

Sidebar quote: "It burned everything but the dirt."

Diana: Today is November 18th, 2017.

Diana: What is your name?

Carol: Carol Woodruff.

Diana: Where do you live?

Carol: Englewood.

Diana: And what is your occupation?

Carol: Retired.

Diana: What did you use to do?

Carol: I worked at the elevators.

Diana: Okay, Carol, and how old are you?

Carol: Seventy four.

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

Carol: Actually Eugene got the page. We had discussed the fact that they were predicting lots of bad things. And he got it, the page came and he said, "Can I go?" and I really didn't answer. I just looked at him. And then Faye they called me and said that Bernard had called them, Bernard Smith, and said there was a fire west of him.

Then she called me in a little while and she said, they called and said the fire is at the Mackie Bridge, which is about ten miles away. I thought, "That's a long way from Faye and Frosty." But I had talked to her and I knew that Frosty was leaving and that she was there and she had told me that Ashland Fire Department was going to come foam their house. She said, "What does that mean?"

And I did know enough about what they do to tell her that they were literally going to foam it! And that it would run all over everything. Then at some point. I lost communication because she lost electricity. Eugene had said, "Do you want to go out there?" and I said, "No." Then I fixed dinner and we knew the fire trucks were all going west, you know, because we could see them.

He said again, "Do you want to go?" and I said, "Yes." Well, we get out there and there's Bill Neier and Darren Osborne, and Ethan and Layton Ediger (Faye and Frosty's grandsons). And they said we couldn't get out there. I guess I wasn't even smart enough to be scared. I mean, I just thought it was because of the smoke and stuff. I really at that moment didn't realize the fire was as close. We were standing there talking and Bill looked at me said, "Look, that pasture is burning." I had no idea there was fire within ten miles, you know. I had my phone, and Tanya called me and she said, "Girl what about this." She said, "Do you think we should maybe start gathering up our horses and dogs and stuff?"

I said. "Yeah, I would." I said, "We're going back to town." And I said, "We're going to leave."

Diana: So does Englewood have a siren that sets off when there's a fire?

Carol: Rarely. They just page the guys anymore. The only time they set the sirens off anymore is for a tornado. Mostly they just work through the pages.

Diana: And did you get an evacuation notice?

Carol: It was on the phone when I got home two days later. Because we came and we... as I've told people, the first things I loaded was my two cats because I knew I had one chance to get them in the carriers. And I wanted to because they're my babies.

Diana: Right.

Carol: And then we kind of stood there and what do you take? And Shelly's always on the phone, "Mom, why are you still there, and then what are you taking?" And I said, "First, I've got the cats and then I got the medicine." Because Sue Miller told me one time, when she had to evacuate, she said, "I didn't take my medicine." She said somebody said the first thing you ought to get is your medicine." Shelly said to get Uncle Joe's letters. Uncle Joe was my uncle who was killed in the war and I wrote this down there. But we have the original letters and she wanted them. We have a genealogy book that is Eugene's family that's this thick. I mean literally. "Take it, Mom." And I stood there and looked around, and Diana, you don't know what to take.

I brought clothes for two days. And I think now... You know, I thought later, of my folks' senior pictures. A lot of things, but you just don't know.

Diana: So do you remember what time it was?

Carol: I don't, I honestly have no clue what time anything was.

Diana: And where did you go and how did you get there?

Carol: We went to Ashland and we went through the Angle Road. I asked Eugene, I said, "The Highway or the Angle Road?" He said, "I'd go the Angle Road because the fire... you know."

Diana: At that time, it was going northeast.

Carol: And when we got to Acres, Gardener's hay was on fire. I had really not seen any other fire but I could see their hay bales burning.

And I said to Eugene, "Do I keep going?" and he said, "Well yeah, because you don't have any choice." Right. And he said, "I think there's enough country roads, that if we get, you know, we can go in... So we got to Ashland, and we pulled in there at Millie Fudge's deal, and there were two people getting in an ambulance. And Eugene said, "Well, go ask them what to do." I didn't know what to do, because I didn't know them.

