

Frank York

Diana: Today is February 7th, 2018. What is your name?

Frank: My name is Frank York.

Diana: Where do you live?

Frank: I live seven miles southeast of Ashland, or three miles southwest of Sitka.

Diana: So what is your occupation?

Frank: I have worked for Stockgrowers State Bank for forty-one and a half years, almost 42. I also farm and ranch out east of Ashland.

Frank: How old are you?

Frank: I am a young sixty-eight and a half years old.

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

Frank: We started hearing about a fire about 11:00 am at the bank. Of course, I think that might have come over the Englewood dispatch. We were all very concerned because from that area we looked at the flag outside the bank. The flag was sticking straight out in the opposite direction of Englewood. Of course, we had heard it started south of Englewood in Oklahoma. We were immediately aware of the possibility that this could be bad early, early on. At 11:50, the local fire siren went off, right before noon. Our local fireman, Bill Neier, took off and we knew it was bad, or was going to get bad.

Diana: So Ashland had to evacuate later in the afternoon. What types of things did the bank do to get ready for that evacuation?

Frank: Well, we were monitoring it during that whole time. In answer to your question, Jay Canton had a pager, so we were listening to the chatter. We had received an e-mail from Sherry Neier saying she had talked to Bill. On the e-mails, I recollect, she said, "This is really bad, pray for the firemen." So we knew early on. I thought about calling Bill, but I knew he wouldn't have time to talk and to leave the guys alone. But it seemed like maybe he called me and said, "Frank, if you know of any people in that area that might have a tractor and disk, please call them and tell them we are going to need some help." I could think of just two or three people in that area that still would have a disk; a lot of people have gone to no-till farming and have sprayers. But I did make a couple of calls.

So further preparation was, at 3 o'clock, we knew it was getting bad because of the smoke cloud coming into town. You could actually smell it, and it was starting to blot out the sun. Three o'clock was our normal closing time, and Kendal Kay had gotten a call. He is, of course, our mayor, and we made the decision we were going to shut everything down, and everybody was to get out and go home. Prior to that, there wasn't a lot of in-house preparation outside of just praying and concern for the firemen and the first responders.

Diana: So you have an emergency plan at the bank?

Frank: We do, that we review every year, usually in the spring. Of course, a wild prairie fire was probably nothing that anybody had ever prepared for. Our first thought is tornado. Not too many floods! Things that are natural disasters would be wind storms or tornadoes that we kind of have in our scenario and that we practice for and plan for. The prairie fire, we had actual experience this year.

Diana: So do you have an offsite place where you keep copies of everything that you have at the bank?

Frank: Yes, we do, and we go over that and prepare for a different scenario every year. But like I said, I don't believe a fire had been on our list. We started doing this after the Greensburg tornado. I think most businesses across the state have some strategic plan for an emergency of this nature.

Diana: So once they decided to close, were you still in town when they gave the evacuation order?

Frank: I had hightailed it for home. My wife Sue was there; I think I might have called her somewhere in there and said, "Hey, we're heading out. This thing's looking serious. Keep an eye out." She, of course, could see the smoke. The smoke was rolling in. I got home about 3:15 to 3:30, and I no sooner had pulled in my driveway than my cell phone went off that gave the evacuation orders. So I just kind of played with, "Should we leave or should I stay here and defend the fort?"

Diana: Did you expect it to get there?

Frank: Well, actually I didn't. But there again, the smoke was blowing still out of the southwest right towards our direction. And it's hard to judge at that point still, pretty much daylight. You can't see flames of course, but as far as I knew it might have been just right over the hill. The intensity of the smoke was growing minute by minute. So we decided to do that thing that you always see on TV if you've got 10 minutes, what are you going to take from the house? We started loading our car. One of our cars, and then I decided, we have a dog. I didn't want a dog in a nice car, so I said, "You drive the car, and I'll drive the pickup with our dog, Zoey." And then we just kept packing items that you would want to take.

I had my tax work on the computer, so I unplugged the computer and took that, photo albums, the things that you normally can't replace. Pictures of some artwork that has value too. Sue had thrown a couple of suitcases of clothes together.

Diana: Where did you decide to go?

Frank: Originally, we thought we would go over to Bev York's and then kind of plan there. We had called Bev to make sure she was aware of it. Then I suggested we call Eldora McMinimy, which was just the south of Sitka there. I think about the time we were trying to deliberate, we got a message that said, "Go to Coldwater." That is probably good because if we'd gone south to Buffalo or something like that, most of those people got moved out too. So in our transit, we found out that Bev was right behind us as we turned onto the Highway 34 south of Sitka.

Of course, as we went by Eldora's house, I pulled in. I could see that she was trying to carry a suitcase out to her car. I helped her get out of her garage and into her car and made sure she knew to follow us or stay close to us. We told her that everybody was heading to Coldwater.

Diana: So did you take all your vehicles to Coldwater?

