

**Diana:** Okay, today is November 14th, 2017. What is your name?

**Bessie:** Bessie Seacat.

**Diana:** And where do you live?

**Bessie:** In Ashland, Kansas.

**Diana:** And what is your occupation?

**Bessie:** I'm a housewife.

**Diana:** How old are you?

**Bessie:** 94 years old.

**Diana:** When did you first become aware of the Starbuck fire, here after referred to simply as "the fire?"

**Bessie:** What time do you mean?

**Diana:** What time during the day. When did you first know something was going on?

**Bessie:** It was in the afternoon and the sky was all reddish and getting dark.

**Diana:** Where were you?

**Bessie:** In my house.

**Diana:** And what was your first thought when you saw the smoke?

**Bessie:** Well, I wondered what was going on. I didn't know what it was.

**Diana:** Did somebody call you and tell you what was going on?

**Bessie:** No.

**Diana:** Did they come pick you up?

**Bessie:** They did.

**Diana:** Who came and picked you up?

**Bessie:** That would be Jesicka Wilkinson. She came to my house, and she said, "We are evacuating right now, what do you want to take?" So I grabbed my purse and I got my Bible and my music and a jacket. And I think that's about all I took.

**Bessie:** So I went with her out to Janae and Matt Wilson's house and their family was all busy getting the vehicles all loaded up and their camper and everything. Then we took out and we went back toward the Sitka corner and went north to Bucklin because we got word that we needed to go north. And so we got about half way up to Bucklin on that road and got the message that the fire was coming down from the north. So we turned at the Lexington community corner and went east toward Protection and went to Protection and then over to Coldwater that way.

**Diana:** When you got to Coldwater where did you go?

**Bessie:** We stopped at that place before we got into Coldwater, oh that place where the gas pumps are, I think it is. And there were friends of Jesicka's and the family that were all congregating there and kind of regrouping. And then we went into Coldwater and we went to the high school and there was refreshments and fruit and sandwiches and so on to eat and to just stay there. I sat, you know I just sat down at a table with others and the Wilsons and Jesicka had plans to make and things to do and to think about, which they were doing.

**Diana:** So when you were at Wilson's, and when you went back to the Sitka Hill and went north to Bucklin, could you see flames?

**Bessie:** No.

**Diana:** It wasn't close. Could you see the smoke?

**Bessie:** I don't remember even that.

**Diana:** Was real windy when you left?

**Bessie:** Oh not too bad. Janae drove the camper and we followed right behind her.

**Diana:** So then, when you were at the high school and Coldwater were there lots of people there from Ashland?

**Bessie:** Yes, there were many people.

**Diana:** And did they tell you what was going on, or did they... did anybody in authority say "you need to stay here all night" or do anything like that?

**Bessie:** I didn't hear that but they were getting cots ready for people to sleep in and chairs like recliners. They were moving them in to the auditorium there where we were.

**Diana:** And how long did you stay there?

**Bessie:** Well, I don't know just what time, it was dark by the time we left the high school. But, Kenna Jackson had hook-ups and told Janae and Matt that they could use her hookups for the night. And so we all took out to find that place and it was really dark. They didn't know just where they were going but they found it and they hooked it up which took a while, quite a while you know, to get it in there and get it ready and.

**Diana:** Was it in town or was it out of town?

**Bessie:** It was in town.

**Diana:** And then did you stay in the trailer for the night?

**Bessie:** Yes. And so they got it all ready and then I sat in Jesicka's car while they were doing that. And so when they were ready they helped me to get into the camper and they had the divan that they pulled out and made into a bed and that was my bed. And there were like bunk beds in different places and there were eight people that stayed there with their family.

**Diana:** Including you?

**Bessie:** Including me and three dogs.

**Diana:** No cats?

**Bessie:** No, there weren't any cats.

**Diana:** So then, Tuesday morning when you woke up in the trailer, did you go eat breakfast somewhere?

**Bessie:** No, we didn't. We just stayed around there until about 10 a.m. Somebody had a box of graham crackers. And that's what we had. And I think I had brought a banana, from the food that they had from the night before.

**Diana:** So while you were with them, had they found out that their house had been burned?

**Bessie:** While we were at the high school, they found out their house was burned. Janae showed me some of the flames and how it was, because they had taken a picture of it. Her husband was out there. Matt had gone out there.

