: Who were on the other trucks when you left, then?

Bill: On 54 was Darren Osborn and Jeremy Fast. On 50 was the chief, Dave Redger and, Raymond Vera was on 58 and I don't know who was with him. I don't know who was with either one of those guys. I don't recall. I knew then, but I don't recall now.

Diane: With taking those trucks, were you answering Mutual Aid?

Bill: That was a request from Mutual Aid that we – and that was our procedure was to take two or three trucks and a tanker for Mutual Aid. That way we left home one 6x6, one 1-ton brush truck, and one reserve brush truck, which was a wise decision on that day due to the high winds and the extreme conditions we had, temperature, wind, and fuel load.

Diane: So, where were you when you first found the fire or started fighting the fire?

Bill: When we left Ashland, you didn't even see any smoke. Didn't see any hint of smoke in the sky until I got to the Englewood Junction, which is 12 miles west of Ashland. As I went 12 miles south to Englewood, you could see smoke billowing then, and it was blotting out the sun. At that time, I called a friend of mine, Harry Walker, that I knew was a mile north of Englewood and about four miles west and called him on my way and told him to get his tractor and disk going around his farmstead and to get as big a fire break as he could get plowed. We then went straight west from Englewood, and our plan was still to go to the Meyers Ranch which would have been 20 miles west of Englewood and then back south 15 miles at least.

We only got 12 miles west to the Frosty Ediger residence. When you come over a hill you could see the flames coming over the next hill on the other side of Crooked Creek, and that was about three miles away at that point. We decided at that point Englewood Fire was still calling the shots there because it was in their district. They said to set up around the two residences there at Edigers, and to protect the residences. The gentleman there, Frosty Ediger, hooked up his tractor and disk and plowed up his whole yard. Englewood trucks were around the south house on the south side of the road and out buildings, and we were around the homestead house there and out buildings there. Soaked them all down, and we had about 10 minutes I would say, to do that before – and had a chance to refill the trucks. I still had about half a tank left after filling trucks back up. I remember hearing the guys from Englewood Fire say, "Hang on. Here it comes." At that time, I snuggled in real close beside Truck 54 because he had a front monitor on that truck, and it was blowing water into the wind, which meant it was blowing water back on to us. That helped keep me cooler and prevented us from probably burning. First time in my 39 years as a volunteer fireman I'd ever experienced a head fire that took three minutes to burn over the top of us. And that's what it took. It was three minutes. It was hot. It completely blacked out; you almost needed a flashlight to see inside the cab and the air got pretty thin. That fire was sucking a lot of oxygen.

Diane: So, do you have any oxygen equipment? Do you have SCBA (Self Contained Breathing Apparatus) on your truck?

Bill: No. We do not have SCBAs on our brush trucks. Never thought – well, never needed one before. I sure wished I'd have had one that day. After the fire blew past us, the Englewood Fire Department took off on the road and went east and north to protect several other farmsteads. We stayed there at Edigers because there was fire back burning up against the house there where they have cedar trees. We put that out. Meantime, I ran out of water. I transferred all my water, so I took off going back the 12 miles to Englewood. That stretch through there where the fire had already burned through, the wind was blowing so hard it was blowing all the ash and the sand. You couldn't see past the end of the hood of the truck. I had to open my driver's door and look down at the road to see the road and make sure I was on it. I crept down the road at 3-5 miles an hour for at least three or four miles before I finally got through the fire. I caught up with the edge of the fire and up there the smoke wasn't as bad because it was still just flame.

I drove through a pretty good wall of fire there to get on down the road. I went on to Englewood and filled up, and as I started to come back, the trucks were begging for water back at Edigers. The other tanker had dropped his load of water on the trucks and he was coming back through that and trying to see. He was caught in all that smoke and couldn't see. I knew I couldn't pull in and go on down that road because George (Krier) and I would have hit head-on. Had to wait for him to drive on through, and here again, it took him probably – he couldn't go over 5 or 10 miles an hour. Went back through it. It wasn't much better. Got back there, dropped my load of water on trucks, refilled them all. We headed for Englewood then. And by the time we got back to Englewood, the fire had gone on northeast far enough and then the wind switched to the north and came back into Englewood from the north. We were – I'd got another load of water off a tanker in front of the Englewood Fire Station and set up first a block west of the community church there in Englewood. That position got too hot to maintain. I had to move a block east. There were times there that we had fire on the left side of us, right side of us, in front of us, behind us – I thought the whole town was going to burn down.

Diane: So, were you sitting there by yourself?

Bill: I was sitting there by myself unless a truck pulled up and then I'd give them water.

Diane: And then, when you ran out of water, where did you go for that?