The young woman said, "We're evacuating Ashland." And she said, "You can go to Coldwater." I didn't really want to go to Coldwater, and Shelley had said, "If you could get to my house," she said, "you can't get inside, but you can be there." Well, I looked north, and I didn't want any part of what it looked like up there. And I was aware of the wind shift thing because, when we were talking to her while we were still at home, she said, "Mom, the wind is blowing from the north up here. And we still hadn't...

Diana: Right.

Carol: So I knew the wind was going to shift, and so we went south at the Sitka corner and went on down there. And that's one of the times I suggested that if Eugene didn't like the way I was doing things, he could stand on the side of the road. He probably didn't tell you that!

But we went south and we had switched the radio to the K101, and Jay Douglas was saying. "We have people calling in here and I don't know where to tell them to go." He said, "There's a fire in Englewood and Ashland, in Clark County. There's fire at Harper County there are fires back to south of..." You know, he said, "I don't know where to tell people to go."

Well, we went on south and came back across the state line road there to 283.

Diana: Did you see any fire when you were coming across that part?

Carol: By then, we could see the fire north of us. You could definitely see the whole thing north of you.

Diana: Was it still daylight?

Carol: Yeah. Yeah. And we stopped there at the highway and saw Brenda go, by, for one. And Eugene said, "Well, go south and see what's going on. So we started south and he said to me a couple times, "Get in one of these wheat fields". Quite honestly, I wasn't sure about a wheat field because as dry as it was, I thought the wheat, even though it's green is still, you know, crunchy! And it was! Well, when we were going south. We met Rick Walker and he stopped and he said, "Let's just pull in one of these wheat fields." And it was Rick and his mom and dad, and I think there were a couple cars. I don't know how they got from south of us, but they were not people we knew.

But we sat down there in the wheat field with Rick and Joyce and Harry and Brenda and Pope. And I think there were a couple other people. You know kind of some of the Englewood clique. And then Brenda was talking to one of her friends who was sitting in her front, in her car. And she was really upset because she wasn't sure they were going to be able to save her house. And the good firemen said, "If they're there, they will save your house!"

When we came back to town, when they said it was clear, we came back up here. And quite honestly, when we came in from the south, the airport pasture was on fire. The trees were still burning down there at the Brown house.

Diana: Was it was still light?

Carol: I don't know, it probably was five or six o'clock but I really don't know, because I never looked at my watch. I thought, "Are we smart coming back to town?" But we came, and we just followed Brenda. When we went by our house, it was there, so we just followed Brenda because I knew that she was, you know, upset.

Diana: Needed support.

Carol: Yes, she did. And when we drove up, yes, her house was still there. But as we drove up the fuel house just blew, I mean it was just instant... They had pulled her pickup out into the park. But her lawnmower was still over there under her carport. She said, "I wish..." She went over and got it! She and Eugene just walked over there. She started it and drove it out!

We stayed with her a while and then, you know, I really didn't know what to do so, Eugene said, "I want to go to fire house. Of course. And he stopped there and was talking to... I think he's the guy that works for Gardiners.

Diana: Scott Tune?

Carol: Yeah. And they were filling the big tanker out of a tanker that Rick Whisenhunt had brought up from Laverne. We were standing there talking to them. I think Josh came up, Josh McKinney because his eyes were so swollen! They were in and out, you know, and they all stopped and talked to Eugene. And then again, as we were standing there, The Boutz place just north, just literally... suddenly everything was on fire. And the firemen kind of looked and said, "We watered that place down!"

You know. I did, because somebody said to me, "Monty's house is on fire." So I drove up and around, but then I backed up, and yes, Monty's trailer was burning. But I couldn't see Jerry and Joyce's place, which I think by then was probably gone. But I just backed up then and came back, because I didn't want to interfere if somebody else was coming up or if they were going to go there and do something. The firemen just kind of spread out. Brenda came by because she was, of course, checking Jean's house. And there was a tree limb that had fallen, and she thought maybe they needed to put it out. We're were just doing various things.

