

Linda Redger

Diana: What is your name?

Linda: Linda Redger.

Diana: And where do you live?

Linda: 2615 CRU in Sitka, Kansas.

Linda: What's your occupation?

Linda: I'm a postal clerk.

Diana: And how old are you?

Linda: Sixty.

Diana: When did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, hereafter referred to simply as "the fire" that occurred on March 6?

Linda: I became aware of it about noon. Well, between 12:30 and 1:30 is when I became aware of it. I was out walking over my lunch hour and just happened to run into Don White and asked him about it. I'd heard the fire sirens go off and he told me there was a fire over around Englewood. I knew it was not good, because I could see the smoke.

Diana: So what was your immediate reaction, when you were first told?

Linda: I was concerned because of the wind. I knew it was not a good situation for the firefighters.

Diana: Did you evacuate?

Linda: No. I went back to work. I didn't know we were supposed to leave. I didn't even know it was coming towards Ashland.

Diana: When did you leave Ashland?

Linda: I didn't leave till after 4. I was still at work and I never heard anybody say to evacuate. I saw a police vehicle go down the street in front of the post office going south. I heard them talking, but I didn't know what they were saying. And then, actually it was a little before 4, my postmaster Susan stepped in the door and said, "They've told us to evacuate."

That was first I knew for sure. People were coming in and commenting, but nobody came right out and said, "They told us to evacuate."

Diana: So did you know the school had closed early that day?

Linda: Yes. Because I ended up... my granddaughter ended up coming up. They called... Let's see, how did I find out about that? I think, actually, somebody happened to mention it and I went by the school to... Or I called the school, I don't remember which, to verify it, and told them to send my granddaughter up to my work because she had nowhere else to go. I was concerned about her running around Ashland with the possibility of there being an issue.

Diana: So did you close early?

Linda: No, not really. I mean maybe by a few minutes. I had a customer come in that even though we kept telling her that... I guess I wasn't aggressive enough and said, "I'm sorry, you have to go."

Well, and to be honest, I wasn't even sure we were evacuating. But she kept talking, and it took us a while to get her package ready to go. So it was just shortly before four, just a few minutes before 4:00 before she got done. And actually, she got a phone call from her parents, saying they needed to be leaving. That's when she kind of said, "Oh, I got to go!" and left.

That's when I realized, okay, maybe it's a concern.

Diana: So did you just go home to Sitka?

Linda: You mean before... Well actually, I was concerned about what to do with the mail. I stuck everything I could at the post office. You know, even though I think the protocol is just to leave, I set everything I could think of that needed protected, I put it in the safe. And my daughter Trishia had come in and my sister-in-law Diana. We all decided to go to my house, thinking... I wasn't even aware it was coming to Sitka. So we went back out to Sitka and we were sitting there.

Diana: So when did you first notice the fire was coming your way?

Linda: About 5:20. My sister-in-law and I were sitting in my kitchen, which is on the south side of our house, and it got very dark. We commented about the darkness and didn't really think too much about it. Then a few minutes later it lightened up, and Diana commented about the fact that she wondered if my vapor light had come on. I walked over and looked out my east door and looked up at the vapor light. It hadn't come on, but I looked on east and there was what looked to me like a fire right there in my pasture to the east of the house. And that's when I kind of got excited and hollered at everybody to, "Get up and get your shoes on!" My granddaughter's lying in a chair and playing a game. You know, "Get your shoes on. We've got to get out of here." And I knew they had already... think they were evacuating Protection, or they'd closed the road.

So we jumped in our vehicles and headed south, expecting to go to Laverne to evacuate. When we got to Laverne, to Buffalo, I'm sorry, we went to Buffalo. When we got to Buffalo, I had needed gas and I pulled in to get gas and had no more finished getting gas than they told us to leave Buffalo.

They just told us to head south. They said, "Don't go east don't go towards Alva. Head south." So we headed towards Woodward.

Diana: So what did you take with you when you evacuated?

Linda: All I took with me were dogs. I didn't even... I panicked and just grabbed my purse and my dogs.

