

Frank "Pinky" Ellis
Oral History conducted
on April 21, 2011
Interviewed by Emily Pearson
at the Casper College Western History Center

Frank "Pinky" Ellis was interviewed in the Western History Center at Casper College. In this interview Pinky discusses growing up in Casper, his father's journey from Ireland to Casper, life during the depression, his father's sheep operation, his position on the Casper City Council and Natrona County Public Library Board, going to Casper College and University of Wyoming, early childhood memories, family memories and life's lessons.

Emily Pearson: This is Emily Pearson and I am interviewing Frank Ellis, also known as "Pinky" Ellis at the Western History Center at Casper College, April 13, 2011. We are going to talk about "Pinky's" life and growing up here in Casper. I guess we will start out with, How did you get your name?

Frank “Pinky” Ellis: That is one of those nicknames that you fight, my hair was really, really red. Bright red; and I didn't like the nickname "Rick" and "Red" it just kinda grated on me and as it turned out, there were two other guys, not in the same class but same time in high school that had the same nickname. And they still have them, like me. "Pinky" Mathers and "Pinky" Hawks. And, I always thought that was kind of interesting. Of course, now you are grey-haired and grizzled and people say, well, where did "Pinky" come from? The short of it, and it started as I entered High School, I had never had anything in elementary school that made any difference whatsoever. So it is just one of those things you acquire, then you get to a point where you kinda like it, and finally you identify with it. That's what I have done.

Pearson: Good name. When did your family come to Casper.

Ellis: Well, I was born in Casper in 1929, and my father came to this country from Ireland in 1914. And he came to work in the sheep industry, his Uncle who was also from the old country had come here in 1872, I think. And he paid my Father's passage it was in quotes the term that they actually forwarded the money to buy the ticket; to get to this country. And, in my Father's case and his Uncle, he had already paid for three other brothers. Mike came in 1907, and Jack in 1909, and Tom in 1911.

And, then my Dad, and then the war started. There was no more until two more men came in the middle twenties. My father paid for one and his brothers who were partners at the time, paid for the other man. And it was just the way immigration was used and it worked very, very, well. The guy who was not an indentured servant, but he did have the obligation of paying back whatever money was advanced. In my Dad's case, he didn't go through Ellis Island. He went through Boston, and there were relatives there, that he stayed with for a couple of months I think. Then came on to Casper, Wyoming and went to work in the sheep business and filed on a homestead in 1916. He went to the Army in 1918, and as a result of that you had a quicker path to Citizenship, with the service and so he was a Citizen and got out of the Army in February of 1919, and came back to Casper and worked for a man named Steve Tobin. He worked for him that year and then the next... that Fall of 1919 he, and his brother, his older brother, went into the business together. And they stayed in the business for ten years until each of them married.

And like lots of things the women didn't get along so they split the partnership. But, my Dad in the fall of '27 went back to Ireland ostensibly and objectively to find a woman to marry and he did. He met my Mother at a Christmas dance and they were

married the following April. She came to Casper in July of 1928 and was absolutely devastated by the bleakness and no green, and I think she just spent the rest of her life, making the area green. She really, really worked at Horticulture. But, the sheep industry was the keynote of my Dad's interests.

But when he and his brother split up in 1930, the depression had started and people just everybody has got a little different view of the depression and my growing up in it, and frankly there just wasn't any money. There wasn't any extra money, people just don't have that kind of an awareness today. It cost a dime to go to the movie, and that was a big "dadgum" ration for a week. If you were lucky you had a nickel to spend on some candy, or an ice cream cone cost about... a single dip cost you a nickel and so that was your Saturday morning fun. But, we weren't hungry, we always had plenty to eat. And you had the basics and you recall, my folks, they bought a house on Milton Ave. and it stayed in the family till after my Mother died and Sister. Then, we sold it as part of my Sister's estate, and it had a gas furnace. And I don't even remember that, the first one. Because depression got tighter, money was not available and we converted that gas stove to a Coke not coal, but Coke. Coke was really cheap, a dollar a ton. It was a by-product of the refinery. When they had cooked one of their processes they had lots of coke. It was oily and it was really hard on the inner appearance of a house.