We drove around a little bit. I saw smoke back to the southeast, and I really thought it was the old Methodist church, which would have been a good thing. But, it was Gary Wood's house. And there again, it seemed to me like they just were instantly, you know, there was no little bit of fire. They just blew. And I don't know why. But we drove around and we went down First Street by the Christian church. And I honestly thought it had burned Erin Fast's house because the fence was all gone. And the next morning, when I went by, no, the house was there!

Diana: The fence was gone.

Carol: Yes, the fence was gone. We were concerned there again about Robin and Carol's because they have all those trees. And it got darn close and of course, it burned across, you know some. But nothing really got east of the highway. And we thought about leaving my cats at home. But at the time, there was fire over by Jeff Krier's two houses, just burning down on the fence line is what it was. And I thought you know that gets one of those two houses, that's going to be a big fire. But there again there were no firemen. They just, they just had to let some things burn.

And I think they went by and checked them occasionally and they're not going anywhere and it didn't burn those houses down.

Diana: So about when did they leave Englewood and start toward Ashland?

Carol: I really don't know because I didn't think when we left that the firemen had gone that way. Some of them may have because I don't think we saw them all. They've got three or four different trucks and of course, they were filling the tankers and things. I really don't know when they went to Ashland. I can't say that they did. They were trying to keep little fires from becoming bigger fires here, and some of them may have already been over there. I really can't tell you that because we just saw some of them.

And at some point, we decided we better go on the Shelly's, and there again as far as time wise, Diana, it had to have been dark. Because I don't remember, well, it was dark enough that we couldn't see the damage.

Diana: So how did you go to Shelly's. Did you go to Minneola?

Carol: We went north.

Diana: Did somebody stop you?

Carol: No.

Diana: Was there anybody at the 12 Mile Corner?

Carol: Yes, but they weren't stopping North traffic. They were stopping south traffic because that's one thing I remember now. At the time, I thought, "Why are all these cars parked on the north side of the road?" And I think that they may have come over and said, "Where are you going?" And we said, "We're going to our daughter's in Bucklin. We're from Englewood you know."

And so they let us go. We went to Minneola and got gas. And when we were there at the corner store there were some people in there concerned about where they could get through, because they couldn't go south. And it really hadn't occurred to me why they couldn't. South! But there were a lot of cars up there that they were stopping traffic.

Diana: There were some people that were out there because that's as far as they went, like from Ashland. Hayley Walker was sitting out there and they were at Kyle Kaltenbach's. They met at the 12 Mile Corner. So, how long did you stay at Shelly's?

Carol: We stayed two nights, and of course, getting to Shelly's... Did Eugene tell you? Well, they live a mile south of Bucklin on 34. They wouldn't let us go down there. And again I'm on the phone with Shelly, "Where are you, mom?" You know.

Diana: You can come in from the other way, the east side.

Carol: Well, you can if you know how! I'd never... I had been once or twice east and back up to the highway but not enough that... it was dark by then, way dark. So, Shelly said, "Well, tell them it's only a mile down, Mom." And I said, "We did. They said, 'You can't go south."

So Kevin came in to get us, and they stopped Kevin, and they said "Well, you can go to town, but you can't come back." So he took us east. And there again because Kevin, well, I doubt Shelly, she might have, but he wasn't raised in this area. He didn't know all the dirt roads and he said, "I wasn't real sure where to turn." Because we're going east and I kept thinking, did he turn and I missed it? Because Eugene got in with him.

Well, he said, "I went the way that I knew right that I've been." So we kind of went a long way. But we got to Shelly's and she was on the phone with my sister! But we stayed two nights with them and we wouldn't have gone back the second night had she, not just kind of... "Mom, I don't know."

Diana: So, did you go home Tuesday?

Carol: We came back down the next day.

Diana: So, did you come 34 did you go back to Minneola?

Carol: No. We came down 34.

Diana: So, what kind of things did you see on your way back home?

Carol: A lot of really extreme damage and that it was a lot closer to Shelly's house than we knew. But the damage was so dramatic. I mean, it just burned everything. You know, there was nothing. And then of course, to Ashland, basically there was the fire damage and then you come west of Ashland a little ways and then you run out of it again. And so then when we started down and got to it here, I really was.

