

Interview with Ellsworth Pinky Mitchell
Ishpeming, MI
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Interviewer: Dr. Russell Magnaghi
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RM: Good morning Pinky. First question, what is your birthdate?

PM: February 19, 1921.

RM: How did you get the nickname Pinky?

PM: Surprisingly, I got it boxing many years ago. I grew up with the Bietelas. Roy and I used to box in the Y. They had a name for Roy, they called him Peewee. But they didn't have a name for me. There was a professional boxer in Milwaukee by the name of Pinky Mitchell, so they just tied that to me. To this day there's a lot of people that don't know me by my real name. If you say Ellsworth, they don't know who you're talking about.

RM: Could you talk a little about your background? Where were you born and where did you grow up?

PM: I was born in the Cleveland location in Ishpeming. I grew up neighbors to the Bietelas. I guess that's where I got to be a ski jumper. Although, when I was 3 years old I remember my Dad had me out in the yard and I got initial training. Then of course living next door to the Bietelas, Paul was very influential on my life. He was 3 years older than I was. I used to be his sub paper boy. We grew up together. He was a very good athlete. A clean living athlete. Of course he went on to the University of Wisconsin and then he was injured in St. Paul. He out jumped the hill like he always did on all of them. He got tangled up. They had barrels on the bottom of the outdrop with ropes to keep the people back. Somehow when he fell he got tangled up in the ropes and it threw him. He hit the barrel or whatever happened. With all the injuries, he died about 3 weeks later. That was terrible.

RM: How old was he?

PM: I think he was 21. That was in 1939. I was 18 so that would make him 21.

RM: So you got involved with ski jumping kind of in your back yard then?

PM: That's right. I had quite a few ski jumping hills in the yard itself. Some of them were a little dangerous because sometimes you had to turn so you wouldn't go into the barn.

RM: So you actually had a number of different sized hills in your own yard.

PM: We had hills in the yard, we had them all over the location, I'd say hundreds of them. We'd start with the small ones and go to the big ones. Work your way up.

RM: So as you were growing up there were younger kids following you so you had this continuous training for all the kids in the neighborhood.

PM: I got involved in junior skiing. When I came back from the Service, I figured my ski jumping was just about ready to end because I had a family and that's when I decided...because I enjoy working with young people. I always did. In fact the young ones, my favorite was Uncle Pinky. I took over the junior ski club and it was really enjoyable working with young kids. I did that for 20 years. I started in the late '40s, about '46. I had the junior club, I think it was '66 when I decided to turn it over to somebody else. I must say I had a bunch of good skiers. I had some Olympic riders come out of that junior club. A lot of good jumpers. Sending entries in to various places in the UP, you had to line up all the cars to take the kids to go.

RM: So your coaching wasn't just an 8 to 5 job and then go. You would then take them to the sites.

PM: I've got to say one thing. A person that not too many people now know...about Al Qual, he was employed by the city and worked at the Winter Sports Area. He and I used to have a few ski tournaments during the winter in this area. We had 2 jumping hills. One called Teal Lake and the other called Baby Lake. We used to have quite a few tournaments there during the year. We'd put on a banquet. We'd cook a crock of beans and have hot dogs and a bottle of pop in a Dixie cup. Every time we had a tournament that's what it was. I'll tell you we used to have a gang of kids participating. It was really enjoyable. But I've got to say Al Qual, he really built the place up out there.

RM: Was he working for the city?