Diana: And what about your phone?

Linda: I did have my phone, but it was of no use to me down there. I had absolutely no service the whole time I was gone.

Diana: So how did you get back in contact with Trishia?

Linda: I went to Wal-Mart. When we go to Woodward, my family always goes to Wal-Mart. My sister was in one vehicle, and Diana and Trisha and her daughter were in another vehicle. I got separated from them on the way down there, in the process of them going around the block and me, I'm not sure how it happened with everybody leaving, but anyway I got separated.

So I went to Woodward and we got there at different times. I went to Wal-Mart and they went to a Dollar General, I'm thinking. I sat outside the Wal-Mart in Woodward and finally thought, "Well, I'll go inside and

just ask an employee or somebody if they have a phone," because my cell phone had no service.

So I walk no more than walked in the door, and Brenda Ketron was checking out at the registers! I went over to her and asked her if she had service and she did. So we called Trishia and let her know where I was at. So her and Diana came to the Wal-Mart parking lot.

We left without leashes for the dogs, so I went and purchased leashes. I had nine dogs with me, and I think I had one leash. So I had to go buy eight leashes and so we kind of sat in the Wal-Mart parking lot and discussed what to do.

Diana: Let's go back. When you left Sitka, what besides the fire that you saw to the east, what other fires, or what did you go through on your way down to the state line?

Linda: I remember as we turned and started heading south, I could see a fire that looked to me like, I didn't think we were going to get past it. As it turned out, when we went south there was a curve that kind of curves a little bit east and then goes back south again and the fire was in the west field. So we made it past that one. I could see fires burning a long ways off, but that was the only one that was close enough. I've never seen a fire that tall or that high, or I suppose I've never been that close to a fire, maybe, but it was close. It was coming like east of Kenny Dome's house. I really expected them not to have a house. It was right there.

Diana: So when you got in Wal-Mart, did you go out? What did you do for supper or for a place to stay?

Linda: Well, I was totally in denial, because I kept expecting to come home. I guess I knew there was a fire up here, but I didn't know the extent of it. So we went to... after we sat around at Wal-Mart for a little bit and talked about what to do, we finally decided to go. I think we went to Arby's.

We went in there and got food and we ended up... I think we stayed in there for an hour or longer, maybe an hour and a half, honestly thinking I was going to get to go home anytime, that my husband was going to call me in and say, "Okay, it's clear, you can come home." Between 9:30 and 10, we decided maybe we'd better find something. We had heard that the Salvation Army had opened the Pioneer Room.

We found it, and we went in and actually we were the only ones there. The person was very helpful in finding us... My daughter mentioned that we had all these dogs and she called the dog pound down there, and they were very generous about coming and they met us at their dog pound and took our dogs for us. Although all the hotels down there were letting dogs stay for free (they were being very accommodating to the people they knew were influenced by this fire), having that many dogs, I didn't want to have to try to deal with the dogs plus everything else. They were very, very wonderful at accepting our dogs. Then we went to... I can't remember the name of the first hotel we went to. It was right there as we came out from the road that we were on from the dog pound. It was right there across the street and we went in, as I was standing there, a man stepped in the door and said the Wayfarer Inn was letting fire victims have rooms for ten dollars a night.

I asked the person how much they were charging, and they were charging \$50. I said, "No, sorry." You know, with three of us needing rooms, we had to go where we could. So we went down there, and sure enough they had rooms. We rented two rooms, and you couldn't have asked for nicer people. They were just very nice.

Diana: So you spent the night. But first, did you tell anybody where you went?

Linda: When we were leaving. Well... as soon as I saw the fire to the east of the house, I did call 911 and I told her where I was at. And a woman answered the phone. I told her where I lived and that there was a fire near my house. She asked if we were able to get out, and I said, "Yes, I think we can go." I said, "We're going to go south, we're going go towards Buffalo."

I did call my husband, David, as we were leaving and just in the few minutes I got to talk to him, I just told him we were headed to Buffalo. To be honest, I'm not sure how he ever found out we ended up in Woodward, if he called.