Bill: I just used that last 2,000 gallons and filled up trucks there. By that time, we had a call that we had a house on fire north of Ashland at the Bouziden residence. The Englewood fire chief, fire command, told us that we had to go home. We argued with him for a while saying "We can't leave you," and they said, "No. You've got to go home now." Again, we still had two trucks and an old brush truck here, and a rural pumper at Ashland, but they couldn't do anything about it, either. The conditions were a perfect fire condition that day. We had extremely large fuel load, a lot of the grass was waist high and extremely thick. We had temperatures in the 80's that day, and the winds were blowing first out of the southwest, 45-50. But when that front hit about 5 o'clock and the wind switched to the north, northwest, it was blowing 60-70.

Diane: So, when you left Englewood, how did you go back to Ashland?

Bill: I was able to go up the highway straight north out of Englewood and come up the highway to the Englewood Junction and down 160 into Ashland. I refilled then – I don't remember where I went after that. By that time, it was starting to get dark. We were back and forth west of town, and northwest of town.

Diane: When did you first realize there were two fires?

Bill: About the time I got back to Ashland we found out there was a second fire that started up near the wind farm south of Mineola. Power lines had – on rural residences, two different places – rural residences, the power lines had popped together and dropped sparks and it had moved northeast. And the thing was, while it was moving northeast with the wind out of the southwest, the head fires were only half mile, to a mile, a mile and a half wide. When the wind switched to the northwest, to the north and northwest, we had a 50 to 60-mile-long head fire, all the way from Beaver, Oklahoma clear to north of Lexington.

Diane: So, where did you usually – where did you station yourself to refill trucks that was easiest for them?

Bill: I moved back and forth between two different sets of trucks. We had trucks west of town about three miles and back north protecting a couple of residences. Then we had trucks right here on the northwest side and north side of Ashland. Until midnight or so, I was west of town. And then after midnight I was pretty much just here north of town. I came back to town, I can't even count the number of times. I'm gonna guess that I filled up at least 50 times in that next 36 hours. At 2,000 gallons a time, that's 100,000 gallons of water. That's an immense amount of water to transfer. Luckily, around town here we had a couple of wheat fields on the north side of town. We had a gentleman with a tractor and a disk, four-wheel drive tractor. He plowed up places I didn't know you could take a tractor, let alone a tractor and a disk, and plowed up down the ditches along the highway, plowed up around the hospital, around homes – he saved the west side of town. But it was that night about, it was somewhere around midnight for the first time that the wind went down to the point we could finally fight fire.

Diane: When did you feel the temperature change?

Bill: The temperature dropped immediately when that cold front hit at 5 o'clock, and it started going down then. I remember the first time realizing I was cold was about midnight on the west side of town out here, and I still had on my Wildland gear then, a pair of jeans with a pair of Wildland pants, and a long-sleeved shirt with a Wildland jacket. I'm going, "I'm cold." So, the next time I came to town for water, I did stop here and I got out my full bunker gear. Had to shake inches of dirt off of it that had been in the cab there at the truck and I put on my full bunker gear to mostly maintain warmth.

Diane: So, when you came through the fire house, then you got filled with water out here at the hydrant, were there lots of people at the fire house?

Bill: Well, the town had been evacuated about 3:30 and there were a number of people that stayed. They either didn't have a place to go or like a number of people here in the fire house

were spouses of firemen. One family even had his three kids here, but this was probably one of the safest places in town. There's a lot of asphalt and rock around us. We're a full metal building. If the fire storm came through here, it's probably safer in here than it was any place else in town. But yes, and by that time we had people who, every time I stopped for water, they'd come running out and give me candy bars and wanted to give me water, but my cooler was still full and I had ice.

Diane: What about regular food? Any sandwiches or anything like that?

Bill: I didn't see regular food till about 5 o'clock Tuesday morning. I had a breakfast burrito from McDonalds. That was the best breakfast burrito I've ever eaten. That was the first – because I hadn't even had lunch on Monday. We left here before lunch, and the only thing we had was occasionally a candy bar, trail mix, a nut bar, or something, that was about it; that's all we could find. Nobody had time to stop and eat, anyway.

Diane: Okay, so, we're into Tuesday morning. You've been filling tanks all night and stuff. So, Tuesday, the sun came up, what could you see?

Bill: Well, first of all, at about 3 in the morning you could see fire 360° around town. Fires had gone around us to the east. It started to back burn into the east side of town. Englewood had a truck over here that I didn't know about until several days later and put that fire out. I didn't know that. How they were here, why they were here, I don't know. But we had fire 360° around town. The next morning, I remember I was west of town about five miles and we were on the west fire line. I was taking brush trucks up there and I kept hearing people – people would call me on the phone and say, "We need fire trucks." And I'm going, "I know," but their dispatchers, all they could say is, "We don't have fire trucks to send." One guy called me, a guy I work with at the bank and he said, "It's getting close to my house." I said, "You call 911 and tell them that your house is threatened. They'll find somebody." Frank said he was disking around the north side of his house and turned around in the smoke once and here was a fire truck coming over the hill. It was quite a sight.

