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Interview with Jane Adams

Jane H. Adams

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #241
ADAMS, Jane**

ADAMS, Jane

Feminist, anti-war activist, educator, indigenous rights activist

Interviewed: 1996

Interviewer: Ron Chepesiuk

Index by: Alyssa Jones

Length: 2 hours, 19 minutes, 41 seconds

Abstract: In her 1996 interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Jane Adams described her time as a 1960s radical. She covered various topics, including bohemians, socialism, beatniks, civil rights, women's liberation and consciousness, the Vietnam War, counterculture, and World War II. Adams also discussed the Student Peace Union, SNCC and its factions, Progressive Labor, prairie populism, feminism, the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, and other '60s activists. Adams also briefly discussed her current work with the indigenous people of Latin America and her work as a professor. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: University school, socialism, bohemians, beatniks (beats), Student Peace Union (SPU), Freedom Summer, SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), Jim Crow, Herbert Lee, civil rights, women's consciousness, COFO (Jackson County of Federated Organizations), Fidel Castro, Vietnam War, SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), YPSL (Young People Socialist League), Clark Kissinger, Régis Debray, Ché Guevara, *Revolution in the Revolution*, Progressive Labor (PL), prairie populist, Dave Dellinger, Bernardine Dohrn, feminism, women's liberation, Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas, psychedelics, counterculture, World War II, ERAP (Economic Research and Action Project), LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), Democratic Convention of 1968, Weathermen, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner

Interview Session (1996): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:01:08 *Question:* Can you describe the type of background you came from? *Answer:* JA said it was unusual. Her parents were urban Chicago intellectuals and socialists. Her mother was Jewish and her father was from an old line of New England Adams, but they moved to Chicago. In 1939, her parents bought a farm in hill country, where JA

was born and raised. She went to a one-room school for a couple of years before she went to a small-town grade school. In her sophomore year, she transferred to university school.

00:02:45 *Question:* That's quite unusual-a socialist going to a one-room school house out in the country. *Answer:* Yes, but there were some other socialists who came from a farming background, but their parents were more connected to the universities.

00:03:05 *Question:* So, you went to university school? *Answer:* Yes, a new highway was built that made traveling to the city easier.

00:03:29 *Question:* So, if I asked you, when did you become politically aware, that would be redundant, right? You've been politically aware your whole life. *Answer:* Yes. JA's parents had an African American man come visit them sometimes, even though JA did not remember. Her parents were politically aware and instilled political awareness in here early.

00:04:00 *Question:* What about your childhood? Were you popular? *Answer:* No. JA and her brother were avid readers and were atheists, so they stuck out. After sixth grade, that's when the children started to separate themselves and their differences became noticeable. JA said it was excruciatingly lonely. She thought going away to university school saved her life.

00:05:01 *Question:* What was different when you went to university school? You had more cosmopolitan classmates? *Answer:* Yes. There were some Beats and Bohemians around and the environment made it acceptable and easy to be "different".

00:05:38 *Question:* This carried you into university? *Answer:* Yes.

00:05:48 *Question:* Why did you go to Antioch? *Answer:* JA's mother wanted to go there, so that's where she got the idea. The Depression stole her mother's money and she was unable to go. JA fell in love with the Bohemian atmosphere.

00:06:29 *Question:* Did it live up to your expectations? *Answer:* Yes, in many ways, but JA thought it was a bit New York-y for her, but she loved it and all the folk singing. There was a lot of political activity and she joined the Student Peace Union the summer before she went to Antioch.

00:07:30 *Question:* John Kennedy had a big impact on many people from generation. Did he have an impact on you? *Answer:* JA did not worship him like many people did. She did not like him very much.

00:08:18 *Question:* Why not? *Answer:* JA could not recall why she did not like him.