PM: He worked for the city yes. He was quite a guy. They always said he was the beggar. He would...whenever the Winter Sports Area needed any kind of metal thing to fix something, you could count on Al and he'd have it for you. He'd go out and get it. He was always so busy. I remember somebody saying, he doesn't even have time to cash his check from the city. He carry's it around in his pocket and every once in a while he has to make a note for something and he said the check would come out and he'd make the note on the check. So he wasn't concerned about money, but he was a super guy. He and I spent a lot of time with that. Then it got to a point where it got to be business. We had so much fun originally. We'd be on the phone and call lots of guys who would assist me in getting these kids to Iron Mountain, Crystal Falls, Iron Wood, Manistique, Munising, they all had junior skiers. In the whole UP we just had a great time. The winter would go so fast. But then it got to a point where it was a business. You had to have \$2 here and there. You have to pay for this. The one thing that sticks in my mind and sours me...I had the Junior National Ski Tournament here in 1961. We had skiers from all over the country. I remember this party came in from Colorado. We made arrangements to pick them up and take them to the motel. I believe they were staying at

the Anderson Motel at that time. The fellow that escorted them here, I gave him the use of my automobile to pack those kids from the hotel to the Winter Sports Area. I remember my wife returning a week later she wanted to get her hair done and he had to call a taxi cab. She had her hair fixed and was out on the corner waiting for the cab to come. She sees my car with 5 or 6 skiers in it headed for the ski area. What soured me on that was...well before I go any further I should say that anybody that participated in that national tournament was invited to the banquet including the elders that escorted them. They were invited. Then with the use of the car with that guy and the next year my son made the junior ski jumping team and one other rider from Ishpeming and one from Iron Mountain. So we got together this friend of mine and took these 3 juniors to Lake Placid. We got there and had to find a hotel and pay for our meals. At the banquet the skiers were invited but not the people that drove them out. I remember this guy from Colorado said it's no different here in Ishpeming as it is here. We paid for everything. When he mentioned that, that's what soured me. It really hit me. I was hurt. He said there was a charge for this and that. I looked at him and said I was in charge of that tournament. You were not charged to go to the banquet. You were not charged for your number. Various charges. We helped you out. Then you turn around and tell me that you were treated the same way in Ishpeming. That really hurt. I'm kind of touchy to begin with. It went on. I stayed another 5 years with the juniors. Sending out their entries and getting the entries, planning for the banquet, getting the judges and prizes. Doing it was an honor. It was so enjoyable that I didn't notice it. Then of course I had my son jumping. When he started school, he went to Michigan Tech. He graduated in '66 and that was the year I decided I had enough. I enjoyed the ski jumping days very much.

RM: Let's go back to that. Did you get into... you were an amateur ski jumper. What were some areas you jumped at?

PM: I jumped all through the central and ??? and ??? Iron Wood, Blue London, St. Paul. The year of nationals I went to New Hampshire and I won the Class B national championship that year. That was in 1940. Then the war broke out. I was drafted in the army. I asked to be pulled to the 10th Mountain Division in Colorado. I got there in February 1943. I stayed there and became a ski instructor. In April 1944 I was taken out of the 10th Mountain and went over to the South Pacific.

RM: That was quite a change.

PM: I was very disappointed in that. I figured all that would happen, the 85th, 86th, and 87th infantry regiments were the 10th Mountain Division. I don't know what month or year, they shipped the 87th up to Kiska and they weren't there very long. While they were gone, I was in the 86th regiment. They took some out of the 86 and formed the 90th regiment. I was taken out of the 86th and went into the 90th. Then when the 87th came back from Kiska that's when they had to get rid of the 90th. They broke them up and shipped them overseas as replacements.

RM: So you were out of the 10th Mountain.

PM: I was out. I was assigned to the 41st Division in New Guinea.

RM: Did you know some of the guys there, Gene Kiskinaki

PM: Yes.

RM: Then there was another fellow, Art Ebel? From Iron Wood?

PM: Yes.

RM: He grew up in Iron Wood.

PM: I think his wife just passed away.

RM: A few months ago.

PM: Yes. Then there was another fellow from Marquette, Petoski, I don't recall his first name. I think he was headed out there.

RM: There was another guy...from Northern.

PM: I know who you're talking about. I can't think...the older you get the more names you can't remember. Gene Dogen?

RM: That might be another one. Horeski. He might have been from Wisconsin. He was in the 10th Mountain.