But, Tuesday morning is when we finally – some time during the night we started getting Mutual Aid help in here. Before that, when this fire started, there were 22 counties in Kansas that had fires. And those that didn't have fires were reluctant to send trucks because they might have a fire with that kind of wind and conditions. Oklahoma had fire everywhere. The Meade County Fire Chief told me a week later, he said that in all his years, any time you have a large fire and you call for help, in about 30-45 minutes, the cavalry is coming over the hill. This time, there was nobody to come help. Everybody had their own problems and we were on our own. We couldn't be everywhere. That was probably the thing that's bothered me the most, that we couldn't protect houses. My 39 years as a fireman, I've never lost a house to a grass fire. That hurts. It hurts bad.

Diane: So, when did you realize that you didn't have radio contact with anybody?

Bill: About 8 or 9 o'clock Monday night, we didn't have any radio contact. We knew our tower was good. But the power lines had burned down between the tower and town, but we had battery

backup, so we thought it was fine. Well, found out the next morning that the fire had come through and burned up the batteries that were set on the ground, too. So, we had nothing other than a talk-around channel, and a few 800 radios that were in contact with the command center, and cell phones. I didn't know my cell phone would go to a saver mode, either, but it went to a power saver mode, whatever that was.

Diane: So, you didn't have to charge your cell phone during this time? Do you have a charger in your truck?

Bill: No, I do not. I came through the fire station one time at about 2 o'clock and somebody in here had a charger that fit my phone, which was kind of unusual. The next time I was through town, in about another 45 minutes, it had got enough charge on it to last for the next day.

Diane: So, then on Tuesday morning you were west of town. Did you ever go south or east of town?

Bill: Tuesday morning, about 3 a.m. when we were pretty sure we had it covered here on the northwest side and the north side of town, we did take a tour south of town and went by several residences to make sure. Two of them were firemen's homes. We just had to find out whether their homes were still standing. Went by those homes and came back to town. Put together a group of two trucks and a tanker and we went out here on the northeast side of town and put out several more fires. I think about 5 o'clock we came back through and actually had a moment, then we met a guy that brought down these breakfast burritos from Dodge City. But there weren't many people in town until – after I guess about 8 o'clock in the morning was when I started seeing – I guess they opened town back up and people started coming back. But during the night, the highway patrol had the roads shut down. You couldn't get – I mean, they didn't let anybody in west of town. Then, fortunately that's – if they had done it earlier, we wouldn't have had the trucker that lost his life. But, hey, this was a fast-moving deal and there was nothing – that was beyond everybody's control.

Diane: Yeah. So, you live in town. Did you do anything to protect your own property? Did you have time?

Bill: No. I called my wife about 3 p.m. to tell her that I was okay. And she said, "What do you mean, you're okay?" I said, "Well, it's been a little dicey here a couple of times. That's after it burned over us once, and several more times after that." I said, "You might want to start the sprinklers around the house." Sherry says, "Well, I'm already five miles south of Coldwater because they evacuated town." I said, "Really?" So, that was the first time I'd heard about that was then because I guess, I don't know, our radios weren't – nobody had told us that our families were evacuated.

Diane: Did you not get the IRIS alert?

Bill: Diane, at that time I had a radio in the truck going, my cell phone was going and my walkie-talkie was on a different channel. I had so many things going, if there was an IRIS alert, I

have no idea. I never saw it. I didn't pay attention to it. I couldn't hear my phone ringing most of the time unless it was in my hand.

Diane: So, how did that make you feel to know that Sherry was out?

Bill: Well, I knew that – I felt better knowing that she was safe. And then a little later she tells me that our daughter that lives in Coldwater, she'd gone to her house, and that our daughter and her husband had left to go out to Lexington to a friend of theirs because he hadn't showed up and they were gonna go help him. He had stayed at his farm to put the fire out around his house. I called my daughter on the phone and I spoke to her in words that she's never heard out of my mouth to her, and got the point across that she needed to get her happy butt back to Coldwater because she wasn't trained, she didn't know what she was doing, and she was gonna get killed. I didn't need anybody else to think about but me and the guys with me. A friend of ours told me a week later that I was a little tough on her, and I looked at him and I said, "But I got the point across. I did not need to worry about anybody else but the guys that were with me."

Diane: So, how long were you out, all together, on your tanker?

Bill: We came back through town about 3 on Tuesday afternoon. The chief as I recall is the one that called and said, "Everybody come back to town right now." By this time, we'd gotten some Mutual Aid trucks in. We'd had a lot of other help. The main perimeter fires, to our knowledge, and homesteads being threatened were – that threat had diminished. We'd come to town and we had to blow out the radiators, blow out our air filters on our trucks and pumps to keep them running. They were filthy. And we had about an hour of down time.

That morning, about 11 o'clock, I came through town once for water, and United Telephone was sitting here behind the fire station with a big grill and they were cooking hamburgers and hot dogs. The next thing I know, I had a big ol' bag of hamburgers and hot dogs in my truck to give to the guys, which was the first real food that we'd seen for a long – it was the best hamburger I've ever had. But, again, then we had a chance to eat. That was the first time any of us had seen anything like eyewash or Chapstick. People had brought that kind of stuff to the fire house.