- 00:09:37 *Question:* Were you shocked by his death? *Answer:* Yes. Despite the fact that JA did not like him, she thought the assassination of a president was horrifying. She may not have liked his policies, but she did not want him dead and did not hate him.
- 00:10:38 *Question:* From '61 to '63 you went to Antioch. Did you break off your education to go south? *Answer:* No, Antioch was a culture shock for her and she could not handle more than two and a half years there. She went back to SIU (Southern Illinois University) during the spring. That was the spring that Freedom Summer was organized. JA just knew she was going to go once she heard about it.
- 00:11:38 *Question:* Did any of your friends go? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:12:58 *Question:* How many White women went, besides yourself? *Answer:* Maybe three or four.
- 00:13:22 *Question:* From watching documentaries, I can assume that it was very dangerous for anyone to go down, especially for White women. *Answer:* It was kind of scary, but for twenty and twenty-one year-olds, death was not to be feared.
- 00:13:56 *Question:* But you were there when someone was murdered. You went down two summers? *Answer:* JA went down in the summer of '64 after the three (James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner) had been killed, right next to that county. The fall after the murders, JA worked for COFO (Jackson County of Federated Organizations) office. Then the following summer, she went when Herbert Lee was murdered.
- 00:15:03 *Question:* What kind of reactions did you see from local Whites? *Answer:* JA said they did not see a lot of local Whites. During the first summer, she and some others went to do their laundry at a laundromat and some of the White women were hostile towards them. There was a woman, a librarian, who was glad they were there. The librarian was unhappy with the Jim Crow laws and was hoping for them to fix it.
- 00:16:46 *Question:* What about the Blacks? Were they receptive to you coming down? *Answer:* Yes. The first community she visited was a community with some very light people. JA said she was darker than some of them.
- 00:19:56 *Question:* Were there any situations when your life was in danger? *Answer:* Perhaps. Once, when they went into town, a White girl from Detroit was driving, when armed people pulled in front of them. The girl pulled around them and took off into another community. JA did not know if their lives were in danger at that point.

- 00:21:07 *Question:* That's interesting because a lot of people think that the civil rights workers went down unarmed. *Answer:* The civil rights workers weren't armed, but the locals were.
- 00:21:17 *Question:* But you had protection. *Answer:* Yes. JA's first night in Harmony, there was one record player in the community, and it was in the house where she was staying. They were having a good time when they heard a car coming. The two men in the house took up their guns, prepared.
- 00:22:32 *Question:* What were some of the activities you were involved with? *Answer:* JA was involved with a lot of canvassing. She mostly worked on federal programs. She did not recall doing many activities.
- 00:24:13 *Question:* Why did that occur? *Answer:* The woman mentioned in a previous story just decided that she was sick and tired of being sick and tired.
- 00:25:00 *Question:* Do you feel like you made a difference there? *Answer:* Yes, absolutely. Not personally, but she thought that Freedom Summer did have an impact. It was a turning point. JA said it turned her life around.
- 00:24:45 *Question:* Did that experience have an impact on you as a White woman? *Answer:* Yes, but not as much as it did on others.
- 00:27:43 *Question:* Were you still part of the movement when SNCC kicked out White people? *Answer:* No, JA was never really invested in SNCC or the Black movement.
- 00:29:01 *Question:* It must have been a shock for White civil rights members to have Blacks want to control their destiny. *Answer:* JA thought it was liberating and made perfect sense. JA did think it was probably a shock for others. When women's consciousness started happening, JA was stunned when men did not understand that women needed their own space.
- 00:30:50 *Question:* When was this? *Answer:* JA could not remember exactly when that happened, but probably around 1967.
- 00:31:01 *Question:* Were you aware of Vietnam at this time? Were you concerned about Vietnam and what was happening there? *Answer:* JA said it was not at the center of her consciousness, but she had been active with the Student Peace Union. She had been offered the national secretary position of SPU in '64.
- 00:31:38 *Question:* Why didn't she want you to do it? *Answer:* Because they knew it was an organization that was on its last legs. Mississippi and the Freedom Summer was where everything was happening. SPU was the first organization to focus on

Vietnam, as early as '62. JA had always cared more about Latin America, rather than Vietnam. Latin America was her model for revolutionary action.