**Diana:** So he was out at the house?

**Bessie:** Yes. And Chance. Chance was with us too.

**Diana:** Did Matt and Chance come over to Coldwater and spend the night or did they...

**Bessie:** Yes, they were there too. But they left and then they came back and spent the night with us.

**Diana:** So did you return to Ashland then?

**Bessie:** While we were there in the camper, during the night. You know it was a real cold night. And we got cold because the propane tank ran out of propane, and so it got real cold. And I had covers on, but I was still pretty cold. And one of the dogs, I think it was Chris's dog, jumped up on my bed and lay down beside me. I'm sure he was cold too, so he jumped up there and lay down and kept me warm the rest of the night.

**Diana:** Oh cool. Big dog?

**Bessie:** He's a big dog. A big yellow dog. I don't know what kind he is, they are beautiful dogs. There were two of that color and the little black dog that was Chris's and Chance's. I think one of those dogs belonged Chance.

**Diana:** So what did you think about all this. I mean, you went several places before you got someplace safe. Did you ever feel like you weren't safe traveling over to Coldwater?

**Bessie:** No. Jesicka said, "I'll drive and you pray." So we did. And I don't think that I ever was frightened, I just felt like I was, I don't know.

**Diana:** Well taken care of?

**Bessie:** Yes, the Lord is taking care of it. I'm sure that's what it was.

**Diana:** So did they have enough places and food for everybody in Coldwater when you got there?

**Bessie:** Oh yes. They had a lot of food.

**Diana:** So when you decide that it was okay to return?

**Bessie:** Well, the next morning it was about 10 a.m. when we went back and they decided to go back.

**Diana:** So what was your impressions of driving down the highway, because you came back on the highway?

**Bessie:** Yes.

**Diana:** And once you got probably past Protection, what kind of things did you start seeing and what did it make you feel like?

**Bessie:** Okay, when we got to the part where it was burned you could look as far as to the north or the south and the pastures were all black as far as I could look. And it seemed like it was even to the west I could see it was all black. And when we got to Matt and Janae's house, the house was completely gone. And it just... I couldn't imagine how there wouldn't be anything left. There was a few metal things there, little things, but otherwise that was it.

**Diana:** Did you stop?

**Bessie:** No. We just drove by.

**Diana:** But you could see some things, or did they go back in and look for stuff.

**Bessie:** Oh they went back later, I'm sure. But we didn't then. I was with Jesicka.

**Diana:** And so you guys just drove on into town?

**Bessie:** Yeah, and she took me home.

**Diana:** So like, there's a lot of landmarks that used to be on the highway when you're driving down the road that have been here probably all of your life. Was that kind of eerie? What did that make you feel like when you did see all of it burned?

**Bessie:** Well, it just looked pretty bare you know, and just blank. Burned.

**Diana:** What about the highway? Did you notice the highway was scorched?

**Bessie:** No, I didn't.

**Diana:** And black stuff going across it?

**Bessie:** No, not really.

**Diana:** So did you stay in Ashland then? Did you stay home?

**Bessie:** I stayed home Monday, you know. No, Tuesday, the next day.

**Diana:** Let's go back. Did your family know where you were?

**Bessie:** Jesicka called Bill, when she came to my house and Bill was busy taking care of the fires down there where he was. He was trying to save his cattle and his home and the neighbors and everything.

**Diana:** And he was over at Frosty's.

**Bessie:** Where?

**Diana:** He was over at Frosty's.

**Bessie:** Well, that was earlier, I think. This was about 3 p.m. or 3:30 when Jesicka came to my house.

**Diana:** Right.

**Bessie:** Bill said, "I can't come in." And she told him where I was.

**Diana:** But what about the rest of your kids? Did they know what was going on? Did they try to call you up?

**Bessie:** No, but then the rest of them got together, they heard it somehow, somehow. They all got together on the telephone and got to talking and they said that I didn't need to be in that smoke. So they made plans for me to go to Emporia with Marilyn and Gary. . So Wednesday, Tammy took me to Pratt and Marilyn met me at noon at Pratt. I went back with her for two weeks, to stay with her and Gary and got to go to all their activities at that time and I had just a great and wonderful time for two weeks.

**Diana:** Did you know what was going on down here? Did you see pictures of the fire while you were at Marilyn's?

**Bessie:** Yes. Marilyn got it on television. I was just listening to the stories, you know, and they were in church Sunday morning and that was televised. We had several reports through those two weeks. In fact many of them.

**Diana:** So did you feel like you were out of the loop since you weren't here? Or were you kept pretty much in with what was going on? Did you talk to Bill?