One thing, earlier in the morning, it was about 8 o'clock, I'd come back for water once and there was starting to be a lot of traffic so we were told we needed to run our sirens. I come wheeling in here, and before I could get to a stop, I had about six kids around the fire truck before I could stop at the hydrant. They were all carrying water and candy bars and food, and they were excited to help, but I got hold of one of the firemen's wives that was there, a person I knew that I could trust to get the point across. I said, "You get all those kids and you get everybody in a group and you tell them nobody leaves that fire station until the truck is stopped. The last thing we want to do is run over a kid." That's one thing that really stuck in my mind that day. But about 3, we took a break for a little bit there. We all had time to sit down for a few minutes, sat on a chair and we were just, we were exhausted. But we were making plans on where we were gonna go and work on some fires, lines, and about that time we had a fire call here in the city limits of town. I still think that was an arson. Somebody playing with matches, lit the grass on fire around the house, an old abandoned house, a lot of trees, burned up against a residence. We had a lot of trucks show up, but it was – that was the last thing any of us needed to do was deal with a

structure fire at that time, but, that was put out. I think later in the day – I left after that and took the tanker to the country, and I think they went back one more time for a flareup. How long was I out? I went out southeast of town about 5:30 or 6 o'clock. By that time our big tanker, No. 59, was broke down about 5 or 6 miles on a two-track north of 160. It had thrown a fan belt and was broken. One of our 5-ton 6x6's had broke the afternoon before; the torsion bar gave loose on the axle and it was sitting on the side of the road, so I was the only tanker running right then. We went southeast of town with a brush truck and a tanker, and there was still some fire down there, down near the Bouziden Ranch on the Cimarron River. We worked down there with a couple of ranchers and one of the task forces out of Colorado was there then. They started some back fires, and we burned off some areas there to give us some more protection. We burned off an area, there was a couple hundred acres of grass. The landowner was gonna burn this, anyway, so we did burn it off. It did give us a good – in an hour and a half burn, controlled burn, it saved us a whole lot of time trying to put out a fire because it had been through sand hills and rough country. And by that time, we were tired. We had other crews in here. A big task force from Cowley County, Kansas, Winfield, Ark City, Atlanta, Dexter, I don't know, there's five towns I know that brought at least five or six trucks and a big tanker and those boys knew how to fight fire – they were doing a great job. By that time, the Assistant Chief Jesse Stebbins had gotten back. He'd evacuated town the night before with his family because his wife works in Buffalo. She's an RN down there and then she had to evacuate their hospital. He was gone all that night, but he got back the next morning and Jesse took the command vehicle that day and he took those other task forces and they fought fire all day and did a whale of a job putting out fire.

Diane: So, what did you think about those different task forces? Do they all fight fire differently?

Bill: Everybody fights fire differently, that's for sure. But those guys from Cowley County, and most of the trucks that we got in here from Kansas by Wednesday then, they were all pretty much set up like our trucks and we fight fires the same. The crews that came from Colorado are totally different. They do not have pump and roll capabilities. They stop, engage their pump, drag their hose off, put out a fire, and roll their hose back up and move up a little ways. But before we started making fun of those boys, I saw them cut down some trees and that was their element. They know how to lay trees on the ground really quick and put out fires.

Diane: Besides watching them fight fire, did you get to talk to with them and find out how things...?

Bill: Visited with a lot of firemen from Colorado. Yeah, their comment was, "We don't want any kind of dealings with fire like that, what you guys have had here. Give us a forest fire any day." We're kind of – well, I don't want to deal with any kind of forest fire. I just want to deal with a range land grass fire. So, we're all different in what we've been trained at and what we were trained to do.

Diane: So, what did you know about the accommodations that the emergency center had set up for all these strike teams coming in?



Bill: Here again, I was out of radio communication, so it was 10:00 in the morning before we got our radios working again. Then I found out that our Clark County Emergency Management had set up a command center here and they were working control. They had State help in here by that time, and federal help coming, but I knew nothing of this. I was still killing snakes.

Diane: So, where were the helicopters from where you were at? Was that on Wednesday? Did you see any of them?