I said to Shelly, "It burned everything but the dirt." And I just didn't think about it being that bad. I just... I've seen fires, but... they're little fires and there's usually burns here and nothing burned here. You know, this burned everything. I mean, fences, sagebrush.

Diana: Did you see a lot of dead cattle on your way back?

Carol: No, we didn't, because we were just on the highway, but no, I can't say that we saw [any] coming down or any dead animals of any kind. We did, Shelley and I went out after we got down here, we went north to see how far and to see if it had gone up to Eugene's dad's place which it didn't. And I kind of think we wanted to see because we'd heard you know that the Quonset hut at the Grove Ranch collapsed. We lived out there for a while, and it's kind of special to the kids. We then were going around and go down by Oley's where my folks used to live on.

Yes, there was a sign there said Road Closed and we went around it and then we got down there and the bridge was burned out!

So we backed up, but we did then go west of town and go out to where my folks lived. There's nothing left out there. That's when we saw some... We really didn't see dead cattle, but we saw some in a couple of pastures out there that looked really bad and lost. I didn't know whose they might have been. Then Greg's south pasture that he calls, oh I can't you what he calls it, the West Pasture is I think what he called it, there was a little calf out there, by itself, just standing out in the middle of it.

Our thought was, do you just leave it? What do you do with the baby calf? So then later, we picked up Kevin and Eugene and went back that direction and then we went south there at that junction and the baby was still there. There was a baby calf in the ditch there that we thought was dead. But then June Smith, came by because we'd met Bernard south there by the old Frame place we call it. He was gathering cattle and putting them on wheat pasture there. And June came back with this baby calf, and it wasn't dead, but it wasn't the one that had been in the pasture. I think Laurie Kaye told me that Chris picked it up.

You had no way of knowing whose it was. It was a baby calf. You know.

Diana: No mama around.

Carol: Yeah, and we observed that out at my folks' place there was nothing. There was a mulberry tree that we all used to joke about because the thing put out mulberries like nobody's business. The tree was still there after the fire, but I think Greg, when he went in and cleaned up the place, knocked it down. Honestly, that upset my sister greatly, seeing there's nothing left there. That's the only place she ever lived. I lived over on the hill. That was my dad's for ten years, but Sandy was born after we moved over to the other place.

Diana: How did that make you feel, driving around seeing all the black and nothing?

Carol: Well. I was just really kind of stunned because it was more damage than I'd ever seen, and like I said I've been... I've seen fires before, you know. They never affected me greatly, they were always... You went to and looked to see where this fire went, you know.

Diana: More curiosity than.

Carol: Yeah, and the fact that it was such a big area and burned so much. And I keep thinking in my mind, and I've asked a couple people, was this a solid wall of fire or was it... It really would serve, you know. And I think that it must have... I mean, I've heard some people say it was a solid wall of fire, but then there were also little fingers out. And of course, Eugene said, you know, that day, "I'm not afraid of fire. If you know how to take care or how to act in a fire, you're..."

Diana: You've been around this area for a long time and you've seen range or pasture fires, or even controlled burns. Do those compare to this in any way?

Carol: No, because this was just, first of all, so fast. I mean really, it was so fast that you didn't have time to think about it. All you were doing was trying to save yourself and hoping everybody else was too.

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

Carol: I don't know. I mean, coming back into town was strange because, there again, we could see that the fire was all north and northeast of us. But the fact that the airport pasture was on fire and there were no firemen there! And it was because they couldn't be. They were busy doing other things. And I think that they apparently thought it's not going to go anywhere anyway. And the fact that there were still those cedar trees there on fire, I thought for a minute, is our house going to be there?

And it's not that I have a fancy house or anything, but I've thought more since the fire than I did that day, how much I would have lost. You know, you take things so for granted. I don't have anything that's real fancy. It's just sentimental. But still, I was thinking the other day, what would we have done if our house burned down? You know, where would we have gone? Me and my two cats and Eugene!