- 00:32:27 *Question:* So, you like Castro? *Answer:* Yes. The notions of what they were about came out of Latin America because there was a pan-insurgency there. JA did not remember how she found out about Vietnam. After Mississippi, she went north in '65 and the Vietnam War was what was important there. JA joined SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) the year before.
- 00:34:00 *Question:* That was 1964? *Answer:* JA said that maybe it was the spring of '65 that she joined SDS because she was up north.
- 00:34:15 *Question:* Why did you join? *Answer:* JA went to a conference where the speakers spoke about the society America could build with its affluence. While working for the SPU, JA met people from YPSL (Young People Socialist League), which controlled the SPU, who were Old Left, the ideals of which, JA did not like. Clark Kissinger signed JA up.
- 00:36:19 *Question:* Were you the head traveler of the SDS Midwest regional office in 1965? *Answer:* No, that is an error in Sale's book.
- 00:36:48 *Question:* Was that a full-time job? *Answer:* Yes, JA was traveling. She wanted to organize. In Iowa, she received a Triumph TR-4 car, in which she traveled around with boxes of literature. JA also organized conferences.
- 00:38:41 *Question:* And you were paid? *Answer:* Not much.
- 00:39:10 *Question:* What kind of reception did you receive from students? *Answer:* There were already chapters in most places, but in the smaller colleges, she went to the campus/student ministers. JA said there were always receptive students who opposed the war, supported civil rights, or wanted to do things. JA gave a lot of workshops on the war, but she mostly remembered organizing conferences.
- 00:40:20 *Question:* How successful were you? *Answer:* JA said the conferences were very successful in the area. She only worked that position for about six months.
- 00:41:02 *Question:* The growth was phenomenal. Kirkpatrick Sale said there had been one hundred thousand SDS members by 1968. Do you think that is accurate? *Answer:* JA did not remember; membership was a fuzzy thing because people claimed membership and was active without paying dues. SDS was a state of being, according to JA.
- 00:41:54 *Question:* Do you think that was because of the Vietnam War? Galvanizing the

- students on campus? *Answer:* Yes, absolutely. Without the draft, the movement would not have been what it was. JA said that the fact that everyone's life was on the line made it a much bigger deal.
- 00:42:25 *Question:* Those were heady days. Many thought they could carry out a revolution. Were you one of those people? *Answer:* Yes, but not using the Debray model.
- 00:44:00 *Question:* Can you summarize the Debray philosophy and concept? *Answer:* Régis Debray had worked with Ché Guevara and they had grown frustrated in Bolivia because they could not gain support. Debray wrote *Revolution in the Revolution* and came up with the model of cadres, which were dedicated bands of revolutionaries who moved covertly among the people. There was also Progressive Labor. JA believed in the Cultural Revolution and was for pushing the commitment forward. She also believed in mass revolution, not the cadres.
- 00:47:11 *Question:* They were talking about bombs at this period? *Answer:* When people became adventurous in their rhetoric, it put everyone's lives in jeopardy, even if the threats of bombing were false.
- 00:47:54 *Question:* How strong was your position? The prairie populous position? *Answer:* It changed through time. In '66-'67, they were the dominant force. It was an anarchist type of group. At the national level, there was a push towards disciplined organization rather than Dave Dellinger's organizational thoughts.
- 00:50:32 *Question:* How did you debate and work out differences in such a large organization? *Answer:* At that point, debates were spirited, but then they would all hug it out in the early years.
- 00:51:48 *Question:* How were women treated in the SDS? You were the first woman to hold national office in 1966. *Answer:* JA did not think there was inequality all the time, everywhere. She missed something growing up about male and female relations. The gender socialization did not happen the way it was supposed to happen. JA was unconsciously different. When she entered the national office, she was out of her league. She did not fit in the way that the men in the national office assumed she would in a totally male environment. That was when she started writing about women's liberation.
- 00:56:33 *Question:* So, there was consciousness-raising at that point? *Answer:* Right, but there were not many women at the time.
- 00:57:24 *Question:* Was it lonely? *Answer:* Yes. Bernardine Dorhn and JA got along very well, though. JA's mother was a feminist.

- 00:57:40 *Question:* Where did you turn when you did have a problem with a man not accepting you because you were a woman? How did you deal with that sort of thing? *Answer:* JA just ignored the comments and ran away from the hatred aimed at her.
- 00:58:15 *Question:* Was sexual harassment an issue then? *Answer:* JA was into sexual liberation. Men's construction of sexual liberation was dangerous for women—it became exploitive.
- 01:00:06 *Question:* Did you consider yourself a feminist during this period? *Answer:* Yes. JA did not know when that term came to be, but she always considered herself a feminist.
- 01:00:28 *Question:* Did you think a lot of women's issues in the '60s are still around today? *Answer:* JA said the issues had shifted. Women were often coerced and exploited by men. Men used to respect virginity, whether true or just an excuse, but no longer.
- 01:03:08 *Question:* You must have been angry when watching the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearing? *Answer:* Yes. JA marveled at Hill's strength, but was disgusted by Thomas. Thomas played the race card strongly.
- 01:06:11 *Question:* Did you think it helped the women's movement? *Answer:* Yes, JA thought it had done a world of good for raising the issue of sexual harassment. JA did not know how it was in the Black community, though.
- 01:07:36 *Question:* I believed her, but I was in the minority in the South. Most of the women believed him. *Answer:* JA agreed that his defense was impressive.
- 01:08:24 *Question:* You said you are still a feminist. Does that mean you're involved in women's issues? *Answer:* JA was doing research on farm women. She was looking at the ideology of different gender spheres and how farm women did not pick it up until after World War II and why that happened. JA's mother was involved in pro-choice activities, so she was part of the core of the pro-choice movement.
- 01:12:28 *Question:* Let's go back to LSD in 1967. Were you into the cultural scene? *Answer:* No. JA never fully invested in the music scene; she stayed with Bob Dylan and the folk music from before.
- 01:14:00 *Question:* That's interesting given what the drug scene became at the end of the '60s. Is that because of the excess? You said it was liberating? *Answer:* JA said that psychedelics were different than speed and heroin. Speed and heroin came at the end of the 1960s.