Bill: The helicopters were on Wednesday. I saw one about 8-10 miles away. I could see it over there, but I never was close to the helicopters. The guys from Englewood said that was quite a sight when they made a drop 50 yards from you. It was quite a sight and they did a whale of a job, but they were tied up. They couldn't have flown here on Monday and it would have been no good. They couldn't have flown in that kind of wind conditions. Tuesday, it would have been Tuesday afternoon before we could have used them. They were still tied up at Hutchinson, but we did get help on Wednesday or Thursday, I think. And it was – you asked me first how long I was on a fire truck. I was 35 hours on the truck. I finally got home on 11 on Tuesday night. It was the first time I parked the truck and went to the house. Several other guys had taken a couple-hour breaks, but that was the first time I ever parked the truck. I got up the next morning, was gonna try to go to work, and spent a little time at the school at breakfast with the forest service that was here and I talked to them. We needed to talk to them about parts and got some orders done. I actually went to the bank and was – actually had my first cup of coffee in my hand for two days, which was really good, and had just sat down in a chair which was probably a mistake. The pager went off that we needed to go to Snake Creek Ranch and fight a fire. So we took off with trucks, we actually had a couple of trucks north in the county. We took the rest of the trucks that were running and went to the south end. We also had a five-truck and a tanker task force from Colorado with us too, so by that time, you know, it was nice to have some help again. At that time, all the perimeter fires were out by Wednesday morning. I think, by the time I went home at midnight on Tuesday night, all the perimeter fires were out here in our county and in Kansas. Now, Oklahoma still had some, we could tell, on the radio. But, the next morning we had just backfires burning back in the area. And heck, we needed to save any grass we could save.

Diane: So, when did you finally have enough relief that they let you guys go home and get some sleep and get off line?

Bill: They had help in here Wednesday, but we were still on call. We were still going places. I remember, I worked with a task force out of Colorado all afternoon Wednesday afternoon, hauling water to them. About 8:30 that night we stopped and shut it down. I parked my truck that night and actually went to the Christian church where they had a spaghetti feed and ate hot spaghetti. Boy, it was good.

Diane: Talk a little bit about the bags that Kathy Lamb brought.

Bill: Wednesday, well we called it noon, but it was about 1:30. We got back from down the Snake Creek Ranch and we took a break and again, blew out radiators and air cleaners. They had lunch. They had a hot meal over at the school. I don't remember what it was now, but it

was hot and it was good. While we were there, somebody came and handed us this little small grocery bag, a little brown bag, and it was from the Kindergarteners and 1<sup>st</sup> graders, or 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders of Fowler Elementary School. They had drawn pictures on it. The one I had had a picture of a fire truck on the front, and a picture of a fire helmet on the bank. Darn it, Diana, I don't know if I'm gonna be able to do this. And it said, "Thank you, firemen."

Diane: What did they put in them?

Bill: They had a bottle of Gatorade and a bottle of water, and a little cookie, two different things of cookies. And that struck me – I just sat there and balled like a baby. It didn't take much after that to make the tears run for so many things I heard and things people did.

Diane: I think that's the day the church did roast beef.

Bill: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, the Methodist women brought that. That was the thing – the community turned out to support us. We had food all the time. Well, when everybody evacuated, they couldn't do anything about it. But by Tuesday, we had food, we had hot food, we always had plenty of water. Then the water started appearing by cases and then by pallets. Our fire station, it was a week before we could get our trucks back in the door because of all the stuff that was set up here in the fire station, pallets of water and tables of care goods, baby wipes, eye wash, and Chapstick was really, really important. Now one other thing I finally found out is for hand care is you need Vaseline. That really helped too.

Diane: So, did you see the care packages that Kathy Lamb brought?

Bill: Yes, Kathy Lamb brought some – from the Harper County Kansas 4-H kids, and they had a big care package. We still have two of them here that didn't get passed out.

Diane: Do you remember what was in them?

Bill: Hold a second and I'll get one. It's a big green bag. There's baby wipes and dust masks and Q-Tips and lotion and Chapstick and baby wipes. There's just four bags of that all the same in this big bag.

Diane: And there's socks. Socks and a scarf.

Bill: Socks and a scarf. Well, I never saw the socks and a scarf.

Diane: And there's Aloe Vera.

Bill: Aloe Vera. Anyway, this was kind of important. We now have this kind of stuff in all our trucks and especially the tankers now.

Diane: So, when somebody asks for something, like eye wash, did it show up in abundance? How did that kind of work?

Bill: Yeah. They were – when it was all done, we had tubs full of eye wash. We had tubs full of Chapstick. We had tubs full of, oh, multiple tubs full of granola bars, and Rice Krispy treats, and all the prepackaged little snack bars, nut bars, and stuff like that, nutrition bars that you can eat on the go.

Diane: So, by Thursday, did they tell you to go home and get some sleep?

Bill: Thursday afternoon, we had spent the afternoon doing major maintenance on trucks. We'd got #56 back in the barn, it got the torsion bars put back on it. We had a pump that had lost a cylinder. They replaced the pump on that truck that afternoon. The guys were just kind of working zombies. But, Thursday night, which was the night that the boys' basketball team played in the first round of the State Basketball Tournament, the command center told Ashland Fire and Englewood Fire, "You're gonna stand down. The strike teams will take any calls from now on." Well, something happened about midnight, the dispatcher didn't get the word, and so she paged us out for sparks blowing in a ditch. It was all right. It just needed to be done.

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

Bill: The helpless feeling that I had that I couldn't be everywhere. One of the most helpless feelings I had was Wednesday night at the church when I was eating spaghetti and two different families that had lost their homes came up and grabbed me and hugged me and said, "Thank you." I couldn't do a thing about it. I couldn't save their home and that hurt.