Diana: Who are some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful, either during the fire or after the fire?

Carol: Honestly, I never talk to anybody because we didn't lose anything. You know we... I was here the day Pat Roberts came, and I think Joyce talked to him

Diana: So did you volunteer to go do food or anything like that? Here at the school to pass out stuff?

Carol: I came in. Faye and I both came in and set up and helped sort canned goods and stuff like that back in that back room.

Diana: And did you get a lot?

Carol: Oh, heavens yes. We were up here one day, and I think Janet was here too at that time, and we came up and spent probably half a day in there sorting things. And the next morning I came up and there was more!

Diana: Did you get a lot of clothes?

Carol: You know, we got clothes, and I did come up one day and help them go through clothes. By then it was like a week or so later, and I really wished that the clothing and things could have been sorted before we got them. There was a lot of stuff that we couldn't use at all. You know, there was a lot of kids clothing and there's not a lot of kids in Englewood. And then there were things that were really nice, and there were things that I felt like were garage sale stuff that somebody had found a good place to get rid of. But there was a lot of good stuff. You know there was a lot of good things. And as far as the food and the toiletries, we shouldn't have had to buy shampoo for four or five years.

There's still stuff back there that Sue has brought down recently from Ashland because she said they were kind of wanting to get some of it....

Diana: A lot of water?

Carol: Yes. A lot of water! That's what I told somebody when we finally got to a point where we were looking at what we had, there was water in the kitchen clear down that south wall. There was water in that room that

we've got locked now, clear down the north wall. There was water in the hall. Yeah, we got a lot of water. But we used it all. I mean. We encouraged people that can use that water because of our situation where we're not supposed to drink city water anyway. And you know, it was there and we needed to use it anyway. Most people did come and get water.

Diana: So did you have a lot of hay convoys come through town?

Carol: You know, I didn't see a lot of convoys but I know that there were a lot of people who got hay. I know Greg got hay, I know Frosty got hay. I know that a lot of people got hay.

Diana: Did they stack some here in town?

Carol: They did for a while, but then they moved it. I think they moved it so they could control who was getting it. Maybe. So that it wasn't just... Sometimes people abuse things.

Diana: Can you perceive anything positive that resulted from the fire.

Carol: Oh, I think people work together better. Of course, I'm a little prejudiced about fire departments but, I think the firemen worked beautifully and that's another thing. June and I fed the firemen and the guys that came in from other areas...

Diana: The taskforce that came in?

Carol: Yes, we fed them one night. We got stuff out of the stuff that had been donated to us and used quite a bit of that to feed them. She fixed spaghetti and we got the spaghetti and spaghetti sauce here and we made cakes. I actually, and not just me, but yeah we came up several times and helped fix them.

Diana: So what effect physical or financial or emotional has the fire caused? Which ones are more noticeable?

Carol: I think emotional. I honestly think you could really say we all kind of suffered post-traumatic syndrome to a certain extent because it's not something I'd ever experienced, anything like this. Like I said, Eugene's a fireman, and he's gone to a lot of grass fires and things, but this one was such a big area and to have people who lost their homes that were friends of ours and who lost cattle and who lost... A whole lot of financial stress on them. I personally didn't, but if your friends do you do. And you didn't know what to do to help them. To just be there for them is all you can do.

Diana: Do you think that all of the volunteers that came after the fire, do you think they pushed people into making decisions to rebuild? Do you think that changed how we looked at the fire? I mean we had to move on?

Carol: I know I don't think right here, because some of the ones that lost their homes left anyway. I mean like Kenneth Boutz. He didn't stay. Gary Woods has had a place to go to. Jerry and Joyce, their children gave them the house, so they... And that was before they lost Monty, which I still think was related to the fire.

That was hard on all of us. But I think they're going to be happy where they're at now. I think now that they've finally gotten moved in and everything, that they're OK with it. I mean it's going to take them...

Jerry and Joyce, because their family is here, yes they're going to stay here. Really that was the families... I mean, like I said, Gary Woods is staying in Gerald's house that she already owned. They're really the ones that lost, as far as homes and things. And I can't see anybody leaving, you know. But it does make you think. What would we have done? You know, Eugene and I?