Frank: Actually, I left out a part. Sue has her own car, and I said, "Maybe we better take this over to Bev's," thinking we were more in the line of fire than Bev's. Sue told me afterward, if we'd been thinking, we should have just driven it out into the middle of a wheatfield. It would have been fine. After I left, I thought, "Why didn't I drive my two tractors out in the middle of the wheatfield? It would have made sense too, but you can't think of everything. So we got to Coldwater, I would say, about 4:15 or so. Eldora showed up and so did Bev.

Diana: Did you get to the high school?

Frank: We went directly to the high school. I think Sue was low on gas, so she thought, "No telling where we might end up at night." She stopped and got some gas, and we camped out at the cafeteria in Coldwater for the rest of the evening.

Diana: So on your way over, were you in a line of vehicles?

Frank: No. There was traffic but not heavy traffic at 3:45 when we actually got away. I could look back in my mirror, and I could tell it was getting darker. So we felt, for Sue's protection and the dog's protection, I felt I was doing the right thing. I do remember as I left the front of the house, I stopped, got my cell phone out, and took a picture of the house that had been in our family for 105 years. It was my grandfather's house; my dad was raised there, and I've lived there for 30 some years. I didn't know whether I'd ever see the house again. At that point, it looked like this was pretty serious. I have that picture on my cell phone yet, and it's just all gray and dark behind it.

Diana: Could you smell smoke?

Frank: Oh yes, the smell was very, very much so. And that's why I thought, "This thing could just be over the hill," as intense as that smoke was. The wind was blowing every bit of 50 miles an hour. I'm glad I stopped to help Eldora because she was having trouble managing in the wind and carrying the suitcase.

Diana: So when you got to Coldwater, was the Red Cross already setting up? Or were they later?

Frank: They were later. We just sat around in a surreal kind of atmosphere, thinking, "You see this on TV in California and the fires there are even worse than in Colorado when they have fires. Everybody evacuated to some local spot." You never really think it could happen to you. Immediately, cell phones started going off, and people were huddling around. I remember the Kellenbergers were there and at that point, I think the word was they had lost their house.

Our hearts went out for them because that's what we had heard. A few minutes later, we heard that wasn't the case. That was good. We were getting reports about the Walkers down in Englewood and different people. We heard about the Gardiners, Marc and Eva's situation, and just different reports started filtering in. It was a surreal feeling, but it was comforting to be around people you knew. Even though the anxiety was there and the fear of the unknown and what could happen the rest of the night. It was about 6:00 pm, Neil Kay and Gail were sitting there because a lot of the Protection folks been evacuated also. So we had a mix of Ashland and Protection folks sitting there. You were not there.

Diana: We went to Buffalo.

Frank: You went to Buffalo with the south crowd! Okay. I went over to Neil and Gail Kay's table, and he had his cell phone. He had a picture that showed the path of the fire on a map. By that time, the wind had switched out of the northwest, and he showed me around north of Ashland. He had evidently heard it had gone through Bouziden's. He said, "It's headed towards Sitka." And I said, "Well, I may be looking to rent a home or something." At that time the scope and the breadth of it took hold of me, that this wasn't just a small little fire. This was a massive crisis. So we chatted with several people.

Diana: What do you do for a meal?

Frank: They fed us. I understand that Dave's Pizza over there, I didn't know this till later, but all of a sudden about 20 boxes of pizza showed up. It wasn't very long after that the Red Cross showed up, and they had sandwiches as well.

Diana: What do you with your dog?

Frank: I left Zoey out in the pickup, and we'd go out and check on her. Some people brought their animals into the school. Then about the time they started setting up cots and people were bedding down, they asked people to take their pets over to a kennel that was nearby. I think John Kellenberger made that announcement. It was a good thing to do, to put their animals away, but we left ours in the pickup all night.

Diana: So by the time you got to Coldwater, had the wind shifted?

Frank: It had not. It shifted after we got there. In fact, after we got to Coldwater, there was still a very heavy smell of smoke traveling that same direction. It was still daylight. I'm going to say it was still 4:00 pm. What did I say, it was about 4:15 when we arrived over there. So there was still quite a bit of daylight.

Diana: So you saw a lot of smoke, a lot of ash coming in?

Frank: Not so much ash that I can recall. I remember the scent; you could smell it. And I thought, "Man, that's traveling all the way from home." In the west was a haze, though not as bad as it was when we left the Sitka area. You know, we got along. I remember about 6:30 or 7:00, Jan Endicott came up to me as I was sitting there. She said, "Frank, we need you to lead us in prayer." I looked around for an area pastor, and I said, "Well, we need to probably have a pastor do this." She said, "No, we want you."

So I stood up and got everybody's attention, and we prayed for the firemen, prayed that God would stop the winds to help them fight the fire, and just prayed for protection in general for the whole area. Of course, when I finished praying, I hadn't noticed that there was a KAKE TV camera in my face. So I guess it was recorded. My son in Pennsylvania saw it the next morning. So it went out on the air. I said, "Gee, if I'd known that, I'd have beefed it up a little bit."

Diana: So what did you tell your family? Were they aware of what was going on?