**Bessie:** Yes, I got to talk to Bill too. We're very happy that he saved all of his cattle. The wheat pastures that are all around his house, saved his house. So that was a real blessing.

**Diana:** So did you lose anything in the fire? Personally?

**Bessie:** No, I did not.

**Diana:** What's your most vivid memory of the fire?

**Bessie:** Well, the most vivid was that Monday afternoon at 3:30 and it was before that when all the smoke came over and it got dark and it was a red-brownish, you know. I've never seen anything like that before and I have never seen anything like that kind of a fire and never... I've never had to evacuate.

**Diana:** So you grew up in the country and lived in the country for a long time. Did you ever see any wildfires that would compare to this?

**Bessie:** No.

**Diana:** What's the biggest difference do you think?

**Bessie:** I don't remember very many fires. I know there were some. I remember them when we lived in Lexington, and George would take the tractor and plow and go over and plow around, you know, where the flames were, but nothing serious to them.

**Diana:** They were easily put out and didn't burn a whole lot of acres

**Bessie:** Seemed like it was easy. It seemed like it was, to me.

**Diana:** So, you were gone two weeks. By the time you returned, were there a lot of volunteers here helping with replacing fence and did you see the hay trucks go by?

**Bessie:** I saw them on the highway, as they were going. I saw them bringing in the bales of hay. These big semi-trucks and they were parked clear down to the north. I don't know how far they were, to Main Street, at least, and I saw that several times.

**Diana:** What do you think about that? All the people that came and helped and stuff. Did you ever go over to the church or to the Christian camp? While they had volunteers here?

**Bessie:** No, I didn't. I didn't help with that. But then, it was just wonderful the way they took care of all of the people and had them to eat there at camp and also in a high school too you know. And they did that for several days, weeks. It was a long time. Maybe a month or so maybe, or more than that.

**Diana:** They did that in March and April, and then they moved it from the camp to other churches in May. Then they did some a little bit in June. The Mennonite relief did it at the Hardesty house in June.

**Bessie:** So yes it was wonderful, all the help that came in.

**Diana:** So did Bill have anybody help him do fence or anything else?

**Bessie:** Yeah. He had some volunteers there at first.

**Diana:** Did they help tear out fence? Is that basically what they did?

**Bessie:** They put in fence and tore them out too. Bill and Tammy tore out a bunch of fence themselves. And then the volunteers came in and put up new fences. I guess they helped roll up wire too.

**Diana:** So who were some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful during and after the fire?

**Bessie:** The agencies that came in...?

**Diana:** Or people or even agencies here.

**Bessie:** Well, you might say the bankers. You know, they were telling people where to go and so on. And the feed mill, the Kays. They do a tremendous job. They were on the phone nonstop. Randal Spare did a lot for it.

**Diana:** All the veterinarians and people that came. So what effect, physical and financial or mental, do you think the fire has had on people?

**Bessie:** Well, it's brought our community and all of us together again. We seem to be a close-knit community after this. And having so many volunteers coming in from all over the United States has really made an impression upon us and, I think, on everybody.

**Diana:** So can you perceive anything positive that's resulted from the fire?

**Bessie:** Well, the Mennonites came in and you know we just appreciated everybody that came in to help.

**Diana:** Do you think there any long term effects from the fire that we'll. Have for a couple of years?

**Bessie:** Well. I don't know whether there will be. Bill just made the statement that the grass and the wheat are coming back real good, and there hasn't been too much damage to it.

**Diana:** Need rain.

**Bessie:** Yes.

**Diana:** So what can you do, or have you done to prepare for a future fire or other catastrophe like this? Have you made plans? I mean since you saw people's houses get burned, did you think of anything that you would like to save if there was another time?

**Bessie:** I guess I haven't thought too much about it.

**Diana:** Is there anything the community can do to prepare? Is there anything the community could do to prepare for another fire or another emergency? Do you think we acted pretty well on this fire? The community as a whole?

**Bessie:** Well, I think so. They did the best they could. I know they're training, the EMTs and the fire department are all training to do better. And we appreciate that, what they're doing.

**Diana:** You said you never had to evacuate before.

**Bessie:** No.

**Diana:** Have you been in other emergency situations? Like tornadoes or anything like that? What did you do to prepare for that?