That's when another item came in to play (Lacrylax??) take care, Kalsomine and that again, is a thing your generation has never even heard of. But it was a really cheap form of paint, and you had to do it almost every year, when using coke because it left a film of oily black material on your walls, on everything. And then, in later years things got a little better. I think about 1936 or '37. Mom and Dad installed a new gas furnace.

And it was in operation for a long time till my Mother decided to go to the Hot Water Heat. Anyway, the thing I always remember then, when money troubles eased it became time to redecorate, and this Kalsomine was everywhere. And it was just a washing operation. You had to wash it off the walls, and off the ceilings, before you could paint, change colors and there also came the time you had to become a Wall paper person. I got pretty good at it. And, then when the time came, I had to peel it off, and go to something else, but anyway, life was, it was OK.

Growing up in a small town, well Casper wasn't . . . there was about 17,000 in our growing up years that we remember through high school. Then the start of WW II changed a lot of things. The young people then, were gone and all you could look forward to in high school was the war was going to drag on for a long time and we all figured that was where we were all headed. In our Senior year the start of it in August was the Atomic Bombs in Japan. I for one am really delighted they used them. It spared millions of lives. So starting our high school senior year, we had gasoline and it was still on 22¢ a gallon. It was kinda neat. I started working for my Dad, when I was just a kid.

A little background on our particular sheep operation. We had land that was not too far from Casper and that's where you spent the winter, the winter months. And then, the summer range was on the South end of the Big Horns, and it was a 70 mile trail and that's what you learned to do. Get on a horse, and follow a bunch of sheep up the road, and I've not regretted any of it. It changed a little bit, the road certainly got a lot better and the little bit of political background. There were stock drive ways and the, if you look on some, any kind of BLM Government Agency map you will see the three letters S.W.D. that means Stock Driveway Withdrawals. That's D.W. excuse me. And, in 1921 it

became obvious that homesteading was going to block a lot of the accustomed trails of livestock, cattle and sheep used to get to Summer ranges. So the stock growers were able to prevail on the Congress to pass a law. And they made these Stock Driveway Withdrawals. And what it meant was that those lands were withdrawn from entry by homesteading. What it did, was guarantee a really good trail system, particularly in Natrona County. A lot of those trails are still in place today and still used to a certain extent, but, not like they were. It was another evolution and change in life. A lot of experiences, a lot of irritation, a little bit of anger every now and then. It was crowded, a lot of people and not everybody was willing to try and get along.

But, after high school, I went to Casper College, and started the second graduating class here then finished my Bachelor's Degree at Laramie at the University of Wyoming. And, went into business with my Dad. And one thing that was kind of interesting signed an agreement that I would buy a third of the sheep and that amounted to almost 900 head. And, I paid for them in one year in 1951 because the Korean War and prices for Wool and Lambs were really escalating and the Wool prices haven't got that good since until this past 2 years. That is a long time to think in between. Generally there was enough money to pay for the animals, life starts out.

I met my wife Jackie, known her as kids waved to one another in Laramie. She's from Green River, Wyoming and then after she graduated, I graduated in 1950 and she graduated in 1953. She came to Casper to get a job. We got to re-do acquaintances, and we were married in '55. The great relationship. Just fine, we have three children, Sean, Brennan and Lara.

Pearson: Brennan?

Ellis: Brennan.

Pearson: Good Irish name.[?]

Ellis: Yeah, well we picked Irish names and Sean spelled it S-e-a-n. Now it's quite common, but, 50 some years ago, it was not very usual. He is a Dentist here, and Brennan works as a surveyor in Montana and he was a partner in the sheep operation for 20 years. So a time my brother was not feeling well and he wanted to sell, and so you do. And of course you do pretty good in the escalation of land values you don't make a heck of a lot of money in the livestock business, day to day, but when you make money is when you sell the land, and that's just exactly what happened. So, then, my brother died a year after we sold out; had a stroke. He was twelve years younger than I. It was really a shock. Big Time. But ...that gets me.