Diane: They were there being volunteers, right?

Bill: They were there eating supper too because they'd been working, and they were, you know. They didn't have a place to go.

Diane: That's true. I was gonna say, did you have physical injuries?

Bill: The only physical ailment that I had – we didn't have any injuries other than one guy did go to the hospital to get his eyes washed out. Several guys had issues with just extreme dirt in the eyes. One Englewood fireman had difficulties with – it actually singed his eyes and he was told to go home and stay out of it for two days, and I think he did for one. The smoke, everybody had a lot of smoke, you coughed up black stuff for two weeks. But the thing that bothered me the most is like, all the gloves I had were soaking wet and my hands swelled and cracked wide open. Of course, this was still in March, you know, and it does that in winter in extremely dry conditions. By Wednesday, I couldn't screw a hose onto a hydrant. I had to have help. That day I had a guy from – it was crews from Oklahoma that came up. Five guys just showed up in a car and they wanted to help. Well, this guy, he drug hose for me all day Wednesday, which was a God-send because I was just totally exhausted.

Diane: So, when did you find out about the Vaseline for your hands?

Bill: That's the night at that supper, Dr. McPhail, a chiropractor in town, told me to put Vaseline on my hands and put a pair of socks on my hands and go to bed. I woke up the next morning and

I could bend my fingers and it didn't hurt. That was the greatest thing in the world. Thursday, I went back to work as a banker and our plans there were to take care of our customers. We tried to contact all our customers and find out, you know, who had lost cattle, who had lost fences. Knew anybody, you know, who'd lost homes.

Diane: Was the list of homes that were actually lost different than what you had been hearing while you were out?

Bill: Oh, yeah. During the night, you heard all different stories, but the ones we knew were gone were the people we talked to directly.

Diane: So what kind of things did you do besides water, to try to help save homes? Did you use foam or is there any other solution?

Bill: Oh, yeah. You applied foam. The two trucks that were around town most of the time here on the north side of town used a lot of foam. A rural pumper and also 54 over here and they used a lot of foam that night. I always carry 15 gallons of extra foam on my truck, and it was all gone by Tuesday noon. We'd had an emergency delivery of 60 gallons of foam that came in. Is that what it was? Yeah, 12 five-gallon cans.

Diane: So, is it like a fire retardant?

Bill: It's Class A foam, and it's just a surfactant. It makes the water drops smaller and it just absorbs the heat. One other thing about Class A foam, you spray it on a surface and it won't burn and it won't burn for quite some time. So, it's really – we use a lot of it. We have foam proportioners. Some of it we just tank mix, but we used a lot of that. Thursday, I worked at the bank. Friday, I got hold of the district man for Farm Service Agency on emergency loans. I took him on a tour of the county. We drove about 150 miles that day. He needed to see how bad it was so when we and other banks called for help for our customers that they'd know what it was like. By the time we got back to town, I think both of us were about sick to our stomach. It just – we'd seen – by this time, people were dragging up the dead cattle. They were dragging them up in piles and they were getting ready to bury them. They had to account for them. They had to take pictures. It was tough.

Diane: So, how long did that take to figure out how many....

Bill: I think the cattle were all buried by the Monday or Tuesday of the next week.

Diane: So talk about the veterinary clinic, how they helped people.

Bill: Well the veterinary clinic, number one, the veterinarians all split up and went in different directions with customers to identify cattle that could be saved and cattle that needed to be put down right then. There were some that were obvious. There were others that were, their hair was singed, but then their hooves started to slough off. There were cows that their udders were burned off. Their eyes were gone. They just put them down. And Tuesday, when they were working on this, the veterinarians ran out of bullets. One veterinarian was quite a hunter, so,

when he ran out... By Wednesday the Kansas Fish and Game were here and they helped tremendously. Those guys supplied the weapons and the ammo and they had ATV's to get to places they needed to be. They were a tremendous help.

Diane: So when you were out on the tanker, did you see cattle?

Bill: I don't recall seeing cattle during the fire. The fire was just so intense. The smoke was so intense. You couldn't see anything. I do remember seeing a herd of deer running between me and the fire line west of Englewood. I saw a bunch of cattle on the road trying to – they were alive, but there were some of them burned. George said that one time that he was driving out of the smoke west of Englewood he stopped because there was a covey of quail in the road, and he waited for them to get on past because nothing else needed to die that day. He actually got out and herded them across the road.

So one of the best things that happened to us though, for the fire department, was about 10 days later we had a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team come in from Garden City from St. Catherine's Hospital. There was one chaplain and three other people that were just there to help in situations like that. They'd been there – I think they were probably shocked the way firemen talk, but we had firemen from Englewood, from Mineola, and us, and I'm gonna guess there were 50 guys around that room that night. And we talked. Thought it was gonna be an hour, but three hours later we were still talking through it. But there were guys who were hurting about things we didn't know about. I didn't know about different things that different guys had done, two guys had found the guy that was burned, the truck driver that was killed. The chief and another fireman found him. There were just things that I didn't know about, because again, we were out of radio communication. But everybody had their own haunts, and it really helped to talk about it. That was probably the best thing. That was a moment of healing.