Diana: But did you have a time to talk to him to find out where he was or what he was doing? You just told him that you were okay?

Linda: He was being the fire chief, he was very, very busy and all it was, was okay. That was all I got out of him. I knew that, I didn't have time to...

Diana: Did you call other family members?

Linda: I didn't. I just called David and headed out.

Diana: I called him at 10:30, to tell him where we were at, which motel we were at, probably when you went to Wal-Mart to get clothes.

Linda: Oh, yes.

Diana: So, okay, so we spent the night and got a text at 6:30 in the morning from Dr. LewAnn. That kind of woke us up, and you said something about the dog pound. Did you to go pick the dogs up?

Linda: They had told us the day before they were open from 12 to 1. But that they did go feed the dogs somewhere around 8 a.m. So, hoping to get home, I knew I needed to get back to work as soon as possible. When we woke up, I was hoping to go get the dogs and when... Well, Diana was looking on her computer and roads were still closed into Kansas. She was showing me a fire that actually looked like it was my... I mean it looked like Sitka was burning and I assumed my house was gone.

Shortly after Diana told us that the roads were closed and showed me the fire, Trishia stepped in the room and she said they had opened the roads into Kansas, so we just jumped in the car and ran and got the dogs.

Diana: Do you remember what time you left to go home from Woodward?

Linda: It was probably about 9. I was at work by the almost 11. So I would say it was about 9, between 9 and 9:30 a.m. when we left Woodward.

Diana: And then we stayed and ate breakfast and you went on because you had to be to work, right?

Linda: Well, I was trying to get to work as soon as possible. I hadn't even talked to Susan (Betschart).

Diana: So did you still have a house?

Linda: I did. I got home and it had just burned the west side of the highway and the three houses on the east side of the highway, right there in Sitka, or north and south and the one in Sitka, all survived.

Diana: Did you lose any property?

Linda: No.

Diana: Did you have electricity?

Linda: No.

Diana: So how long was your electricity off?

Linda: Three days, two days. Two days.

Diana: So when you turned the Sitka Corner and went toward town. What was your reaction to what you saw?

Linda: I think I was in shock. I don't think it even registered at first. I was so focused on trying to get to work and thinking about, you know, everything that happened, that I really didn't... I mean I kind of saw it, but it wasn't registering. It was later when I came home after work, that it... I just couldn't believe it. I mean. It was just nothing. Black everywhere.

Diana: When you got to work, what did you have to do? Did you have mail?

Linda: We had mail. We just started working the mail and just normal, everyday postal duties. That wasn't a regular day, because at that time we were covering the Englewood post office, so I was going over there quite often. But no, that wasn't a day I had to be in Englewood.

Diana: Was somebody at Englewood?

Linda: Probably, yes. Scott from Plains, he's a clerk from Plains.

Diana: Could he do anything? Did they have electricity over there?

Linda: No, I don't think they did. We were having to do all of his reports at Ashland. I think it was a couple of days before they had electricity too, the city of Ashland, had electricity. So basically, we just kind of lived in Ashland for a couple of days. We just didn't go home except at night to sleep.

Diana: So did you volunteer after the fire?

Linda: I went to the firehouse and just did what I could. I just made up sandwiches, handed out food to the firemen that were coming in, and helping. That was about all the volunteering I did.

Diana: How many days?

Linda: For three.

Diana: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday?

Linda: Yeah, we came back Tuesday. Yeah, I was there Tuesday.

Diana: Did you ever take advantage of the meals that were being prepared at the school or at the camp or at the church?

Linda: I did at the school. They told us a family had come in and was making a Mexican dinner and we did go over for that. I never did go to the camp or the church for a meal.

Diana: So, how would you describe your emotional response to the fire, after the fire or during the fire? And have you had a chance to kind of deal with those emotions?

Linda: I think, like I said, when I first came back I was in shock. You know, I just couldn't believe it. And then when I found out... especially because quite a few people that lost homes, I knew, and that was real hard. Every time I would go to Englewood, I would cry on the way home. Because over there, it was just like sand dunes. I mean, I don't know if it's their land over there, but it just looked... I didn't know if it was ever going to come back.