- 01:14:34 *Question:* You don't think that people graduated to them because they were looking for that ultimate high? *Answer:* JA said there were people into the thrill of it, which was not how she experienced it. Others, like JA, thought of the psychedelics as a sacred experience. JA did not understand speed or heroin, but thought they were different from the psychedelics.
- 01:17:50 *Question:* Many did not go to Vietnam, but Vietnam is still with people. They don't trust the government. It's still with us, for a lot of people? *Answer:* JA said she never trusted the government. She thought JFK was an imperialist. People said that innocence was lost during Vietnam, but JA thought she lost her innocence during WWII, even though she was born during the war.
- 01:21:14 *Question:* In 1967, during the fall, why did you decide to open a headshop in Oklahoma? *Answer:* She met a student from Oklahoma, Terry Roberts, a druggie. She went back to Norman, Oklahoma with him to organize.
- 01:22:34 *Question:* You thought that was going to happen? Uniting the political and counterculture? *Answer:* JA did not purposely choose Oklahoma; she just went there because of her relationship. She said Austin, Texas was a better place.
- 01:23:34 *Question:* What was life like in Norman? You mentioned having long hair and having to fight your way out of a situation? *Answer:* JA said that Norman's nonconformist community was very small and interesting. It was not a comfortable place for JA to live.
- 01:25:55 *Question:* So, you left? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:26:01 *Question:* What happened after that? *Answer:* JA went to Cleveland because she and Terry knew people there.
- 01:26:13 *Question:* Explain a little about what ERAP (Economic Research and Action Project) was. *Answer:* ERAP was the branch of SDS in the early '60s that adopted community organizing in White communities. They never actually got off the ground because there was not a movement of poor White people. ERAP was trying to figure out what to do. JA, Roberts, and ERAP members worked on anti-war movement activities. JA said that the women's movement was starting to take flight at that time.
- 01:27:57 *Question:* You were becoming conscious of the women's movement. *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:29:05 *Question:* Did it affect your relationship with men? Did you start to view them differently? *Answer:* JA was unsure if it affected her relationship with men.

- 01:31:33 *Question:* Did you consider raising your position in SDS or leaving SDS at this point? *Answer:* No.
- 01:32:00 *Question:* You were going to stay in the organization because you thought it was worth it to fight for the soul of the organization? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:34:42 *Question:* You mentioned Progressive Labor being a malevolent force later. Is this when they started that? Could you talk about that aspect of the situation? *Answer:* At a national council meeting, Progressive Labor started chanting not to use the red flag against the red flag while the others were singing labor songs. Progressive Labor had always seen SDS as a fishing ground for new recruits, but at that point, the two groups became enemies. That sort of division would destroy an organization. Leadership's response was to function secretively and steal power like Progressive Labor was doing.
- 01:37:38 *Question:* That was in '68 or '69? *Answer:* JA thought it was either in the fall or spring of the Democratic Convention.
- 01:37:57 *Question:* You mentioned your roommate, Bernardine Dohrn. Obviously you must have had disagreements about the organization. *Answer:* Yes, but only at the end. Not at the point of the split. The Weathermen had not formed yet; they would not form until after the Democratic Convention. The women's movement crossed many factional lines within the SDS for the women, except for PL.
- 01:40:22 *Question:* So, it self-destructed at that last SDS convention in '69? What were your feelings when you saw people walking out, chanting? *Answer?* JA sat in the balcony and cried.
- 01:40:45 *Question:* Was that the general feeling among a lot of your friends and colleagues? *Answer:* JA said many people were not present at the meeting. JA and others went to meetings after, trying to figure out where they sat, but realized that they did not fit anywhere.
- 01:41:22 *Question:* Could it have gone in another direction or was it inevitable? *Answer:* JA did not know; they were children with little organizational background and skills. She thought that if they had responded differently to the PL threat that there may have been something salvageable, but JA also thought that they did not know how to "ride the tiger they were on". There were outside groups telling them which ways to go, like the Black Panthers.
- 01:43:38 *Question:* But then it got worse because the Weathermen started bombing. You knew a lot of these people, right? They were risking their lives and that must have been more depressing. *Answer:* JA said that she and Terry ended up in San