Diane: Do you think another time like that now, after a couple of months, would have any more...?

Bill: I don't know. I think I'm okay now. Of course, I'm not embarrassed. It happens. Tears run down my face all the time. But yeah, I think there was a lot of guys that were hurting about different things that I didn't know. I guess I'm really concerned about a lot of our ranchers. Cowboys are too tough to talk about their feelings, but those guys shot cattle for hours, and you know, out of 100 cows out there on a pasture, you don't have a name for every one of them, but you know every one of them by sight, too. Those guys had to shoot them girls and it was hard.

Diane: So did you have a lot of customers that lost cattle? Your personal customers.

Bill: The bank had customers, a lot of customers that lost cattle. We had, well I think they're calling it somewhere around 6,000 head in the county. Yeah, there were large amounts of cattle lost.

Diane: So, what were some of the things that, some of the programs put into place to help these people that lost land, fences...

Bill: Donations that have come in have been tremendous. We've gotten food. We've gotten hay bales. We got fence supplies. We've gotten household goods, some stuff we didn't need we got. People have opened their hearts across the nation. In the time since the election and bashing the new president and everything else, you do realize there's people around that are real people and care, and it's giving you faith in your fellow man again. We've met some most wonderful people across the nation. Not only food and everything else that's come in, there's been cash donations. Our Ashland Community Foundation is a 501c3 that's a tremendous asset. They were able to make a distribution to all the homeowners that lost homes. Then, later they made distributions to anybody that had any kind of loss, which was cattle, out buildings, fences, or hay. They used a formula that I think was established a year ago by the Barber County Farm Bureau and KLA and other agencies over there to kind of judge by how many acres you lost, or how many miles of fence, how many cattle you lost, and set a proportion. It had to be hard. I'm glad I wasn't on that committee, but the Ashland Community Foundation had money. There's been an outfit called The Working Cowboy Ranch Association, something like that, foundation out of Amarillo, Texas. They've sent money. The Kansas Livestock Association had millions of dollars donated that they spread across the whole state. There's been some big checks this week that have come in. There will be money. Money has come back on those that lost cattle based upon a farm service agency program for losses. But, that had a limit of \$125,000, less sequestration, which is another 6.9%. So you know – but if you lost 100 head of cattle and they were paying right at \$1,000 a head, there's \$100,000. But for those that lost four or five or 900 head of cattle, and there was one ranch that lost 900 head – they're really short.

Diane: So, overall, do you think most of them are gonna come out okay with all the donations and stuff if they applied?

Bill: This country here has been through, since it was founded and settled, they've been through droughts and floods and pestilence, sand storms, the Dirty Thirties, and everything else. This is the first time we had fire destroy everything. But we've been through all those things before, we're gonna survive this one, too. You know, the large operations lost a lot of cattle, but were their operations any worse than the guy that lost 15 out of his 20 cows? A young guy? There have been donations of cattle, even, come here. It's been an amazing thing. I told several people the humbling events just continue to happen.

Diane: So did you get to talk to some of the volunteers that actually came down to build fence?

Bill: I talked to a lot of the volunteers. We've had volunteers come in to build fence, to bring supplies – they all just were struck by how tough it is. We've got a lot of 'pay it forward' we're gonna have to do that someday.

Diane: So, as the Public Relations Officer for the fire department, did you do any interviews?

Bill: Yeah, I've done quite a few interviews, *The Wichita Eagle Beacon*, and two boys from London, England that were doing a documentary for BBC. I don't know if that'll ever show up, but, the TV stations were all out here on Tuesday and Wednesday. One TV personality almost got run over because he wasn't paying attention and almost got run down by a fire truck. Yeah, I've seen a lot of fire trucks on TV too.

Diane: Do you have any stories in your family of wild fires, or anything like that? Have you experienced any other wild fires?

Bill: Well, I've been a volunteer fireman for 39 years. So you know, we've had some big fires. We've been on what we thought were big fires, 50,000-acre fires in Barber County and Meade County. We've had some of our own big ones. We're used to it, we help each other, we have to, all these years. We've been back and forth. We've helped those guys, they come help us. Into Oklahoma, we've done the same thing. A year ago when the Anderson Creek fire happened in eastern Comanche County, we were over there. I was there one day of the whole three days. I was there the first day, all day, and the second day I couldn't do it again, I was exhausted. The third day we had our own fire. I thought that was the biggest fire I'd ever seen until this thing happened and I hope and pray I never see another one.

Diane: So, what agencies do you think were the most helpful with this fire?

