

Claude Ellis Oral History Interview - JFK #1, 9/9/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Ellis, National committeeman, Young Democrats of West Virginia (1960); campaign manager, Kennedy for President, Logan County (1960), discusses running Kennedy's campaign in West Virginia and benefits to the region as a result of Kennedy administration programs, among other issues.

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Claude Ellis

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Oral History Interview

with

CLAUDE ELLIS

September 9, 1964
Logan, West Virginia

By William L. Young

For the John F. Kennedy Library

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, when did you first become interested in Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] as a presidential possibility?

ELLIS: Early in the campaign I was national committeeman of the Young Democrats of West Virginia and received a letter to meet with some Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] forces in Fairmont, West Virginia. I went on to the convention and met with some of these people, and, of course, they talked with me about Senator Humphrey at that time. I wasn't too interested in either candidate. After coming back to Logan County, a good friend of mine that was the executive secretary to the Young Democrats at that time, Matt Reese [Matthew A. Reese, Jr.] out of Huntington, came to Logan on Mr. Kennedy's behalf and wanted to get the ball rolling as far as the Kennedy campaign in this area. We met with some more people in Logan – Matt Reese, myself, and some of the politicians – and discussed the possibility of getting a campaign manager to head the Kennedy campaign in Logan County. After a lengthy meeting and nobody willing to take on this task, I decided myself to head the Kennedy campaign in Logan County.

We had set a meeting up for that night at the courthouse. We went to the courthouse and met with several people

and elected a campaign chairman and various other officers to direct the Logan County campaign and got it underway. From there on we met with, first, Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy], and Teddy Kennedy [Edward M. Kennedy]. They came into Logan. Teddy spent the biggest part of the time down here; I think Bobby made possibly one appearance. And after that we got the ball rolling.

We ran into a lot of trouble on the religious issue. People here didn't take to the Kennedy campaign because of the fact the religious issue would have some impact. The local candidates sort of shied away with the exception of one or two, and that was Mr. Godby [Thomas Godby], who was a candidate for assessor. He joined forces with us and was one of the only candidates in this area to put Kennedy literature on his automobile, seeing the situation at that time as risky. But he and Senator Dan Dahill [Danny Dahill], who was a Catholic and hadn't made up his mind, joined up with us, of course, and the other officials, such as Judge C.C. Chambers. It had been rumored that he was a member of the Ku Klux some years back, so he didn't want anything to do with the Kennedy campaign. So it made it very hard to get the ball rolling.

But with the help of some more officials, we requested they send down Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., who is very popular in this area. Through his appearance – and there were several of them here in Logan County – the Kennedy campaign took hold and we were able to move it forward. Later on, the chairman of the Democratic executive committee here, Mr. Raymond Chafin, joined use to some extent and was able to give us some good help. And through the speeches of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., along with other people that came into this area with a definite interest in the Kennedy campaign, we were able to move along at a good pace.

Finally when the primary election was over, before that, Senator Kennedy, then candidate Kennedy the future president, came into this area. We had a courthouse rally and this was estimated to be one of the biggest ones we have had in Logan County. I think we served those people about thirty-five hundred hot dogs and soft drinks in the street in front of the courthouse in Logan. His appearance was good, and he made the best impression of any politician that made a one-stop into the Logan County to further his campaign for the president. That,

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from then on, changed the picture to some extent in Logan County. We were able to go on and win the primary by some four thousand majority for John F. Kennedy.

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, did you anticipate any difficulty over religion when the senator first announced his intention, or did this religious issue take you by surprise as it developed during the campaign?

ELLIS: Well, we had talked and anticipated some trouble, and it did develop as far as the religious issue was concerned. We had people here that just wouldn't take to a Catholic being President of the United States, and we had some trouble. We were able to work out most of that trouble, but we did have some bitterness because of the religious issue, because of the fact that some of our people,

politicians and elected officials in this area, were definitely against the President because he was a Catholic.

YOUNG: Well, did you find Protestant ministers preaching sermons from the pulpit against him, or was it more undercover than that?

ELLIS: Well, most of it undercover, but some were outspoken. Some spoke out against President Kennedy because of the fact that he was a Catholic.

YOUNG: Did they give specific reasons then or specific things they were afraid of from a Catholic president?

ELLIS: No specific reasons other than they just didn't want a Catholic as President of the United States.

YOUNG: They didn't list A, B, C, D reasons – just in general, would you say?

ELLIS: No, no particular reasons.

YOUNG: Well, how do you think, then, that President Kennedy was able to overcome this fear of the Catholic? What were the best weapons in getting over this anti-Cathol-

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icism?