PM: There was a bunch here from Ishpeming. Joe Perrault, Roxie Lawson, Farley was there for a while then he transferred to the Air Force. Kenny Oja, that's about all I remember.

RM: So this was like a national congression. These were all skiers ski jumping so they went in the 10th Mountain Division. It was natural.

PM: Well what makes me feel a bit bitter about things that happened. Why I couldn't stay at Camp Hail, knowing what I do about skiing and being a ski instructor, and the southerners waiting to get out of it, they kept them and shipped me out. Then I thought that's the way the Army worked.

RM: Your name just happened to be in the wrong place.

PM: That's right. There's nothing I can do about it anyway.

RM: So before the war you were competing?

PM: Yes. I remember the first ski tournament...it was back many years ago. At 5 years of age I went out where they used to have the regular tournaments before Suicide Ski Hill was built. Suicide was in 1926. So I was 5 years old and we were out at Rocky. I think the hill record was probably 135 or 140 feet. Somewhere in that area. I remember at my age...I don't know why it sticks in my mind. I remember leaving there and starting for home. I took my skis and walked up the side of the trail to the scaffold. Usually we went around to avoid going up the hill. That particular day I walked straight up. When I got to the scaffold I took my skis and went up the scaffold, but then down and put them on. I remember hollering. They waved me down and down I went. 5 years old. I will say I think I came off flat on my back. But why, I have no idea why I did that. One of my friends was there and he raced home and told my Dad Pinky rode Rocky. I remember my Dad telling me don't ride Rocky. You'll break your neck. I think that was the day my Dad came home with a bruise from here down to his leg. He was run over by a Marquette County Truck. He had a broken ankle and all those bruises. Then I came home and he just laughed.

RM: You didn't get hurt.

PM: No, I didn't get hurt. But that was a wicked hill. To me that hill was more difficult to ride than Suicide. It's all in the open. Maybe that's what makes it so bad. Then I remember the first ski tournament that Chuck sent me out. It was at Oust. I wasn't too thrilled about going to a ski tournament. What I was thrilled about, I thought I was going to see sky scrapers. I don't know if you know where Oust is.

RM: No.

PM: Just a few miles out of Baraga. I thought the only place with a lot of sky scrapers was here in Ishpeming. That's nothing but farming area. On the way up I got car sick and the ski club was run a way that you had to line up skiers to drive people to different places. I remember Walt Murray and his wife drove me up. I got car sick. I don't think I could have been in the car more than a mile or two. This was only 65 miles up the road. Then one of the major ski tournaments I went to, I must have been around 13 or 14 years old. I went to Munising. I got first prize in Class C and I got the Most Graceful Rider. Coy always gets me. He always calls me Most Graceful. There were a few others...I don't know if you know Jeff Jacobs, but every time I see him he says hi most graceful. I would say I wanted more to show style than I did distance. I wanted to keep up the distance close to the long jumps, but then pick up points with style. There were quite a few tournaments I picked up like that. I looked forward to getting Most Graceful Rider than I did anything.

RM: A real honor for you to win that.

PM: Now days the jumping style is so different. I don't particularly like that. The skis are like this. But I guess they're getting their distance. I wanted to ski with skis together and a nice lean and just a slow pull at the arms. Ted Zeberski used to come and poke just like a bird. It looked so beautiful to me. The year I won nationals...let's see. Joe said

you're the only skier that went through 3 classes in one season. I was in C, I went to B, and I went to A all in one ski season. That was 1939-40. I jumped Class C in the early part of '39. I wasn't 18 yet. I wasn't 18 until February. So I participated in Class C. Then in the '39-40 season I went into B and then won the nationals and went into A. At that time you had to win 1st, 2nd, or 3rd place to go from B to A. That year I think I took 7 firsts and 2 seconds out of 9 tournaments. Then after that the war started. I got away in 1941. I had a bad accident on the practice hill in Negaunee. I had a good ride over the hill, but when I got on the landing I was still standing up but I went off the landing and into the swamp. I don't know... a few days previous to that they had gone into that swamp and taken a machete and cut the ????. When I got in there I fell and hit those ????. I had 8 stitches here. I was very lucky it missed the eye. I think I had 8 stitches there. I had 12 in my head. The only thing I remember about that day is they carried me up the hill. The only thing I remember is going under a barbed wire fence. I had a new sweater that was shipped to me from Norway. My mother had gotten it. I had a nice new sweater...