Frank: Yes, I remember I texted my daughter Emily Salmans in Hanston; she might have already known about it because they had a fire on some of their property around Hanston, on the Salman's property. So she was worried about that. We had texted her. I think I group texted all of my kids and Jennifer in New Jersey, Sue's daughter, that we were all heading to Coldwater, we were being evacuated because of the prairie fire. Of course, they all got excited and kept texting back and forth with us throughout the evening.

Diana: So did you get to spend the night on the cots?

Frank: We elected to go out into our vehicles and kind of recline the seats back. The dog was out there, so it was not a restful night. About 10:00 I got a text from Lossonn Pike who had decided to stay behind to go out and help Kirby Pike, who is a neighbor, just about two miles as the crow flies, a mile and a half south of me. So he was helping Kirb do whatever he could, Kirb was on his tractor and disk, he said. Then I got to thinking, how really I should have stayed home and done a little more preventive maintenance around our place as well. But I was there and by that time they had closed the road. So I was captive or stuck over there. But throughout the night, Losson about 12:00, I don't remember exactly what time, it was after midnight, called me and said, "Frank, I've got good news, and I've got bad news." And I thought, oh bad news can't be any form of good in this situation. And he said, "Well, first," he said, "The bad news is it's gotten in your CRP." There's a section of CRP grass that was waist high. That was my biggest fear; if it got in that CRP, it could be possible to lose the place. "It's in that CRP and heading..." he said. "But the good news is the wind." The wind had switched out of the northwest at that point.

This CRP is right east of our house, and he said, "The good news is it blew it into that CRP about midway into the pasture, and it's heading that away from here. The head fires are moving southeast away from the house." But then he paused, and he said, "Well, there might be some bad news. It's backfiring towards your house." I said, "I wish you hadn't told me the rest of the story. So how far out is it?" He said, "Oh it's probably a good 300 yards out. Maybe." He said, "It's hard to tell."

He was going back and forth, and then shortly after that, I had a text from Jim Randall, Keith Randall's son, who had come down from Garden City. I've heard later that it was after the roads were closed and he came in through the county roads to get to Keith's place to help Keith out. And so Jim was also feeding me information about our place. In fact, he did text me a picture after the electricity had gone out and everything was totally dark, so this would have been 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. You can see the silhouette of the house with the fire in the background with a reddish colored sky. He said, "Well, it's still a mile north of you in CRP." That was in my Cousin Charlene's ground, but the only thing that would stop it would be a dirt road between our place, and it was still going pretty hard. I think about that time he said the wind had died down just a little bit, but it was still burning pretty good.

About three o'clock, he took a picture of the fire line just east of my house, and you could see. Of course, it was burning against a pretty strong wind, so it wasn't moving very fast but yet it had a lot of fuel to feed it. So at about daylight, I told Sue, "The roads are still closed, but I'm going to get home."

Diana: You were pretty anxious to get there.

Frank: I was. I could not help but feel guilty all night that I didn't stay and defend the fort, as they say. So I told her at 6:00, "I'm going to go, even if I have to go the back ways," because at that time we knew the roads were probably still closed. So I went into the school and got what news I could and got a little breakfast and used the facilities. I was intent on getting on the road and getting over.

About that same time, the word came out that they'd opened the road. So I cruised home. I brought the dog and left Sue there. I said, "Give it some time; I'll call you and give you the all clear." I sped through. As I was going through Protection, there happened to be a fire crew getting gas at the gas pumps there on the highway. I pulled in there, and they were from Haskel County, the Sublette area. There were about three trucks; they were getting gas. I remember stopping and saying, "If you guys want to follow me and help save my house I'll lead you."

And they said, "Well, we have a call to go down south of Protection to the Woolfolk area, but give us your address, and we'll put it on dispatch." I did, but I thought, "Well, probably nothing will ever come of that," because I knew crews were in high demand everywhere. So I gave it to them, and I headed home.

Diana: You were going west on the highway? When's the first time you saw fire damage?

Frank: Just before the county line. I saw the Koehn house on the south side of the road. It was burned. As I progressed further, I saw the damage to the Wilsons homesteads that were burned to the ground.

Diana: What are you thinking about your own place at this time.

Frank: I'm thinking I had just gotten reports that the fireline was about a hundred yards from my front door. So I felt like, with the wind still opposite of the fuel, it was a backfire, I still felt I had a certain amount of time. As I turned at the Sitka Hill and went south, I realized everything was just black, just desolate. I was worried about Eldora's house at Sitka and your brother's house.

Diana: Right.

Frank: Both just barely escaped. In fact, at Eldora's, it came right up to the west side of the road and the highway stopped it, fortunately for her.

Diana: Was the fire around the elevator burning by the time you got home?

Frank: All the fires were out right in that area. The big timber pile that Buddy had put in there that everybody had worried, "How are we going to get rid of this?" because he was gone, was still smoking with a little flame there.

But then I went on down to our corner there by Kenny Dome's. His house was still there. I wondered about Bev's, but I didn't go on down south to check on her place. I felt like I needed to get home. So I got home, let the dog out and hurried over to my tractor. It had really cooled off that night, and my tractor was still hooked up to the drills from wheat drilling in the fall. I thought, "I need to get that unhooked and hooked up to my disk because at that point the flames were 100 yards from the house. I thought I could get out there easily with this disk and put out a fire line and probably snuff it out but it went a whole mile north and south there.