- Francisco. JA worked as a secretary and Terry worked in a factory. They were burned out on everything and did not know where to go or what to do from there.
- 01:44:53 *Question:* That was the general feeling, right? *Answer:* Yes. On some level, JA was grateful that there were people drifting in and out of their apartment because the freeloaders were still fighting in 1970-71. Then the Townhouse happened.
- 01:46:18 *Question:* Were you shocked? *Answer:* No.
- 01:46:22 *Question:* You thought that it would end this way? *Answer:* JA did not know that it would end that way, but it was a logical progression. It made sense. JA thought it shocked everyone active back into reality. She was grieved by it, but she was not shocked by it.
- 01:47:03 *Question:* You must have thought about the legacy of SDS and all those years you spent with it. What do you think the organization accomplished? *Answer:* As an organization, JA thought it gave a mythic focus. It was also a very flaky organization as people faded in and out of leadership. People identified with SDS. It was a consciousness-raising organization. It gave the movement a form. It created an arena for discussion.
- 01:52:33 *Question:* So, it's still here? *Answer:* Yes, maybe. SNCC and SDS allowed people to see the society that was possible until late 1968. When they stopped doing that, that's when they fell apart.
- 01:53:12 *Question:* Do you see the possibility of resurgence on campus? How do the students compare with the students of your generation? *Answer:* JA liked to think that there was a new wave coming. She had been teaching long enough to have a feel for the shift, but liked to think that there was a shift. JA thought the times were changing and felt hopeful for Clinton.
- 01:55:33 *Question:* The environmental movement is happening. Housewives are taking a part in it. *Answer:* Yes, activism was everywhere in JA's view. JA hoped that her daughter's generation would have a movement because they needed it.
- 01:56:47 *Question:* That's how it started with your generation in the 1960s? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:57:19 *Question:* Has the SDS had any effect on your present professional life? Is the experience still with you? Do you still stay in touch with your friends? *Answer:* The experience would always be with her and they had reunions. The SDS people were her life-long friends.
- 01:58:32 *Question:* You went through a lot together, so there's that bond. *Answer:* Yes.

- 01:58:39 *Question:* Getting back to the early '70s when you were a secretary. There's a blank spot from '70 to '76 on your *curriculum vitae*, what happened after that. How long did the burn out continue? *Answer:* JA said it continued until she went back to school in '76. When her child was born, she started to move back towards the mainstream.
- 02:00:38 *Question:* What year was this? *Answer:* 1970. The couple and their child moved into a small apartment with other people. After that, they squatted in an abandoned house. While JA was in the hospital, they were evicted from the house, so they moved into a commune and lived there for about a year. JA and a few others left there and bought a house. After about two years there, JA went back to school. She wrote and illustrated children's books that were never published after school. She then began her climb up the academic ladder.
- 02:03:40 *Question:* How did you get involved with the indigenous people? *Answer:* She started out in anthropology at Antioch. Under the influence of the counterculture, she became interested in shamanism. Somewhere along the way, she became aware of what was happening to indigenous people.
- 02:06:46 *Question:* Have you been to the Amazon? *Answer:* No. RC and JA had a conversation about their time spent in Latin America.
- 02:09:33 *Question:* Is it as exciting as the '60s? *Answer:* JA said it was different. The academic life was very demanding. RC told a story about the struggle of receiving tenure. JA was trying to marry her academic life with her activism.
- 02:11:27 *Question:* What are your goals in life, in terms of your career and personal goals? *Answer:* JA knew where her research was going, but did not know exactly how to reinsert herself into history.
- 02:14:12 *Question:* If you could do it all over again, would you do it differently? *Answer:* JA did not think she would look for another organization because she never liked them much and they were stressful. JA wished that during the '60s that they had mentors or adults that could have given them a degree of leadership. The civil rights movement had a great deal of adults and older people who could give them structure. That fell apart, too, but it helped them for a while. JA said that if a movement came along again, she hoped that her generation could be mentors and prevent the organization splits. RC and JA discussed Dave Dellinger and his experiences, considering his advanced age.
- 02:19:41 *End of interview*