RM: Was that the worst accident you had?

PM: Yes. Down in Buffalo location in Negaunee.

RM: So after the war you put aside contests?

PM: After the war I didn't continue jumping. I got out of the Service in December of '45. I did a little jumping in January and February of '46. I don't remember what tournaments I went to. I finished out that year. The 1947 I was getting to the point where I had to quit because of my family. But I did participate. I remember I went to St. Paul and wanted to try out. My brother-in-law and I, I remember it was late in the week before we decided to go to St. Paul to participate. You had to jump there for making the Olympic Team. There were 3 or 4 different tournaments you had to ride in for making the ski team. Somehow or another we left Ishpeming early Saturday morning on a train. We got to St. Paul early in the morning. We got in a motel and slept a few hours. Then when we got up they said we weren't allowed to ride because our entry was too late. We were kind of disappointed in that. But I think it was Ted Zeberski that said, don't worry fellas, you'll ride. He said if they don't let you two ride none of us will. So they let us enter. I was on the same hill Paul Bietela got hurt on. The funny thing about that hill, the location it was in. Some how or another there used to be sand flying in the air with the wind and it got on the trails. I don't think that hurt me any. I don't think it caused me to fall. I just automatically fell. The ride was good off the takeoff. But then when I fell somehow I lost my balance. I was shook up. I went out for a while. When I come to I said this is it. No more. My skis are broke, I might as well give it up. When somebody said my skis were broke I said go over to Northland Ski Factory, I need a new pair. The next morning I returned home and my brother-in-law stayed over to pick out a pair of skis from Northland. They were kind enough to replace any skier's skis that were broken. But when I got home I wasn't feeling too good. I remember funny things. I got up and was going to go to work. My wife said I better not go to work. She should have said you better go to work and forget about your injuries. Quit skiing. I said I better go to work.

She said no you're going back to bed and take it easy. I remember that. I remember little things. I thought she would be kind of...she was waiting for me to give it up. We discussed those things ahead of time.

RM: That was about what year?

PM: That was '47. I did a little skiing around the area. Not any competition.

RM: Just for yourself.

PM: Yes.

RM: After that did you get into coaching?

PM: Not actually coaching. I would go out to the ski areas and just tell the kids what to do and just a few pointers. Not actually coaching.

RM: What was your involvement with the Ishpeming Ski Club?

PM: Well the Ishpeming Ski Club...I was president of the club in '55. I didn't care too much for that. It was kind of a funny year too. It just seemed to be that ski jumping was making a turn for different. I don't know how to explain it. I don't know if people were deciding they didn't care too much for the sport anymore or not. Maybe it was just what I thought.

RM: So you got out of skiing.

PM: I got the junior club. That's what I'm happy with. That's where I'll stay.

RM: So you continued coaching until '66.

PM: Yes.

RM: Have you stayed active with the Ishpeming Ski Club since then?

PM: No. I have some health problems and don't go too far. I had ???and it really took a lot out of me. It's arthritis, but it isn't only in one place. It's in every joint and every muscle in my body. Thank God for Prednezone.

RM: So it works for you.

PM: It's a miracle drug. It sure works.

RM: Otherwise you couldn't get around.