Diana: Not just a little bit.

Frank: No, the whole CRP field was burning back to the west from north to south. So Barrett Broadie was

over there, and he and Bill had been out with their spray trailer trying to help in any regard, but they were having trouble getting it started. Something had broken on it, and they thought initially the coolness had frozen something. So he came over and helped me hook up to my disk. Fortunately, the tractor started just before that, so that was a relief on a cold night. Just as I was heading over to the field and into the field, I look up and here comes a sheriff's car down my lane. It was the Comanche County deputy. Well, as it turned out it was Greg Ellis who's the Comanche County Fire Chief. I stopped and got out and I said, "Boy, am I glad to see you! Is the cavalry coming this way?" He said, "Look over there." And there were two Comanche County fire trucks coming! They came in, and one right after another got on the north end and just sprayed it out. I didn't even go out. As they were regrouping, after they got it out, they suggested I go out and plow a couple more breaks in the area that hadn't burned yet, which wasn't much but just in case it had come back around.

I have a wheat field just south of my house and a wheat field just kind of northwest of my house. I had pasture west of the house that hadn't burned yet, but from every direction you looked, at that time, you could see smoke. Even north of my house, there was still fire in the CRP north of my house. But the road seemed to be containing it at that time. So I called Sue, and she came over and about the time that she got there, I decided, "I think everything seems to be peaceful. I'll run into the bank and see what I can do there."

Diana: So the bank was open?

Frank: We opened the bank at the regular time. There was a small staff. Kendal was involved with the operation center up there as mayor and Brandon was out doing his thing. Bill was on the fire truck.

I think we had a skeleton crew, just those in town that were able to make it back from Coldwater, and a couple like Loree Krier who never left town. But that's not all bad because she was able to document it with pictures and her great book. So I hadn't been there about an hour; Sue wasn't really excited about me coming to work because she felt like, "Are we really out of danger?"

Diana: Too much smoke?

Frank: Smoke everywhere you looked, in any direction. I assured her that if I saw anything on my way to town, I'd turn around and come back. Well, there was a fire north of the road, the W Road, just north that goes back around what we call the Broadie corner there. But that road seemed to be containing any fire. Again, the wind had died down probably to 20 miles an hour at that point. It was still a pretty good wind, but it wasn't like it had been. Oh before that, I had noticed there were some cattle in a wheat pasture just south of the house. Corey McCann, who worked for Bouzidens, showed up with his four-wheeler. I saw him out there trying to get these cattle. He had already asked me if he could put them in our pens, just to locate them. So I went out and tried to help him. We eventually got about 25 head put in my corrals there. So

I told Corey, "Just leave them there." There was water and everything and they were safe. So I hadn't been in town 30 minutes at the bank, when Sue calls says, "I think you'd better get home. There is a plume of smoke out in our west pasture," the pasture that hadn't burned yet.

I said, "Sue, I just went by there; it was all stopping on the north side." She said, "I'm just telling you, the dog and I are leaving again. We're evacuating." When she said that, I decided she sounded pretty serious. I told the gals at the bank that I was headed home to see what this new excitement was all about.

I no sooner got past the elevator and had headed out on the Sitka Road than I could see this big plume of smoke. I could locate it, and it had really enlarged again. As I got closer, I could tell that it was in my west pasture. It had burned under the culvert, under the road, through a cement bridge sort of thing which was full of thistles and dead weeds from previous years. Of course, with the wind, it was just a funnel to put it over onto the other side. It reignited and spread again. So I quickly jumped back on the tractor; Sue had already left, and I went out into my west pasture around through the south gate and proceeded to disk that lineup. The wind was kicking up again, still kind of out of the northwest. So I was plowing it as far west as I could, but there was a fence that stopped me. I didn't have any wire cutters.

And then there was a big ditch, that was kind of hard, a big draw. I decided, "Well, I'll plow and get it

snuffed out the best I can." And I did that for about 15 to 20 minutes. I thought I had it pretty well under control except for the west end that I couldn't get to. About that time, I looked back to the east and what happened was it had burned down the bar ditch to a little 20-acre horse pasture just north of my house. It had gotten in that north pasture and was starting to head south towards the house. So I folded the disk up, went back around, and I was able to extinguish that fire. Just about the time I felt like things were going well, I looked back over to the west pasture, and it had jumped my fire line and was raging quickly towards my corrals, the barn, and the house, just east of that. I remember, I stopped as I was folding up the plow, and I said a little prayer. I said, "God this is bigger than I can handle, help me out here." And at that moment, I looked up and here came Ashland Rural Fire Truck 64 down the lane. I said, "Oh, thank You! That was a quick answer to prayer."

Diana: That's a big truck.

Frank: That was one of the big trucks. Jeremy Fast was driving and Darren Osborne was on the back, as was Adam Elliott. I drove the tractor, they pulled into my yard, and I told them where the gate was south of the house. I said, "Get over there."