Also, Dad had bought a few head of cows, before he died, and so we built that up and we had 300 Mother Cows, and keeps meals, and it was a good side operation and we also trailed them to the mountain, we had enough land up there to take care of all the sheep we had plus the cows. So, it made a double trail. It took a week to trail the cows up there and it took ten days to two weeks to trail sheep, twice. So that was a lot of time spent on the trail. We started out with sheep wagons, that is what I dealt with. They are still a really, really efficient means of living, convenient. Two guys can get along pretty good, three is a crowd, but, you do what you can and I have slept in really bad weather for whatever circumstances. Three of us to a bed, and it is kinda difficult, 'cause a guy has to sleep with his head down as you have a problem keeping his feet covered and warm. And the guys at the other end, don't realize that their feet stick in their face. And, anyway you do it.

Times got better, the roads got better and we started using travel trailers. And, the best advantage of that was the refrigeration. It was difficult. I should mention that my Dad died in kind of a pretty big time tragedy to us, the family. He work trained, his railroad siding will be on the land of (both sides??) He used it all the time; we just didn't see this train. It was raining, killed him, killed the dog and sure put me out of commission for a long time... But, anyway, you move on, and just... we've had a good life. No objections.

Pearson: You were a County Commissioner?

Ellis: Yeah got in to small town, small county politics, some City Council for five years. And, we just finished the current building City Hall, it was a big move. You just can't imagine the feeling of relief it was for everybody. They used the County Building forever, and you always felt that the City people were just not really welcome from the viewpoint of the County people. A little escalation of grandeur I think. But, anyway that was a great thing to move in to that building. I've laughed every now and then, there is always bones of contention and politics, it's just the way it is, and it's proper. And I was thinking the other day I used David Street, the really great access, and I can remember when I was on the County Commission, I was a really good friend of the man that owned the south half of that. He... I went to lunch with him one day and had a buddy for a back-up who was also a good friend and we did our dangdest to get him to agree to sell that cause we knew we could get the agreement from Sears on the other end of the block. I didn't think I'd ever live long enough to see David Street opened all the way, and it's good you know, it's just one of those things this town is like a lot of railroad towns.

Everything is built originally around the railroad and the path the railroad took through a village, or a county, or a community and in Casper, it set up a lot of streets that didn't go anyplace. They ended in dead ends, or they did this or that. And the railroad doesn't want to particularly have very many crossings. They were reluctant to have as many as we had here.

So, those are the things that help the community to develop. It was good. Before that, I had spent the usual six years on the Library Board and we had just finished that building, current building and it was a really neat deal to move to something that was really a lot more stately, certainly looked nice, and I always recalled I was the Chairman when it came time to install Prometheus in the front of the building. It was a wonderful sculpture by Dr. Russin at the University of Wyoming and there were a number of people in this town. Jack Rosenthal, and Tom Stroock, for two, two people that are gone that really (helped??) to [tape faded] beautify the community, and they paid through their own money's for those kind of sculptures.

Anyway, I always remember we supervised that installation that thing on a Sunday morning. Jackie and I had the trailer packed and the kids ready and we were leaving on a "go quick" while we had a little time vacation. But, had to wait until I supervised Prometheus getting put in place. But one of the things interesting about the Library Board, is the 6 year term max, you can't serve any longer. And they call it the Billy Johnson Law, and it became, it's a state law. It's a script that County Libraries in the State of Wyoming can not have people serve on them any longer than a six year term. And the reason was Billy Johnson was a old time, long time clothier here, he had a clothing store and he was a great guy. But, he was on the Library Board for 47 years, and

one of the immediate predecessor to me on the board was an active politician and he just didn't like that. He just thought that Billy had died on the board, and so he used a little bit of politics and he got the law passed. And, I'm not saying it is good, bad, or indifferent, it's kinda nice to know you were only going to be there 6 years. That was long enough. There's two -three year terms and not more than six. But you could go off, and come back on. And, I only remember one person that did that. Anyway, that's called "small town politics," but I think it is really important. If you have an interest in your community, where you live and what you can do to make things nicer for everybody else, it's O.K. When we were on the City Council, we got ten bucks a year, and we ponied it up for the candy fund. Now, of course, they get paid. I won't go to that, the architect of all that. Anyway --

Pearson: What was College like? College experience?