PM: Right now I'm trying to get off it. Every time I tell the doctor I'm off of it for a while. When I start feeling bad...I'm not asking you, I'm just going to go back on. I did that a couple times. Now I got kind of interested in hockey. My son, after graduating from college...he graduated from Tech, and he worked in Midland at Dow Corning. He talked to a fellow down there and got interested in law so he went to Oregon to law school. He graduated from there and then he moved to Minnesota. So I thought maybe he'd be...he's still interested in a little skiing in St. Paul. But he's mostly interested in hockey. My grandson is in it. That's kind of how I evolved into hockey.

RM: Well you've had a very interesting career with ski jumping.

PM: I loved it. One thing about it, you're on your own. If you mess up you can't rely on 5 or 11 other people. It's just you. I enjoyed the Bietela family. I knew every one of them Anslem, Leonard, Walter, Paul, Roy, Ralph. We had a little ski jumping hill right there close to the house. We called it Halls. That name...see if I'm not mistaken, in the Bietela home, before the Bietela's moved there I believe there was the Hall family. They were ski jumpers. In fact in 1925-26 Henry Hall was at one tournament in British Columbia. I'm trying to remember reading about it. Henry Hall and Carl Hall, they were good ski jumpers. The Bietela's came in there and every one of them was good. Walter was more stylish. Paul was distance, but he had good style too. Then Roy, he and I used to be chums. After school we'd get our skis and hike to Suicide and take a ride or two and stop on the way at Cedar Lake... Those were the ski hill names. Cedar Lake, Cleveland Bush Hill, Steep Landing, Corner Hill... we were jumping all day and all night long. We'd come home from school and our studies got a little bit behind. At night...the driveway going up to the Cleveland location had two rock walls along the edge of the road. Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company, Julian came and lived in the cottage up on the hill. In that area we used to park there and go over that first wall and then come across the road and hit the next wall and just what we called a little chute. We had a little chute on there and what we used that for, we jumped that at night because we had it under the street light. When we jumped on there we'd get up in the air and it was meant to practice our landings. We weren't interested in how far we jumped. It was just a little chute and we practiced our landing.

RM: When you went out at night, you'd always do any kind of jumping around a street light? Moonlight? What did you have?

PM: That particular thing would be by the street light. That light was just enough to let us do that. All we wanted to do is get up in the air and practice that landing. At Corner Hill we would start way up by Cleveland Bush. It was a big wooded area behind where I lived. Cleveland Cliffs had a little area up there. It started up there and then it came down and the takeoff was by the streetlight on the corner. There was a street that turned like this and went up the hill. That takeoff was there but it was dangerous. When we came down and were up in the air, we didn't know if a car was coming. It was...how anybody didn't get hurt down there I'll never know. We had a very good friend of mine...in fact he was the Best Man at my wedding, was crippled. I think he had polio when he was a youngster. He used to ride that hill. He went home and this is the way he

walked. He put on a pair of skis and jumped that ski hill. It was amazing. You'd have to see it.

RM: He would hold it?

PM: Yes. He'd hold that leg. It was like that when he took off from the takeoff and when he landed he had that hand on that leg. It was really fantastic. You would never see anything like that now days. Then another thing, wherever you had a ski hill, you built it yourself. To get there you hiked. You cross country, you downhill, and you jump. You've got all three. You were trained on all three. I think that helps built up your legs. I come home from grammar school and changed clothes. Hiked up to Suicide and took a ride. Stopped at Cedar Lake hill and took a couple rides. Then I went home and ate and then went back to the hill under the light. That was some exercise. People said I lost so much. But it was fun.

RM: Where do you see down hill skiing going today?

PM: Downhill?

RM: I mean ski jumping.

PM: I really don't know. I've thought about it and I really don't know. Up here, when I had the junior club I had a lot of meetings at my home. At times I bet there was...all the years I had the junior club there were at least 40 to 50 kids that wanted to jump. Then it just kept dwindling down. Now I don't think we have more than 4 or 5. I used to send the juniors to different tournaments and I'd have to line up at least 10 people to drive them. We'd put 5 in a car and sometimes my wife and I would take our two daughters and we'd go. But we had to wait til early Sunday morning because I didn't know if I had to bring skiers. If I didn't have enough cars then I would take 3 or 4 skiers with my son. Then my wife and the girls had to stay home.