By this time it was about a hundred yards from my corrals, and in that west pen where all the dead fire weeds were from the year before, I didn't have cattle in that particular pen, I thought, "If that gets in there, the barn will be torched immediately and could very possibly set the house on fire."

Diana: Was the wind blowing hard enough that it was hard to see through the smoke?

Frank: It was, and I didn't know how bad it was until it got on top of a bluff. As they were leaving to get over there from just north of my house, I think it was Darren, said, "Get over there and start farming." So I went behind them and started just doing a north and south break, on the west side of my pens, until I couldn't see where I was going. I realized flames were coming up under the tractor and I decided at that point I needed to exit stage right and get out of this. Plus, I knew there was a fire truck out there somewhere, and we were on a collision course any time. Then I saw a spray of water hit my windshield and I thought, "Well, they're here. They're close." So I got over to the right fence line. In a matter of about probably a half a minute, the wind blew the smoke away.

It hit my fire line and a wheat pasture just south out there, and we saved the place. I remember the fire guys asked me if I wanted them to go out in the pasture and put it out. Then they pointed back to the house, and I knew that they had meant to check the house out make sure there weren't any embers around the house, garage, or the barn. I think they sprayed around some places.

Diana: And so did they foam your house?

Frank: They didn't foam it.

Diana: They just made sure all the fire was out around there?

Frank: They sprayed some areas out in the pens where there were some weeds and stuff, just for preventative measures.

Diana: So that did that put out all the fire.

Frank: The house at our place was out of immediate danger. It proceeded to burn south across my fence line into the Broadie pasture that leads to the south of Barrett Broadie. I remember they had to refuel, and a tanker or something came in and filled them up, about that time I think I called Kirby or Kirby called me. I thought, you know, I've got a disk. I could go there and try to work on that because it could go on down towards Kirby's into Bev York's pasture CRP that hadn't burned yet. So I went over and worked the fire line in the Broadie pasture for about an hour or so as best as what I could because there's a couple of rough canyons over there too. I saw Bill and Barrett, and they were over there with their spray truck. They had it

going again.

Diana: Was this is that the only fire truck that you saw?

Frank: That was it, and to go back to the night before when Losson called about it getting into that CRP. I said, "Well, Losson, do you see any blinking lights out in there? Are there any fire crews in our area?"

He said, "Frank, they're all in town trying to save Ashland." I said, "Well, that's where they need to be." Bill Neier told me later on that he had made a run out through our area in the middle of the night sometimes and he primarily checked on our places. I had texted Kendal, knowing that he was busy, and I just said, "Yes or no. What do you know about southeast of town?" I remember him saying, "I don't think it's there yet but this is really bad." So I wasn't going to bother him again.

Diana: When you got the fire put out around your house and when you came back, did you have electricity?

Frank: No. The electricity was off. I'll have to remember how long we were without; it seems like it might have been through Monday night through Tuesday. I think it came back on at our place on Wednesday. It wasn't more than a day. We had it worse during the ice storm in January a month or two before.

Diana: Where did Sue evacuate this time?

Frank: I think she might have gone over towards Eldora's over on the highway. She said she could tell that there was a big plume of smoke and it kept getting bigger and bigger; of course, she was worried about me because she knew I was out on the tractor.

And as soon as we of got the all clear, I texted her and said, "Praise the Lord, it was that close."

Diana: Did you take advantage of the meals in town Tuesday night?

Frank: No, we didn't. I guess we didn't know that they were down at the Christian camp.

Diana: Well, at that time it was at the school or at the Christian church.

Frank: I guess we weren't aware of that. I don't even remember what we did for meals Tuesday night. We probably had stuff in the refrigerator that we ate. I do remember we came to town to get some thermoses filled up at the church just for flushing and that sort of thing. But you know, even on Tuesday night, we felt like everything around us had burned, which was evidenced when a couple of days later my son Tyler came out from Wichita and had a drone and put it up in the air. Literally, we were on an island, and it was black all the way around us. We were sitting on about 10 or 15-acre island that survived.

Diana: How long did the smoke smell last?

Frank: Oh mercy, Diana. I would say for a month after the fire, especially if I would walk out in the morning to come to work and it was the humidity was up or something. It was very evident. Of course, we didn't get any rains for three weeks there.

Diana: So what did you lose in the fire?

Frank: I lost all my grass, except just that right around the house. I have leased pastures up north of Highway 160. All three half sections up there were burned, every pasture.

Diana: Did you lose all your fencing?

Frank: Primarily, all of it. Then over here on the Sitka Road, the Cristman Place was burned, with the exception of just a small acreage where a wheat field had kind of buffered some pasture.

Diana: Did you have any cattle at the time?

Frank: This is my story on cattle. I'm a stocker operator, and I normally start buying in late February or March. The morning of the fire, my cattle buyer that lives back in central Kansas said, "I'm going over to Missouri. They've got pretty good runs today. Are you ready to get started?"

I told him, "I've lost money on cattle the last two years. I'm really not liking the scenario right now." I said, "Tell you what, let me crunch some numbers for a couple of days. I'll call you back." He laughed and said, "Well, there's always going to be cattle available. Let me know when you're ready."