Ellis: Well Casper College was really interesting. Then, you have to think of it in the context of me. I was seventeen years old, and the war was over and this place was being flooded with vets, and taking advantage of the "GI Bill," and enrolling in college. And that to me, is one of the greatest things that this country has ever, ever accomplished. The education of a generation. And, these guys maybe in years, weren't all that much older than me - three or four years and I made lasting friendships that lasted till I'd go to the cemetery to say good-bye.

It was a wonderful growing up period. All of a sudden you grew up pretty fast. These guys are already mature, but still at a time to have a lot of fun. It was a great experience. Then going to the University was the same general experience. I enjoyed my classes, the work. There were lots of specialties about it and there were some

professors that you didn't have to be very smart to think, well they should have retired twenty years ago. They were still using materials for statistics for 1930, didn't make a hell of a lot of sense. It was only 20 years later, but it was outdated, totally. And I liked this Fraternity life; I was a kind of a key to University of Wyoming. There were a lot of Fraternities, and a lot of Sororities, and you was active, it was fun and it sure didn't cut into your school work. Whatever you wished to do, what you accomplished was up to you. And you did. No regrets, whatsoever. And it was OK.

Pearson: What is your earliest memory?

Ellis: Oh you know, I really don't know. Just one lasting memory and I have to digress for a minute. Jackie and I have spent a lot of years going to Yellowstone Park, always in the summertime. This past February, we went in the wintertime, for the first time. Highly recommend it, it's a different world. It was just great. Temperature never got above zero, but you didn't care. It was really wonderful.

But, the thing that I really remember is the first time, I went to Yellowstone. I was nine years old and my Father and his great and good friend across the street loved to fish. And they were good at it. So, Scotty had a little boat it had a small engine on it, there were oars, and loaded it up and our Mother's went and Scotty's family, his youngest son was about 16 at the time, but he could drive. We spent three weeks. That's a long time just to camp, and that's what it was. It was a wonderful experience, never forgot. I can still have vivid memories of what we did in certain areas and where we went. And the finale was, they are getting ready to come home and I don't recall any idea of what the limits on fish possession were. But they were pretty liberal, and you could take out a certain amount. I don't know how much but there was a lot of it. Well Scotty and Dad

decided to dry what fish they were going to take home, and they strung them on a wire between two trees and forgot about the picnic table that was underneath them. And in the morning, went out there and the bear had got them. There were a few fish on one end and a few on the other and nothing in between. Ok. Took another three days and they replaced the fish that were gone. Then we went home. But that's one of the early memories that you have.

There are other memories certainly, but we didn't have an extra vehicle (or??) pick up and my mother never learned to drive. Dad wasn't a great driver but he sure could get around in the mud and the snow. That was fine for that time. And, one of the memories with him, was he smoked a pipe all the time. The only time he took it out of his mouth was to eat and sleep. My sister and I learned how to load his pipe so he could keep 2 hands on the wheel. So he had a tobacco, called Granger Raw Cut, and it was a coarse tobacco and so you put some in the palm of your hand and you'd rub your other hand on it to break it into smaller more combustible size, put it in the pipe and tamp it in so that it was a good solid pack, hand him the match and let him light it. It's one of the things you remember, you just don't forget it. And, that sister is two years younger than me and she is still alive in Oregon. Our youngest sister was fifteen years younger than me and she had a heart attack. However, she never quit smoking. Big time smoker, killed her. Anyway...

Pearson: How has styles and clothes and fads changed, from when you were younger?