Diana: Was the wind blowing?

Linda: Oh yeah.

Diana: Dirt? What about the landscape?

Linda: That's just it. It reminded me of what the desert would look like, it was so bad over there.

Diana: Did you see dead animals?

Linda: I didn't see many dead animals. I think because mainly I was on the highway. I was kind of surprised at the turkeys that were over at Englewood. How did they survive? I was surprised that within three days, you could see green coming up between Ashland and Sitka. I could see shoots of grass coming up. I was just amazed. Then for a long time, over in the Englewood area, you just couldn't... To be honest, I wasn't sure it was ever going to come back. But it has, just over there now, you can't hardly tell that they have had a fire, other than the trees. The trees, you know, are definitely still looking bad.

Diana: So when you were driving back and forth to Englewood, did you see a lot of fire trucks that had come to help those days?

Linda: I must not have... I think I must have had to help in Englewood for a couple of days that week, because I really didn't see many fire trucks out and about.

Diana: When's the first time you got to see your husband?

Linda: Let's see. Tuesday, when I was coming back, I didn't see him; I talked to him on the phone. I kind of was watching my phone, as I was driving, trying to see when I would get service. He has a pasture south of Sitka, that he takes care of, and that is the only live fire I saw coming home from Woodward. The fire right there was coming straight for his pasture. As soon as I got cell phone service, I called and told him, "I'm back, headed home, and there's a fire coming straight for your pasture." All he could say was, "Nothing I can do about it."

You know, he didn't even tell me where he was. He was fighting fire somewhere else. I mean, he had to protect homes and the towns. Oh goodness, I don't think I saw him... I might have seen him that night. I think the firemen finally start coming in about 10 or 10:30 Tuesday night, into the Ashland firehouse while I was there.

That's when help from other towns and states were showing up and so the Ashland firemen were able to start kind of taking some breaks. That's the first time I remember seeing him, was Tuesday night, and I didn't even call him or talk to him through the day. I knew he was focused on trying to get fires taken care of, so I didn't even try to communicate with him.

Diana: Since you didn't have any electricity at your house, how did you clean up to go to work every day?

Linda: I went to Diana's house. I was trying to think, it would be Tuesday that we just went and cleaned up at the house, at Diana's. Seems like we went back (home) on Thursday; we were taking a chance that we were going to have electricity.

Diana: And you did?

Linda: You know, I'm thinking that we got home and we didn't. I don't think we had electricity Thursday. I think it was Friday before we got the electricity, because Thursday we came home and our neighbors to the south of us, Hazen's, had electricity and we didn't. I was thinking as I was driving home, "Oh good, I can get a shower!" and I got home and we didn't have electricity. David got up the next morning right away and called and there was something in our area, I guess, on our poles. But, yeah, we didn't have electricity till Friday morning.

Diana: As far as any physical or financial loss at your house, there really wasn't any?

Linda: No. We tried real hard not to open anything. We knew since we were in town, they had sandwich making materials at the firehouse, so that's what I was... I was just eating there. And so we tried not to open the refrigerator at all or the freezer. So we didn't really... everything pretty well stayed.

Diana: What's your most vivid memory?

Linda: I don't know. When I think about it there's just, you know, I can remember... The most vivid is coming to Ashland, I mean coming to Sitka. One minute I heard (we have a fire scanner), I heard that they were at about Bouziden's fighting fire. And the next minute I was looking out the window and we had a fire at just east of the house.

Diana: Do you have any idea what time that was?

Linda: Well, I would say about 5:30, between 5:30 and 6. Because I know when it got really, really dark, we looked at the clock and it was about 5:20. We should have known something was not right.

Diana: Who were some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful with the fire?