ELLIS: I think, as I've said before, the many appearances and talks by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. helped change a lot of people's minds. And then his appearance himself. That had everything to do with it. He was able to convince the people here in Logan County that he was qualified and would make a good president, which he did.

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, before we started this interview, you mentioned a state senator from this district – is that right – who is a Catholic.

ELLIS: That's correct. Dan Dahill.

YOUNG: Is there any way to explain the fact that the people of this area have no objections to a Catholic senator, but would object to a Catholic president? Is it just the difference in the two offices?

ELLIS: Well, I think the majority of the people in Logan County, knowing Dan Dahill was raised – was born and reared – right here in the county, didn't realize and didn't make an issue out of the fact that he was a Catholic. I think the majority of the people who voted for him didn't realize that he was a Catholic, and there was no issue made. But there was definitely an issue made on the fact that President Kennedy was a Catholic.

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, I wonder, then, if you would review for me your personal contacts with Senator Kennedy during the primary campaign.

ELLIS: Yes, sir. Senator Kennedy, when he came into West Virginia, tried to cover as much territory as possible. I think he landed at the Huntington airport, and swung up through the southern part of the state, up through Williamson, West Virginia, and came on into Logan. A group of the Kennedy people met with him in Omar. We had a short get-together there on the parking lot of the supermarket, Shaheen shopping center, at Omar. He got in that area about the time

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the miners were changing shifts. Most of the coal mines are up in that area. There were a lot of coal miners there still in their work clothes. He spoke in the parking lot there briefly.

Then we pulled out of there on the way to Logan, some seven miles out. As we came down through these communities where the coal company houses were boarded up – people around here called them Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] window blinds – the president (Senator Kennedy at that time) wanted to stop in these areas, and he did. I was raised at Omar myself, and I'll never forget...I told him if he'd like, I'd introduce him to some of these people. He said just to keep the fellows back and let him go on his own as he always liked to do. And in one community, Switzer, West Virginia, between Logan and Omar, he went from door to door and met these people on their porch, and made a good impression all the way down through that area. I know you could hear comments thereafter about how he stopped and met with those people, and how they enjoyed having him come into their yard and talk to them about their problems, right on their front porch.

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, would it be safe to say that the economy of this area as of 1960 was about 90 percent based on coal, or would it be even higher than that?

ELLIS: About 90 percent based on the coal mining industry in Logan County and this area.

YOUNG: Are there any other industries – agriculture, timbering, anything at all – that compete with coal?

ELLIS: No. It's definitely all coal.

YOUNG: This is what I'm getting at. Would you mention any way in which Senator Kennedy and then later Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. appealed to coal miners as such?

ELLIS: I think the reason that Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. appealed so much is because his father was so well thought of in this area. People here thought there was nothing like his father when he was president, to help the

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people in this area when they were down and out, to make a comeback. They really thought there was nothing like the Roosevelts. I think he was able to get through to them on that alone. And then the President himself came in; he sort of knew what they wanted and, I'd say, spoke their language. They liked him.

YOUNG: How much of the depressed area was the result of lack of coal production and tonnage, and how much of it, on the other hand, was the result of automation – production still up but people simply unemployed?

ELLIS: The majority of it was automation.

YOUNG: In other words, coal production actually remained about the same, but there were fewer people producing it.

ELLIS: They were actually mining more coal with less men.

YOUNG: Did either Senator Kennedy or Mr. Roosevelt talk about retraining or moving people out or bringing new industry in – anything specific with respect to the economy?

ELLIS: Yes. They had their program outlined. Senator Kennedy's program to move forward included retraining and new industry in this area. He said one of the first things that he would do when he was elected president was to devote his time to West Virginia and areas like Logan County, and he kept that promise. He has moved West Virginia and Logan County forward from that day on when he was inaugurated in Washington.

YOUNG: Well, has the economy of Logan County changed to any degree in the last four years? Has it been diversified; have new industries come in, to any degree?

ELLIS: Yes. Definitely so. The ARA [Area Redevelopment Administration] development took place, and we were able to put a plant in down at Phico, a garment fac-

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tory that employed around a hundred men and women that were unemployed at that time. They came along with money for a new courthouse that is being constructed now. You probably noticed that as you came in town. Also, they furnished money for new parking building in the city of Logan. We have moved forward tremendously here because of the fact that we had the president that understood and was here and knew what we needed.