Ellis: [Laughs]. Somebody is, of course, there is always clothing fads and the thing I still can't get over. To me Lee's, Levi's, Wrangler's, whatever you want to call them Jeans today, are acceptable wearing apparel any place. I grew up they were work clothes. And

the only thing different was the real farmers used "Bibs", and we wouldn't be caught dead in "Bibs" and they are a very functional piece of wearing apparel. We had, well, I am really sad that the men particularly, don't have more of an interest in looking nice and dressing well. For certain occasions. Today, Bankers and Lawyers are the only ones, and maybe Accountants that will wear a suit and coat and tie to work. Doctors don't, and no body else does. If you go to a function any more Heavens, I've got a closet full of pretty nice clothing, and I don't wear them very much. And I don't wear very many ties. I kinda regret that, I really do. But, I still can't get over wearing Levi's to church. I don't even do it. And, other, I've always liked women's wearing apparel. And liked to see women that dressed in a suitable classy way it's nice it's OK. And, again the Levi's don't enhance the woman's female form too well. But anyway.

Pearson: Hmmm. [pause] Describe a big old family dinner when you were growing up.

Ellis: Scrumptious. It was a function, that there was no television, and the radio that we used for newscasts. And of course then in the later evening there would be a variety of radio programs. We listened to them. The various, oh, around 5:00 o'clock 4:30 the Green Hornet and the some of the other guys, real do-gooders for kid's programs. Then later there would be good drama programs. My dad particularly, we had a Zenith transoceanic big time radio. It stood so high, and it had short wave facilities and everything else. And he loved to listen to a newscaster in Des Moines, Iowa - Bob Burlingame. The news came on at 9:00 o'clock every night, Bob Burlingame with the news, half hour program. And the only time Dad didn't listen to it, was when he was really busy and didn't have time to. But he listened to it virtually every night.

In the country we had good, they were pretty good size radios, twice as big as that. And they had big battery packs, they call them 500 hour - you would get 250 or 1000 hour packs. The only thing you had to have was a good aerial, so almost everybody had a pole stuck out in the back, and 10 feet of wire leading to wherever the radio was, for an aerial. Pretty important. But to finish on the dinner. We always ate as a family, but Dad was not there in our growing up years in the wintertime. If the weather was bad we didn't see him for a week at a time, and maybe longer. The roads weren't very good, the vehicles weren't that good and so he just stayed on the job. Then later when he bought some land closer to town he was able to come to town every night, if the weather was suitable and it would continue that way for myself in our family. I missed the births of 2 children during the winter. The child, funny that the oldest - my sister took my wife to the hospital and boy you don't see anybody. Jackie walked under her own power into the hospital. They didn't even come up to get her in a wheel chair, and our youngest girl, we were shearing and it was snowing, and rain and it's a crucial time to shear sheep in bad weather, they die pretty dadgum quickly until they have a few days of getting used to being naked. So, I didn't make that birth either.

The family meals were always worthwhile. We had a lot of chatter, lot of conversation and folks were always interested in what was going on in the young people's worlds. And in our case, we really had two families. My sister and I were three years apart, and then the next two were the product of, the depression was kinda over and a little more money available, and so two more children. And, so they were separate from us because of the age difference. But they are a close family. It is worthwhile. Then, Sunday afternoon, way into the ... my Dad was killed in 1955 and Jackie and I

were married in February of that year and she was pregnant. She was a strong lady. Didn't lose the child but the hospitalization I required. Anyway, we just a ... Sunday afternoon was our evening off and our house was a gathering place. We had a lot of relatives; I had 21 first cousins that lived in this town.

Pearson: Whoa!

Ellis: There were two ... one ...two or three first cousins, besides myself now, between moving and dying, but anyway, it was a fun thing. It was a ... our house really was a gathering place and people would come and play cards, visit, and no dishwashers, it was all hand work, so the ladies washed the dishes after the meal and the men smoked and visited out in the living room or the card games started, and the kids ran around all over heck. We had a pretty good sized house and we filled it up.