Linda: What I saw was probably the school. There were so many people bringing, just from everywhere, bringing supplies and bringing them to the school and to the firehouse. But to me, what I what I saw, was the school helping the most. I guess because of being involved with the firemen. They housed the firemen; they fed the firemen. That's what I saw at first, was the school being really... It was the week after spring break or before spring break. And they even closed, they didn't have school, so that they could take care of the firemen.

Diana: So what was your reaction to all these firemen that came in? How did it make you feel when you saw the strike teams?

Linda: Oh, I was just amazed. I was thankful, because Tuesday night when I saw those guys, our firefighters, you could tell they were just totally exhausted. I don't know if they could have gone on much longer. And they just amazed me, where they came from.

Diana: So they got sleep Tuesday night.

Linda: Yes.

Diana: Then they got up early and went back out?

Linda: They were told Wednesday, I'm not sure what time, I don't know how many of them abided by this, but they were told they were supposed to go home and not come back for eight hours. They were told Tuesday night. And I don't know how many of them did that, because I know it's hard.

Diana: Who told them?

Linda: The command center told them, "You're off duty, and we don't want you here. We don't want you back for at least eight hours."

Diana: So what kind of things did they do on Wednesday that you're aware of?

Linda: The firefighters? Well, I think mostly they were taking strike teams to different places to fight fire. You know, showing them how to get to places and helping to fight the fires. But they had groups that were just taking strike teams out with them to show them where everything was and how to get into places

because some of these firefighters that came in had never fought fire like this. Their firefighting techniques are a lot different than ours. So they weren't even aware of how to fight this kind of fire.

Diana: Do you have any history in your family of big wildfires or fires like this in the past? Or just mainly prairie fires like we've had, small ones?

Linda: No, I've never had any of my family members talk about it, that I'm aware of. And even, you know, a lot of times when you have something like this, it will bring that out. They'll start talking about stuff like that and I've never, I haven't been around any... Of course I don't know that I've been around any of my older relatives for any of them to tell me stories, but I haven't heard of any fires. Of course I don't think too many of my relatives on my side of the family were ranchers or farmers and... So they didn't have to deal with anything like this.

Diana: So when the volunteers started coming, and the hay started coming into town. Did you have any contact with those people?

Linda: Mostly just waving at them as they went by. You know, they would usually go down Main Street. And of course, I was at the post office every day. When I got the chance I'd go out, and wave at them. But I really didn't talk to too many of them personally.

Diana: Did you go volunteer at the camp or any place?

Linda: No.

Diana: Did your family have any volunteers help with any fire damage that you might have had?

Linda: My husband had a cousin from Inman that they were sending a group down to help. They called David and asked him if he... Because they wanted to help more than just David. And so David put them in touch with our neighbor, who, we found out, hadn't had any help either. So they came down and tore out fence for us and Matt Wilson also. I'm thinking that's all. I don't know that they built any. I think they just tore it all out but they said it was basically just get out of their way and let them do it. They were so efficient at it.

Diana: Do you remember how many came?

Linda: Twenty-some.

Diana: Did they bring their own equipment?

Linda: They did. They brought wire wrappers, but I also heard them say that the younger boys in the group were rolling it up faster than their rollers could roll up the old wire. Yeah, they brought in four-wheelers and skid steers and... of course, I'm sure they brought their own pliers and stuff.

Diana: So did they take the posts and the wire with them when they left? How did they dispose of it?

Linda: I don't know what they did with it.

Diana: They cleaned it all up, didn't they.

Linda: Yeah. They did.

Diana: So, can you perceive anything positive that's resulted from this fire?

Linda: I think it's made... I think it benefits the land to be burnt off. Thank God for rain. I mean we've had lots of rain since the fire, which has made a world of difference. So we've got some good, it appears to be

good crops, good grassland now.

But I think it's also brought out, it's made people see the good in a lot of it. It's been amazing how many people have come to help us out. It's also made people more aware to help other people, because we've had fires in other places that we haven't been... I think part of it is because we've been through this. We've sent stuff to help them out, also. So, I can't say a lot of good has come of it, but it's definitely cleaned the land up.

Diana: What about people helping people? Were you amazed at the way the agricultural community came out and helped? Were you aware they were that way or did that kind of stuff?