YOUNG: We've mentioned Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., some of his father's popularity perhaps rubbing off on Kennedy through the son. We've also mentioned the issue of religion. Was the Kennedy war record a factor at all, do you think, in his popularity? Was it emphasized here?

ELLIS: Yes, his war record helped in his campaign here because – I don't know the percentage, but most all young men here had been in one branch or another of service, and they knew and read about his war record, and it helped him in this area, I'd say.

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, before we leave the primary completely, can you remember any specific stories that were told about the president in terms of his Catholic faith?

ELLIS: Yes, there were several stories going around in this area about what might take place if they elected a Catholic for president. One in particular I remember. Some fellow from up in the Rum Creek section had put out the word that if Senator Kennedy was elected president, the Pope's picture would appear on the front of the dollar bill.

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, do you have anything more to say on that?

ELLIS: No. Like I say, they had several stories, but that's just one of the ones I remember.

YOUNG: Would you then go into something else in terms of the primary and evaluate the differences, if any, between the two candidates, the two United States Senators, Humphrey and Kennedy, running at that time? Did there seem to be any real difference in terms of ideology,

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platform, and what they would do for West Virginia; or did it boil more or less down to

personalities as an issue?

ELLIS: I think it probably boiled down to personalities. The story came into this area that the reason Humphrey was a candidate was to stop Kennedy. We had a senator from West Virginia, United States Senator Robert Byrd, that had worked hard to stop Kennedy. I think he had paired up with probably Lyndon Johnson at that time, and several of them had gotten together a program to stop Kennedy. They both did make appearances in Logan; the people were able to hear their views. And, as always, I think, Senator Kennedy made a better appearance and was able to say to the people what they wanted to hear. I think both their programs were similar, but Senator Kennedy at that time was able to get through to the people in this area better than Senator Humphrey at that time.

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, I wonder, then, if we might go on to the general election in the fall. Was the issue of religion still being discussed then in the November battle against Vice President Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], or had religion pretty much ceased to be an issue by that time?

ELLIS: In this area, the religious issue had pretty well worn down at that time. And then in this area in particular, when the primary is over 90 percent of your work is over. Because of Logan County being predominantly Democratic, the Democrats hold a nice four to one majority here. As I said before, our work was pretty well over, because all the Democrats united together and were able to give a nice majority. I don't remember, I think it was seven or eight thousand majority for him in the general election that we had fought for and almost got. So you can see the Democratic registration here after the primary is over, then how much a majority you can come up with in a general election.

YOUNG: Well, you had mentioned earlier some of the things that happened after the election. Before we leave the primary and the November election, do you have any other anecdotes or stories about the senator, or any stories with respect to the election that might be of interest?

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ELLIS: No. There were several stories. A lot of the national magazines moved in here during the primary. They attended some of the campaign meetings, and left here with all types of stories, some true and some not, about how the people worked here. They left with the story that Kennedy had enough money to buy West Virginia or Logan County. But in the case of Logan County he didn't have to buy it. The people went for him here; he spent very little money here in this area. That's about all, except some of the stories that had been in national magazines, and I don't think they need repeating here today.

YOUNG: Well, do you think that the national press did southern West Virginia an injustice in terms of its portrait of poverty and that sort of thing, or was the picture painted pretty fair?

ELLIS: I think as far as the picture of poverty is concerned, it was not exaggerated too much, because we had a great deal of unemployment here. The Republicans in Washington at that time I don't think realized or even knew where Logan County was – and probably West Virginia – because of the fact that we went from about third to about thirty-fourth in federal aid after President Kennedy took office. I think they exaggerated and did us a lot of damage in the way they wrote up how elections were held in Logan County, because these people formed groups to try to have fair elections when it wasn't necessary. We have elections here that have been in the past Logan County politics and it will always be Logan County politics.

YOUNG: Well, one thing I was impressed with today, driving down from Charleston on U.S. 119, was – and correct me if I'm wrong, but I think this is right – most of the coal mines and coal camps as such are located usually in pretty remote areas, aren't they?

ELLIS: Yes.

YOUNG: The mines aren't in Logan and they aren't in Bluefield, but they're out someplace in the hills.

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ELLIS: That's right. Most of the mines in this area are located out in the heads of the hollows, so to speak, and most of them you have to travel over a secondary road to get to them. And the Kennedy boys – I speak of the Kennedy boys – all three of them could possibly tell you better where the mines are located in Logan than some of the people that lived here, because they worked hard and met the shifts changing at all mines at one time or another throughout the primary election.