RM: One thing that Coy talked about and Ray talked about were the Cleveland location flaggers.

PM: That was the softball team. There was a softball team called the Cleveland Flaggers. At one time they were called the Dobinski Flaggers. Dobinski had a star and I think he backed them up. After it went to Cleveland. I don't know what else he...

RM: Coy just mentioned it. He was talking about the area. He didn't specify, just that it was one of these things...what is your background? Cornish?

PM: Heinz 57. My mother was Norwegian. My Dad was English and a little bit Scotch and Irish. I used to kid my mother...how come my Dad went to the Episcopalian Church and my mother was Norwegian...how come you sent me to the Swedish Church? Swede, Norwegian, what's the difference? Of course if you're talking to a Norwegian then the Swede is a Norwegian with his brains out. A Norwegian is a Swede with his brains out.

RM: Was there a lot of that ethnic banter between the different groups when you were growing up?

PM: Cleveland location was mostly Finnish. I always tell people now, I hear people say minorities. I was a minority. All those Finns up in Cleveland location. I had one cousin Jack. One cousin in that location, that was a minority. But surprisingly, a lot of those older people didn't talk English. I remember when my mother sent me out to Mattson's. They had cows. I had to go get some milk. They would say ??? Mitchell boy wants milk. I managed to get along.

RM: Why did your family move to the Cleveland location with all the Finns?

PM: That I don't know. My grandmother owned the house. She was living upstairs and she had a daughter and a grandson, and a son. All I know is we lived downstairs. My mother and dad with 5 children. She was a mixture of Swede and Norwegian, or maybe just Norwegian, I don't know.

RM: I thought maybe they were Cornish and they were living there before the other people came in.

PM: The Cornish part is on my Dad's side. All I know is I was living in Cleveland location.

RM: Do you remember the other locations around the area?

PM: Around town, all the different locations played ball against each other. There was Nebraska side at Cleveland Ave. and Bank St. and Ridge St. on the southeast side of town. Cleveland location was south of that, just about directly south of Nebraska. North of Nebraska was New York side. Then west of Cleveland location is Salsbury. West of that was Junction location.

RM: These were all named after mine shafts?

PM: Cleveland location, I guess because Cleveland Cliffs had that cottage. Salsbury, I don't know what that's named after. There wasn't any mine...there were mines, Lakeshaft Mine, Holms Mine, Barna Mine. That might have been named after some CCI thing. I think that is after a person anyway.

****SKIP IN TAPE****

RM: National Mine had a junior ski club as well?

PM: Yes.

RM: Just to kind of go to these locations, do you remember what ethnic group was there or was it just a combination of people? Did certain people move to certain areas?

PM: I think yes because the Italians were down off of W. Division St. and W. Superior St.

RM: You had Andriachi's store on Division St. So they were in this area here.

PM: The Italians were in this area here mostly. There were Italians in Junction location. A lot of French people in Junction location. Of course Cleveland location was mostly Finnish. I'd say Nebraska, probably Scandinavian. The same thing in New York.

RM: Then in the center of town was the business people?

PM: Downtown was mostly business.

RM: Some of these streets like Main, Pine, Euclid, Healy, that area, north of downtown...

PM: I would say English.

RM: Yes.

PM: Mostly English.

RM: Do you mean a lot of Cornish? ??? Jacks?

PM: Yes. I guess a whole mixture of them were there.

RM: But the core would be English and Cornish people in this area. I've heard of these locations, but didn't know where they were at. North Lake, who lived up there?

PM: They had two mines up at North Lake location. I guess both of those houses were built by the mining company. ??? Steel and Cleveland Cliffs. There were a lot of Italians up there. Finns and Italians, and French.