Diana: So have you made any plans or can you do, or have you done something to prepare for another fire or emergency type thing?

Carol: No I really haven't. It's one of those things that if it happens again, we'll deal with it, I guess.

Diana: So has community done anything, or can they do something?

Carol: Well. Millie has been down and talked to us, to the council, and they have discussed getting some generators. So that we would have electricity and water. I don't know who was, and Olen may have told you but somebody contacted him and got a generator up here to us the next day.

Diana: He said there were some companies in Laverne that brought some up.

Carol: I think that was Olen's boys... I think that was because of the fact that Rick and Duane both at the time were working in Laverne. They got somebody who helped us. We've talked about sirens because the siren right now, they set it off I think once this summer for a tornado. It's just like I always said would happen, Eugene and I were out there watching!

Diana: Did it quit?

Carol: It ran for a long time. It was actually one of those things that it was moving north and I think they may have set the ones off in Ashland too but they didn't realize this one was on. So they didn't shut it off till somebody called and said, "Hey, this thing's been running 30 minutes!"

Diana: Because whoever set it off supposed to turn it off.

Carol: But you know as far as making... and I don't know what you'd do different. I mean if you're going to live here and you live in an area... And I have told my husband, that I was a lot happier person before I knew. Even before this fire, because he's gone to some of these other fires around it. He said to me one time, you know, people don't know how fast the fire can travel. And I told him I thought I was happier being blissfully ignorant. Because then I would sit here and look at Englewood, and particularly when they went somewhere else to fight a fire and we've got one truck here.

You know it happens to other towns too. And we sit basically surrounded by pasture. You know there's a few wheat fields maybe south of us. Sometimes Greg has the field south of us and sometimes he doesn't.

Diana: The closest mutual aid is either Meade, Ashland or Minneola.

Carol: And I know when Eugene was fire chief, he made them leave one. I think they do. I don't know. He's not running it anymore. But then any other thing is, there are two of them. My thing, I guess was, I looked around and because Englewood has so many vacant lots. You know fire strike in a vacant lot that's not mowed could go pretty fast.

Diana: So you need to do some mowing?

Carol: Well, but if it's private property. I mean they keep things pretty well mowed. But there again, there's still a lot of places in Englewood that are open lots where nobody lives and they don't maintain them.

Diana: So what do you think about evacuations during a fire. Do you think it is as important as like a tornado or something?

Carol: Yes. Because a fire can cover a greater area than a tornado and that may not be a true statement either. I guess you can see them both coming, but I really think if I was honest, I'd say I am more frightened of a tornado than a fire. And maybe that's because my husband knows fires.

Diana: Yes, he's not afraid of fires! And always in the past, the tornadoes have been the thing that's moving the fastest. But this time the wind didn't act like normal fires that they'd been used to.

Carol: No. And you know, Englewood Fire Department, and Ashland Fire Department, any of them, normally they've all relied on mutual aid. Mutual aid was not existent that day because everybody else was busy trying to save their area. And it was because of so many of these spontaneous things. I was talking to Nina, and she said when she came home from Laverne, she was talking to Rick and there wasn't anything burning. By the time she got home, there was a fire south of Gate and they just popped up. I guess it was combustion and low humidity that day. Because we were standing out there and Bill said, "Oh, look that pasture's on fire." I really thought the fire was ten miles away from us yet, and there that thing was burning! It really got my attention.

Diana: So do you have any other thoughts about this experience that you'd like to share?

Carol: I just hope I never have to come through it again. I think it brought people together and people were very generous. People didn't, you know, like the hay.

And no, the news media didn't even know we existed. I mean it might have been on one little short reference to us that night.

The rest of the time it was like, "Oh, that's over and done with." Had it not been for Facebook, I have to say I forwarded or shared a lot of things so other people would be aware of what was going on out here. I know there's been other places that have had bad fires and things. But our area's, well, most people don't even know Kansas is out here. Let's be honest.