YOUNG: You've already mentioned some of the benefits that came to Logan, but I would put it in this framework. You may remember that in 1962, when Congressman Bailey [Cleveland M. Bailey] was running against Congressman Moore [Arch Alfred Moore] in a redistricted district in West Virginia, the Republicans charged that Kennedy had exploited West Virginia and made a great deal out of it to win the presidency and then had let West Virginia down. Would you comment on this in two ways: first, Logan County and the area you are familiar with; and then your attitude about the state in general.

ELLIS: Well, in Logan County we had, as I said before, this poverty thing and a lot of unemployment. And then immediately after President Kennedy took office, he helped to initiate the Food Stamp Program,

which people here are still enjoying. It worked out as a good program; it was good for Logan County. And also the emergency employment program out of Charleston, that is now controlled by the federal government, where each man that receives a welfare check is able to work that out. For every dollar he gets, he puts an hour in working. I think that is something that was necessary for this area, and that that and the Food Stamp have been a wonderful thing to happen down in this area in Logan County.

YOUNG: How would you compare the economy of Logan County now as of 1960?

ELLIS: Well, the comparison would be that Logan County is 100 percent better off today than it was in 1960.

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YOUNG: Unemployment down?

ELLIS: Unemployment – as I mentioned before, this works program helped the unemployment situation. As far as the coal mines themselves, they have been able to work and possibly hold as many men, or probably add to. It's definitely up, in this area.

YOUNG: You mean mining employment is up, even with automation?

ELLIS: Yes, it's up compared to 1960.

YOUNG: Well, do the local people, then, give much of the credit to the Kennedy administration, or do they see this as just a general national prosperity?

ELLIS: They give the majority of the credit to the Kennedy administration. They know that one of his first acts was doing something for West Virginia, and they know and appreciate the fact that he did do something for them.

YOUNG: There are two other questions, Mr. Ellis, that I'd like to ask, that I should probably have asked earlier. In the 1960 primary were there a great many people acting as volunteers working for Kennedy, or was the Kennedy campaign handled pretty much by party regulars who had been in politics for some years?

ELLIS: No, as I mentioned before, the politicians, the party regulars that had been in politics for some time and were holding office at that time, didn't take to the Kennedy campaign. They were against us, and we had to depend mainly on volunteer help. He had a lot of volunteers. The women's group formed a telephone committee, and the Volunteers for Kennedy, and worked hard. Most of

our help was volunteer help for the Kennedy campaign.

YOUNG: Well, did these volunteers come, then, from any special religious group or class, or were they distinguishable, in other words, from any other groups of citizens?

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ELLIS: No, they were citizens of all groups in this county. We started out sort of slow and we welcomed any help we could get because we figured we needed all the help we could get in this area. And they were just people from all walks of life here in Logan County that would donate their services and time to help the Kennedy campaign.

YOUNG: These volunteers, then, wouldn't be overwhelmingly Catholic by any means?

ELLIS: No. We had a few Catholics in the organization. 2 or 3 percent. The rest of them were Protestant, such as myself.

YOUNG: Would that 2 or 3 percent also reflect the Catholic population of the county? How large is it, or is there any way to tell?

ELLIS: I think about 3 percent are Catholic in Logan County.

YOUNG: Have you noticed that any of these people that were volunteers have remained active in politics since 1960?

ELLIS: Yes, several people that started out with the Kennedy campaign had not been in politics up to that time. One instance I can remember is the local school teacher who is in Washington now. He hadn't been fooling with politics, and he got interested and got with the Kennedy forces and moved on up to the national headquarters, and is still up in Washington working. His name is Mello Cotton. He was from this area here. He left as a school teacher, and he's still in the federal end of it in Washington.

YOUNG: Mr. Ellis, have you any final comments, then, on the effect of the Kennedy years, the Kennedy primary on West Virginia, or the New Frontier itself on West Virginia?

ELLIS: Yes, I think the Kennedy campaign and John F. Kennedy running for president was the best thing that ever

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happened to West Virginia. It let people throughout the country know and distinguish between West Virginia and Virginia. Most people thought Virginia took it all in, at one time, but now definitely they know that West Virginia is here; they know that the people of West Virginia can and will do something for themselves. I think possibly that Kennedy himself was good for the people here because he gave them some hope to hold on to when he let them know that they should get out and do something for themselves. And they did. We have been able to move forward with his program, and I think the country will keep moving forward with his program.

YOUNG: This has been an interview with Mr. Claude Ellis, who served as Kennedy county campaign chairman in the 1960 primary in West Virginia. The interview was made on September 9, 1964, in the Aracoma Hotel in Logan, West Virginia, by William L. Young.

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