Pearson: What were holidays like? Big family?

Ellis: Well, holidays were observed, and we are Catholic and really believed in the Christian holidays or holy days. Easter was a big time deal, if the weather was decent, Dad would be in town. And, it's funny. On Sundays he always wore a suit to church and he'd keep a tie on for the rest of the day and a white shirt, and Mom would have to wash and iron the white shirts with an iron. Remember? You are growing up in an emancipated time, where we have wrinkle free, hang, it's great and I enjoy it, believe me. But it was, again, we always had plenty to eat.

Pearson: What was your favorite activity as a child?

Ellis: That's a funny question. Those were the days when you played outside a lot particularly when the weather was decent. And, there was all kind of neighborhood games. And, we lived in a neighborhood where there were thirty or forty kids and we all

ran together. And, we stayed out until maybe 10 o'clock on a summer night. Kick the can was the deal. And we all, mom had two great big hedges of lilacs they are easy to hide in. And you had parameters, you couldn't go on to that neighbor, particularly neighbors to the east they had no children and they had no tolerance for children. They were nice people, but we just enjoyed a time, that was no different from anybody else. It was good, we had bikes, and skates and we went through the procession of having a wagon when you're younger.

One Easter, not Easter, Christmas, I was really looking forward to getting a wagon I remember that. A red wagon, I think it was called a Flyer, and I didn't get it. I was really disappointed and they pretended that Santa had lost it out of his pack and it was outside at the base of the chimney. I still remember how delighted I was to see that wagon.

Pearson: What was your favorite toy? [No answer] What was the first movie you ever saw?

Ellis: Oh, I have no idea. I really don't know again, we didn't ... there was always the good movies and folks who go to them. I can remember one that I went with my Dad. Dad grew up in Ireland making a living as a fisherman on the Ocean. On the Atlantic Ocean, and he loved Ocean-based films *Captain's Courageous*, with Spencer Tracy, and I am not sure, 1936, or something like that. But I remember going and he always, I've gotta tell you the laws of frugality, he sat through a movie twice, even if he didn't like it the second time. You always got your money's worth.

Pearson: Do you have any stories that came down from your Parents or your Grandparents?

Ellis: I never knew my grandparents. So, oh; just the thoughts of family and memories, and stories, good, bad and indifferent but nothing in particular. There was always something happening somewhere. And, it never changes. Life's that way.

Pearson: Well we talked about a lot of things.

Ellis: When we turn this thing off, I want to ask you a little bit about your background. But we won't put that on tape.

Pearson: OK [laughs]. Of all the things you have learned from your parents, what do you find most valuable?

Ellis: I think, number one, honesty, a lie isn't worth it, because you always spend more time then covering up for it. Than it would have been to tell the truth to begin with. And that's just been a cradle with me. If a person doesn't like what you have to say about them, don't tell a lie.

Pearson: Why did you choose the profession that you have?

Ellis: Boy, I liked animals, you grow up with something, and I assume that it is probably about fifty-fifty. Kids that are on a farm you hear a lot of them 50% of them say, well they couldn't wait to get off of it. Because of the work, the duties, and the expectations. And the other half never wanted to know anything different and that's about the same for me.

Pearson: You don't want to be like and (Ash??) girl or anything like that?

Ellis: I was just happy knowing that it was a good life, but, it certainly didn't, unless you had a lot of livestock and that is something that becomes harder and harder to expand. Cost a lot of money, financing all that, that's one of the things that does happen, in that you have a problem and sometimes it takes you years to pay for it. I lost 60% of our

sheep one spring, and that really bent me backward for a long time. That's one of the things you don't forget.

Pearson: What do you believe is the key to a successful marriage?

Ellis: Oh well again, honesty is the biggest thing. Compatibility, and no body so overwhelms one another that she can do everything, that phase ends, and make the adjustments. Seeing the other person, what they are, what they mean to you. And I sure understand that people make a bad choice, maybe to start with. Or other factors enter in to cause a change in personality and life style.