That was at about 10:30. At 11:00 o'clock I realized there was a fire. At twelve o'clock the fire whistle went off here, and the next day I realized that it was an act of God because I wouldn't have had any place to go with the cattle anyway. Totally a God thing. Gary (That's his name) called me and said, "I heard you had some tough luck out there. So I suppose you don't need cattle?" I said, "Gary, I don't have a place to put them except them in the feedlot and that isn't my game." Yeah, I kind of lucked out in that department. As a result of that, I didn't buy cattle all last year.

Diana: So did you have a lot of things that you needed to take care of at home before you went back to work or did you end up going back to work?

Frank: I did not the rest of the day.

Diana: Or that week?

Frank: Oh yeah, I was back the next morning. On Wednesday, things had pretty well died down as far as any smoke or flames around our place. Nothing left to burn. Actually, I think they were still fighting it down on the river south of us. You could see smoke, and of course, it moved east down over on Snake Creek and in that area.

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

Frank: I would imagine, if you had to narrow it down, it was plowing out west of my barn and all of a sudden I realized I was engulfed in smoke and flames coming up around the tractor. That was a moment of decision. I thought, "I really don't want to go out this way." That was very impactful. My wife calls me a hero; I call myself stupid, but you do what you do with those things.

Diana: It is perception, I guess.

Frank: Well the house has been in our family for 100 years. I didn't want it to go up in flames. And that's why I felt so guilty the night before. I was there in Coldwater not able to do anything to save it.

Diana: So you've been around this country your whole life, and you have seen wildfires before, or prairie fires or just grass fires.

Frank: We had some ourselves.

Diana: Is there any comparison?

Frank: Nothing. This was beyond belief.

Diana: When this fire started, did your experiences with earlier wildfires make you think that this was no big deal?

Frank: I never had that thought, Diane, because that wind was just cranked up so high Monday, that I

immediately thought this could be it. I believe I said this earlier, this could be a really big deal and lining it up from south of Englewood towards Ashland, yes there are some wheat fields that might break it. But there's a lot of grass in between there too. And I had no idea at the time that there were these two fires south of Minneola or in the north of Bouziden's and up in there that had also sparked and of course that probably itself did more area-wide damage. I realize the other fire cost people their homes.

Diana: So has your family ever lost a lot of grass in a fire?

Frank: Oh yes. I remember a fire that started here east of town on the south. It was a CRP burn one day that got away from the fire department. It came through the Christman place and put me out of business there for a year, but I was able to find more grass that year. That one was scary because I had just turned out a bunch of steers. I'd been starting a nice set of Montana steers, and by the time I got over to that fire, they were all backed up in a corner.

I was able to cut the wire and get them out on a wheat field. They would have been well-barbecued had that not happened. Because of that memory in my mind, what the ranchers that lost cattle in this deal went through was so, so realistic even though I didn't lose anything myself.

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

Frank: Well, you know people are endless. I don't know where to start. The outpouring was so evident immediately with the program at the school gym with different agencies that had set up. I think it was that same week Thursday or Friday that we had the FSA, the... I'm not sure who all was involved with the meeting at the high school that kind of filled the gym up with several speakers on fence recovery and different things like cow/calf recovery and animal recovery that was available. You know the individuals, and again I can point to the fire department. I'll always remember when I gave Jeremy a hug. I wasn't losing a house, but it was close.

Diana: So talk about some of your customers. How difficult was that to handle? Did you have any that lost land or cattle or anything?

Frank: Yes, numerous ones.

Diana: Did you have to contact them?

Frank: We made it a point to try to call everybody that we knew was or could have been impacted to see what we could do to help out. Occasionally you would hear of a story that you hadn't heard before and thought, "Oh Gosh, I need to call them." But we made it kind of a team effort to get in touch with our people within the next week at the latest.

Diana: Did you have lots of people coming through the bank during the time after the fire?

Frank: Oh I remember that next day, I think Ashland was still was a ghost town anyway on Tuesday. That day we had the skeleton crew there and even Wednesday it was pretty slow. But I think things came back to some sort of normality towards the end of the week and into the next week.

Diana: Did you have a lot of landlords coming back to check out their land afterward?

Frank: Yes, we did. I had an aunt from Wichita that came out and had property just east of my place. I know of some customers that are from other areas. They might not have had an account with us, but had certainly lived and fences that needed to be repaired. So it impacted a lot of people that didn't necessarily even live here. Owners primarily, it was probably the biggest thing I've been through. I would call it our Greensburg tornado, even though we didn't have loss of life. That was really as we've all said, we're very lucky we didn't have a lot of funerals to go to the next week.

Diana: So did you volunteer at the school or the camp with meals?

Frank: I did, probably into that next week when I realized what the Christian church folks were doing.

Diana: What kind of things did you do?

Frank: I didn't do a lot. I showed up in the evenings and helped serve there two or three nights. My wife kicked in, and she helped get a crew to give some of the gals that had been doing that, Mel Hink and some of her crew, some relief a couple of different days. It was good too because about that time is when the big volunteer crews were rolling in. There were a lot of people here.