Linda: I guess I really knew that they did, but I was kind of surprised at from how far away we had help. And most of it was just people helping people, not government, not big business. I'm sure, I mean I know there's been some big businesses that have donated and sent stuff to us. I'm not saying they haven't helped, but it's just that the common farmer/rancher. We talked to people that were just a couple coming back from Florida. I think they were in their motor home and they got to Missouri and heard about us. They just drove over and they were here for a couple of weeks, just living in their motor home helping whoever they could find to help. I mean, there are good people out there and you seem to forget that sometimes.

Diana: So what can you do or have you done to prepare for another emergency. Have you thought about what you'd do differently?

Linda: Well, I would take clothes with me! Like I said I was totally in denial. My daughter brought clothes for her and her daughter, Diana brought her computer, or brought the laptop, brought her jump drive. You know she brought clothes. I guess I just never realized that anything like that could happen. So I would definitely be a little better prepared when I left. I don't know whether I would have moved quicker. Because really it could have been a lot worse than it was, with us waiting as long as we did. We got lucky that the direction we were going, either the fire hadn't got to it yet or the wind shifted.

Diana: So what about the community? How can it prepare better in the future?

Linda: Well, I don't know whether, because I feel like our firemen are well-trained. I don't know whether there's equipment they could have had that would have helped them out. I did actually hear a comment made that the fact that we didn't have as many firefighters as... Or fire equipment, that maybe that saved some lives because we couldn't be some places where they could have gotten into troubles. But, I think our strike team was prepared for floods and tornadoes but they never trained on fires. So I think they'll, I know they're probably doing that, training and learning what to do. I know they're giving classes on things like, "How to plant," or, "What to plant in your yard or what not to plant."

Don't plant bushes and stuff close to your house and things that I never even thought about. And now I do kind of look around my house and think about that.

Diana: Do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd care to share?

Linda: Not that I can think of.

Diana: What type of things did you tell your family that lived away from here about what you had experienced?

Linda: Well, that is one thing maybe I would have done better; I did not stay in communication with my immediate family. Being on that end of it, you know, I have discovered that they were very concerned and we weren't communicating with them because I had no phone service. I think that I would do different, I would try to keep them more in the loop better. I've just, basically I have kind of just sat back and listened to stories. Even to this day, I hear things that happened to my husband, to my son who helped fight fire, to other firemen, that I didn't wasn't even aware of. So I haven't told them a whole lot about it. I kept thinking, "This isn't happening. We'll be going home anytime now." But I think I've done more listening to what other

people have been telling than talking much about it.

Diana: Has this kind of helped you make sense of the whole fire? Or does that scare you?

Linda: It's kind of amazed me, that there's been so many stories that you know God had to be involved. People couldn't have made it through situations without help. There was a lot of good things that happened to us, to me personally, because we got out in time. We didn't run into any fires. You couldn't have asked for better people than in Woodward. When we were down there, everybody we encountered was just as helpful as can be. You know, for being as devastating an experience as that was, you saw a lot of good come out of it and things that happened for us.

Diana: So anything else? Other stuff?

Linda: Not that I can think.

Diana: Anything that really struck you after it was all over that, "Oh, that could have been bad," or, "Oh, that was good."

Linda: A lot of things have struck me that if it had gone a little different it could have really been bad. I mean we lost one life in the whole situation; and I have discovered that there were people that had tried to stop this trucker and told him, "Do not keep going." And he just, you know...

It would be frustrating to know that you tried to stop somebody and then have something like that happen to them. It's just some of the stories I've heard about people that just... had one story about a guy that just... you know, a man and his son were trying to call cattle and they just kept honking their horns. The son finally said, "We've got to get out of here." And it wasn't very long until two people on a horse came out of the smoke. The only reason they made it out was the horn. Didn't hear that until like weeks after the fire.

I mean you just, you hear amazing stories every day of how people survived that really shouldn't have. I mean just by the grace of God they're still here. And you know all that even though we did lose homes, those can be rebuilt.