Bill: Well, I will give a lot of credit to our emergency management. Again, as I learned years ago as an EMT, I was an EMT for 20 years for Clark County, if you train and practice for things, when it does happen, when an emergency does happen, you know how to handle it. I feel that our county has done a lot of work working towards emergencies. We've trained and practiced for tornadoes and floods. I don't think anybody ever contemplated a fire of this proportion that would take a whole county. The same thing with the Greensburg tornado 10 years ago. None of us could have ever – you couldn't ever have pictured a tornado that could do that much damage to a whole town. So here again, you practice, you train. There's been a lot of things that have taken place in the last 10 years after the Greensburg tornado we learned from. A lot of it you know, I give a lot of credit there. The agencies that helped us again, we had a lot of help from everybody but our Kansas Mutual Aid, just firemen from other districts, that was the sweetest part. But we had a lot of support from different places. Our fire equipment companies that we buy from, we had two different companies that brought us – we called them and said, "Send us foam." They said, "How much?" We said, "However much you can haul," and they did. They had foam for us. We supplied foam to the other agencies that were here on the task forces too.

Diane: Did you work any with the Highway Patrol, or the law enforcement?

Bill: Our law enforcement guys were spread just as thin as we were. I didn't see many of them. I saw a lot of highway patrolmen the first night, second day, third day. As a matter of fact, one highway patrolman took us to a fire down there on the state line, on Snake Creek Ranch. He spotted it and had seen the buildup and he's the one that directed us in there. So, highway patrol was a big help. You know, we would have had more assets here to help us if it hadn't been for the other fires. The big fire around Hutchinson drew a lot of assets in there. There were a lot more homes threatened there, and I'll acknowledge that. I understand that, but as many of us have talked here since, if we'd had had another 100 fire trucks that first night, we'd have just put 200 more firefighters in danger and I don't know that the outcome had been any different even if we'd had them spread out to all the places that lost homes. Because it took, to set up around a farmstead in that wind, it took five or six trucks and a big tanker and you couldn't do that. I mean, there's just not that many assets, period.

Diane: So, how much do you think the training that the department's been doing the last couple of years, like Firefighter 1 and Firefighter 2, and the equipment that you have, help?

Bill: The last several years, we've gotten pretty much everybody through Firefighter 1 and Firefighter 2, Driver Operator, HAZMAT Awareness and Operations, and those are all really good classes and they teach you confidence. They train you how to use your gear, your personal protective equipment. I'll admit still, with all the years of experience I've had, a couple of times the panic level got up to about my eyes. You know, if it hadn't been for training, I wouldn't have been able to have stuck it out. It's been invaluable, the training has been. But the guys also just were – they all performed above and beyond.

Diane: So, what do you think we could do, as individuals, to prepare for another, a future fire, or what can the community do? What are some of the things we need to do?

Bill: We've already been to one class on being fire safe for the community. I think a lot of people now are gonna understand in the rural areas that, number one, they need to fire proof around their homes, which means mow closer and shorter. If you're gonna have cedar trees, they need to be trimmed up and they need to be farther away than 10 ft. from the house. You need to have them 30, 40, 50 ft. away. If you've got grass on the other side of your house or the other side of your tree row or something, it needs to be mowed extremely short. You need to have fire breaks. More people around here have been very interested in having their own water supplies, whether it's a tank trailer that they'll use for spraying their crops as a water supply, or whatever. They're gonna have a pump and they're gonna have a water supply so they can wet things down. A lot of the places were trying to protect their homes with a garden hose and when the electricity went off, when the power lines burned, they didn't have a well. A lot of guys are looking at building their own personal spray rigs. We've got several people who are getting ready to do controlled burning and we're gonna have those anyway, but there's gonna be a lot more here. People are gonna be a little more aware. They're gonna think about if somebody comes and tells you you've got to evacuate, what you're gonna take with you this time. A lot of people left and didn't take anything. A lot of people spent too much time and took everything. Yeah, you need to have a plan. There's a lot of things like that. I think people – we're gonna be more aware. I think because of it, if something like this ever happens again, we're gonna do better. But again, nobody ever fathomed. So, what's the next thing that's gonna nail us? Are we gonna have an earthquake? Are we having a volcano pop up in the middle out here? You know, I don't know. We're gonna be all right. We're just gonna be all right.

Diane: So, what do you think – your opinion. What was the most interesting or unbelievable thing that you heard about all the chaos that happened?

Bill: This fire brought families together that had been separated for many years. It taught some families they need to be a little closer together. I made a comment one day that in our town, in our area, we've always been friends and neighbors. Now we're family. Everybody looks out for everybody else. Again, it's been very humbling. As a fire department, it's taught us to just – we can only do what we can do. If we'd have had all brand new trucks sitting in here, it wouldn't have made a difference. You can only go so far and be so spread out. You can only spread five



trucks and two tankers five places, or maybe three places. But thank goodness, through our training, and grace of God, we didn't have anybody hurt or killed, and that's the main thing.

Diane: Yeah, it is. So, do you have any other thoughts or things about this experience that you would like to share? Something you forgot?

Bill: It's told me I'm older than I thought I was. Ha, ha. Retirement is looming from the fire service.