Diana: So did you get to talk to them?

Frank: Oh yes, I did. In fact, I took advantage of two or three different crews at different times that came out to tear out fence. The most memorable was the busload of 4-H kids from Michigan. This was about three weeks or maybe a month after when they showed up. They all stayed at the camp. Your boss, Holly, had put me on the list. I said, "Yeah I've got plenty of fence to tear out. I took them over south of Sitka. When I went down to meet them, this is kind of funny, my name starting with 'Y', I was probably at the bottom of the list. And so I got the last three standing because people had already come and gotten their groups and taken off. There were three girls, one who was, I think, in junior high. Two of them were sisters, and they were all good friends. They wanted to stay together as a group. The oldest one went to Michigan State.

I thought, "Oh Gosh, I won't get much done." But their leader kind of winked at me and said, "Don't worry, Frank, you've got the best workers on the bus." And later on that day they about worked me into the ground. They were taking wire down, and I was rolling it up the old-fashioned way. It was a warm day that Saturday, I remember, my tongue was hanging out later that evening. We asked them if they wanted to stay with us rather than come back into the camp and they were very grateful that they got our facilities rather than... I don't mean to sound that way, not that things weren't great that way, but they didn't have to sleep in a dorm. They had their own bedroom that way.

Diana: So they worked a couple of days for you?

Frank: Actually, we asked if they wanted to go to church with us that next Sunday morning. They were all good Christian gals, and they came to church. As soon as that was over, they said, "Well, we'll go home and change back into our work clothes." They had their sack lunches already, so off we went. We worked until about 6:00; we had to have them back in because their bus was going to leave and drive all night back to the thumb of Michigan. Sandusky, I believe, was the name of the town. But they were all 4-H girls, and they knew how to work.

Diana: So have you kept in contact with them?

Frank: Yes, we have. They took a liking to us, and we felt like they were our own kids. I went down to see them off, and it was almost like seeing my kids go off to college for the first time. They are delightful girls, and we e-mail back and forth and do Facebook. They keep us posted.

Diana: So did you have some other volunteers come to help?

Frank: Yes, I had a group out from east of Lawrence; four guys that just decided to come out and help. That very first week, Trent Null was also helping Holly Fast, and he had a crew coming down from northern Kansas. I didn't think anything about it, he didn't have names, but they showed up the next morning and it happened to be Leanne Pike's brother Darrell. He had two big strong guys, and I took them up north of the highway. They had a half-mile torn out and put back in two days. These guys knew how to work. Plus, (this is on a cousin's pasture) but they brought a whole trailer load of fencing material that had been donated by the co-op up there.

Diana: So it's just a pretty dirty job tearing up the fence?

Frank: At that point, I think it was before our first rain. So every time the wind blew, it was Dirty Thirties all over again.

Diana: Did it get better after the rain?

Frank: It did, it settled everything down. Of course, even that first week, you could see green sprouts starting to come in certain areas.

Diana: Has your grass pretty much come back?

Frank: You know, it has. Even in July and August, you could be driving around, and it just looked like a golf course. A little later on, you could see a lot of the weed growth. If you walked out, you could see it wasn't a lot of grass. We were seeing a lot of weeds, ragweed and that sort of thing.

But I was up in my pastures here a couple of weeks ago, checking on some fence that still needs to be repaired. The buffalo grass, I think if this thing could turn around and start raining, I think I could start buying cattle. Maybe I wouldn't run the numbers I normally run, just cut the stocking rate back a bit. But if it doesn't rain, I don't think it's good for the pastures. There's nothing green for them to eat. But we're trying to stay optimistic there.

Diana: So if you take advantage of the funds that were provided by the community foundation and the KLA?

Frank: I did. I also applied through the FSA for my landlords and myself. I probably had over four miles of my own personal fence that was bad enough to be torn out and repaired. I applied for the other funds that were available. The one out of Amarillo, I didn't receive anything. But I know that they were very helpful, the Working Ranch Cowboys Association. I know there's another application going around now. Mr. Buffet, I think, donating some to that fund. That's for fencing material only. I filled that out too. I told them on every application that I did not want to double dip; I would apply for an amount that would equate to the 25 percent that the government isn't going to pay. So anyway, it's been wonderful to get new fences. This isn't the way we really wanted it but through government assistance and the volunteer help, as well as these wonderful people that donated to the Ashland Foundation.

Diana: Were you amazed at the people that came and volunteered and donated? Did you see the big trucks come through?

Frank: Absolutely, when Saturday was my morning at the bank, I think that was the morning that a convoy of 25 or 30 trucks came in loaded with hay. I had my cell phone and I filmed them. I just gave them a "thumbs up" as they passed by. Just going to Bucklin one day, I met a convoy. I just stuck my hand out the window with a thumbs up and blinked my lights at them.

Diana: Did you get to visit with any of the firefighters strike teams that came? Did you see them in action?