**Bessie:** Well, it seemed like we had tornadoes when I was in Sitka. I lived there as a child. We were always going to the cave, my mom and Grace and I were. I don't remember Dad going to the cave. I guess he was out in the field. And then when we lived in Lexington, I was preparing in my house, I always had things ready to go to the cave, because I had to go many times. And I would take the children down there and have light and something to eat till it was over.

**Diana:** Did you have to stay in the cave very long?

**Bessie:** Well, not a long time. I remember one time when, when, Velmaree (Harden) came over to my cave to come down there with me. I think it was Paul that was the baby and she was running and bringing him and we all got down to the cave together. I think that was a tornado that came pretty close there, but it didn't strike. In fact, we never had a tornado hit our place at Lexington. And I think it was at Sitka that one rocked the house one time when I was a baby. That's what my folks told me.

**Diana:** So you said when we evacuated this time that you took your music.

**Bessie:** Yes.

**Diana:** Which music did you take?

**Bessie:** Well, I had just had Sunday. I had just played for Sunday on the organ and I had my music right there on the organ bench. So I stuck it in there. I don't know why I did that.

**Diana:** So was it all the music you usually play? Or was it the stuff for services?

**Bessie:** Well, it was what I had played the day before.

**Diana:** So what about your harmonica?

**Bessie:** No, I didn't take it.

**Diana:** Wasn't close huh?

**Bessie:** It's right underneath here. My recliner, I have it down there beside my recliner. No, I didn't take it.

**Bessie:** And my Bible was right there and I got it in there.

**Diana:** So how long did you think you were going to be gone?

**Bessie:** I had no idea. I didn't even think about. I just left with Jesicka.

**Diana:** Was Jesicka pretty much in a state? Was she was really excited?

**Bessie:** No, she didn't pressure me like that. That's just all she said to me. She had just had a notice from the fireman to get away from her house. Right away. So she left her house out there and she came in here and she was at Chance's for a while. I saw her come in and then she came over to my house and Chance wasn't there at that time.

**Diana:** Probably not. He wasn't there because they evacuated the hospital, so he was probably there.

**Bessie:** And so she came. And you know, I was very thankful that she did. So I wanted to give tribute to her. For her kindness and for thinking of me and thinking to pick me up and take me. And then we went out to Janae and Matt's, and so I also want to thank them for including me and their family. And that I stayed with them and the camper. And also I want to thank Chris Wilkinson's dog for keeping me warm through the night.

**Diana:** That's pretty special! So, do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd like to share?

**Bessie:** Well, that Tuesday night. We still had reports that there was... that we might have to evacuate again. So I looked out the west door and I could see the flames up there on the bank there. And then after a while it kind of died down so, I think they were fighting it over there. But anyway, that was rather frightening to see those flames so close. I didn't take my clothes off. I thought if I have to leave in the night, I want to be ready. I just went to bed.

**Diana:** Take your shoes off?

**Bessie:** Probably did. But, we didn't have anything like that. So, we're thankful for that. And then the next morning, I packed up my clothes. Well, in fact I was packing the night before because Marilyn called me the night before, and I started packing. And I was ready to go the next morning by, I think, maybe nine o'clock.

**Diana:** On Wednesday?

**Bessie:** Yeah, it was on Wednesday.

**Diana:** So what did Marilyn say when she called you? Did she just say, "We're coming to get you." Or, "Tammy is going to bring you and you're going to come stay with us?"

**Bessie:** No, she said. "Well, do you want to come in to stay with us?" I said I didn't think that I needed to. I didn't think the smoke was bothering me. And so I wasn't sure that I needed to be going. But I said, "Well, I guess that will be okay. I'll come and stay with you." It's a good thing I did, because I kept away from that smoke and didn't get sick from it.

**Diana:** So then by the time you came back the smoke smell was pretty much gone? Or could you still smell smoke when you came home?

**Bessie:** You know, you could still smell some smoke when I got home.

**Diana:** So, did you watch the YouTube videos of the thing?



**Bessie:** Yes.

**Diana:** And how did that make you feel, seeing all that they were showing?

**Bessie:** I was crying. Oh and I want to thank my family for thinking of me and wanting me to be safe from this smoke and everything when I didn't think I needed it. They were right, I did need it, so I want to thank them for all the help they did for me. That was good.

**Diana:** So do you have any other things you want to mention? Any other thoughts?

**Bessie:** I think that's all of the thoughts that I have.

**Diana:** So thank you very much for sharing your experience with us.

**Bessie:** You're welcome. (Many thanks to Leo the dog for keeping Bessie warm and comfortable!)