Frank: I did not see them in action. They showed up after it was pretty much done around town here. I think they did late Tuesday and I think they probably gave our guys some relief, so it wasn't certainly a bad idea. They went down on the river and kind of assisted with that. I heard stories from Bill Neier, he said these guys are probably more trained for mountain firefighting and that sort of thing rather than out in the prairie, but good for them that they showed up. I did see a truck up at the high school parking lot that said Carbondale Colorado Firefighting. My sister lives in Carbondale, so I took a picture of their door and texted it to her. A week or two later, she was so enthralled that people... That's Colorado on the west slope of Colorado, south of Glenwood Springs. She was so proud that her community was involved, she said, "I'm going to bake a pan of brownies and take them over to the firehouse and just say, 'I'm from Ashland.'"

Diana: Can you perceive anything positive that came from the fire?

Frank: Oh, I think primarily, positive is just faith in mankind. What was displayed to our whole community and the whole county and the whole area and into Oklahoma, was the sharing and the outpouring of love and generosity and caring. Especially this time in our country, where there's so much division. It's great to see people come together.

Diana: So what did you think of our community's response to all the volunteers and donations?

Frank: Oh, that was amazing. The way the school opened up the doors and allowed them to stay up there and fed them. Mr. Wettig and the kids, and that was the week that we were in the state tournament. To understand that the boys even sacrificed a couple of nights' practice to put those guys up, when their season was on the line. It was huge.

Diana: As a banker, have you noticed a physical or financial effect of the fire on the community? What about the emotional toll of fire?

Frank: You know the physical first; obviously we bounce back. It certainly looked pretty disastrous there for a month or two maybe further. The pastures may still not be quite back where they were. Certainly, people who lost homes and belongings, you can't replace that. But the human element, the emotional element, is tough I think. But our people are resilient and strong. I think I heard of a couple of instances where people thought that so and so was really getting down over it but seemed to be back to normal. Financial? I'm keenly aware of the fact that thanks to the aid of FSA and the foundation... These guys that lost the big cow numbers may not ever get that loss back. But they're all good operators, and they have the ability, I think, to bounce back with a few years of good cattle prices.

Diana: So like with the drought and the way the wheat crops' looking, how's that going?

Frank: Yeah, we don't need more bad luck after what we had last year. We had some years with good cattle prices and our people built a pretty good equity in their lines, to the point where I don't think there's anybody that's stressed to the point of real concern. Unfortunately, we all feel as bankers that we're really blessed to have survived such a huge catastrophe, that with loss into the millions, that we are going to be okay. It's just amazing really. God's looking out for us.

Diana: So what can you do, or have you done, to prepare for a future fire or some other emergency like this personally?

Frank: Well, my tractor at home is still hooked onto my drill. I think when I get home tonight I'm going to hook it up to the disk for at least the next couple of days. I thought about that the other day. This whole drought right now, our scenario is set up just like a year ago. And who's to say in March or even February this month something that couldn't happen again?

But I think it's taught us a lot of lessons too, not only the fire departments learned a lot of things, local ranchers probably learned a lot of things. You get a 60 mile an hour wind, and there's not a lot a person can do if you're in the direct path.

Diana: You said you had a chance to evacuate some stuff from your house or pick up some stuff. Was there things when you got home that you saw that you thought, "Oh, we should have taken that."

Frank: Oh yeah. You always have second thoughts or things, but in the heat of the moment (pardon the pun) we took the things that we felt were nearest and dearest. You're not going to be able to save everything.

Diana: So what can the community do or have we done to prepare for another emergency?

Frank: I would imagine Millie Fudge's emergency team has learned a lot from this, and the fire department as I said earlier, the community as a whole. I think that everybody probably realizes if we have another evacuation what they would do differently. Some that stayed behind probably didn't rest very good that night and might know that the next time, "I'm leaving." Some that left might say, "I could have stayed behind." You don't know how the community as a whole is going to do, but I think everybody learned. You learn from experience; sometimes you learn from your mistakes. That's the way we all try to get better.

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

Frank: I probably rambled a whole lot more than I had intended to when I sat down here. You get to rambling. You get to telling the story and things come back to you, especially here ten months later. You know anything else, I guess that I would say is thanks to you Diana and everybody that's involved in this endeavor of documenting this. I didn't think my story was exciting enough to actually come and visit, and probably it doesn't compare to a lot of the stories that you've recorded. People had much more harrowing situations and lost their homes and that sort of thing. But my wife kept prodding me; she said, "Everybody's got a story to tell."

Diana: That's right.

Frank: And thank you for this opportunity. I know that out at Gardiner's, the night before the Gardiner sale, a lady that does their media work for them came and tapped me. She had a camera set up upstairs at their marketing center, and came and tapped me on the shoulder and Sue. She said, "Come up after dinner, and I want to interview you because we just want to do a "thank you" from various people in the community. Sue didn't want to do it, but actually she did better than I did. We went up and expressed our thanks to the countless people that we don't know that gave of their time and effort and hay and labor and fence materials and that sort of thing. Just the caring that the outpouring as I said, showed up. That's my biggest takeaway from this; just a thank you to the many people that cared at the time and are still caring.