Interview with Jane Stembridge

December 5, 1996, by Pete Daniel (telephone)

[Preliminary chat getting telephone\tape connection]

Pete Daniel: I thought what we'd start with is just a kind of a biographical outline of all the facts so that I can refer to where you were born, where you grew up, who your parent were, what they did, that kind of thing. If you could just give a narrative.

Jane Stembridge: I was born in Cedartown, Georgia, which is northwest Georgia, near Rome, up from Atlanta, northwest of Atlanta, not too far from the Alabama line. My Dad is from Georgia, but he's from the eastern part of the state, near Augusta, in Burke County. Mom was from across the line in South Carolina, Edgefield County.

PD: What was her name?

JS: Lois Sawyer. And he was Henry Hansell Stembridge.

PD: So you were born there. . . .

JS: I'm not going to tell you what year it was.

PD: I don't have to know the year.

JS: You could figure that out easy enough. I lived there till I was, in fact I don't remember anything there but my sandbox. I have a vague memory of my sandbox. When I was two and a half Dad moved to a different church, and it was in Paris, Tennessee.

PD: OK. And he was a Baptist preacher?

JS: He was a Baptist preacher. So we went to First Baptist Church, Paris, Tennessee. We were there for a longer period of time. My brother Hank was born there. Henry Hansell Stembridge,

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III, was born there, when I was in second grade. There are just the two of us. Then when I was in fourth grade we went to Paducah, Kentucky, where Dad was at First Baptist Church for three years. And from there to Forrest City, North Carolina.

PD: Yes, you mentioned that last time.

JS: We were there quite a while. I went through a lot of schooling there, high school. Sixth grade through high school and part of college.

PD: Now I would like to draw you out a little bit here on the fifties, since we both grew up in the fifties, about the music, the dance, and that kind of thing. Were you part of the rock 'n' roll generation?

JS: I was. I guess. People as me if I remember, like Mary, do you remember this song? Half the time I don't. What we did a lot in Forrest City, partly because we were in a small town and we were pretty sheltered, the wildest thing we ever did was maybe have a beer behind a barn somewhere.

PD: And you were a preacher's daughter, a Baptist preacher's daughter?

JS: A Baptist preacher's daughter.

PD: My, my.

JS: And I, of course, was supposed to be, well, preacher's kids are always dreadful, wild people, and I, for the fifties, I think I fulfilled that expectation pretty well. I lived up to that.

PD: Now how wild were you?

JS: Well, now, I don't if I should answer that.

PD: You don't have to answer, but I thought I'd ask anyway.

JS: Pretty wild. Pretty much the rebel. The rebel. Well, I'll get back to that and kind of fill that

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in, in what way I was a rebel. Not so much in high school; it was more later. My parents would probably disagree with that. Forrest City was the kind of town we did a lot of things together. We did a lot of square dancing, all through high school. But we listened to all those songs, and they were on the juke box at the swimming pool. And that's where we lived. We lived at the pool. Listened to Lloyd Price and Little Richard and all that good stuff.

PD: So what were youall wearing over in Forrest City as far as clothes? What was the standard dress:

JS: At school, the girls wore skirts, sweaters. No jeans except on Sadie Hawkins Day. Once a year we could wear jeans and ask the boys out.

PD: Was that a big deal there?

JS: Sadie Hawkins Day?

PD: Yeah.

JS: Kind of a big deal. Wearing jeans was like a real freedom. Once a year. And this was not a school with a dress code, a stated dress code, or uniforms or anything. It was just like, that's the only thing you ever did. Nothing else ever occurred to anybody. I can't remember a girl coming to school in pants.

PD: Yeah, I don't remember anything like that either.

JS: You just didn't do it. It hadn't happened yet, anywhere, that we knew.

PD: Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.

JS: And our fun thing, our wild thing, was to go to Lake Lure, up near Asheville, which is a huge resort development now, as you probably know, but then it was like local families had little fishing cabins around the lake. We'd go up there on weekends. We thought our parties were pretty

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wild. There were no drugs, of course.

PD: No, that was pre-drugs, at least in my experience.

JS: In our area. And I don't recall any hard liquor. Some of the boys would bring a sixpack of beer. You might see a sixpack, or two sixpacks. And we thought that was just, oh, should we go with these guys or not?

PD: Did you take summer vacations, except up there?

JS: With the family?

PD: Yes.

JS: Dad got a month, and we did. And we went. They were wonderful. It's one of the main things I remember about family things, one of the best things of all. We took the full month, and we all four went. Sometimes I took a friend, and sometimes Hank did. Sometimes we both did, depending on where we were going. It was really a good family thing. We often went to California, because Dad had a brother there. In fact, my father's uncle, uncle Jim Stembridge, had gone out to Hollywood, of all places, from Georgia. I suppose at the turn of the century, or before 1920, somewhere in there, and had started a big gun collection and started renting guns to the movies. It was called, and it's still called, Stembridge Gun Rental. It's quite a big thing. For years, forever, the home of this was inside Paramount Studios lot in Hollywood. I think it's now over at Twentieth Century Fox, but I'm not sure about that. But at any rate, we would go out there. Dad went out to help his uncle Jim when he was in college. He started at Mercer University in Georgia, and uncle Jim needed some help because this was a big thing. He was good friends with Cecil B. DeMille.

PD: Oh.

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JS: Yes, Uncle Jim. And it was getting to be a big thing because of all the westerns. Dad went out between his sophomore and junior year at Mercer. Then he finished. That's how come he ended up finishing at the University of Southern California. He wanted very much to go into the ministry and did not want to stay in the gun room business. So he came back. And his younger brother, Ed Stembridge, went out. And Ed ran the gun room with Uncle Jim. Then after Uncle Jim died, he ran it, and now his son runs it.

PD: So it's still going?

JS: It's still going, and it's going big.

PD: That's remarkable.

JS: Sid Stembridge has it now. They provide all the guns to Arnold Swartzneger. We used to go out. It was great to go out, becuase we got to go on the Paramount Studio lot and see all the movie stars. And get all their autographs. Elizabeth Taylor, Fred Astair. At the commissary at Paramount, everybody came for lunch, from Katherine Hepburn to Bettye Davis, Fred Astair to Liz Taylor. All the people. You could see all these folks and meet some of them and watch them filming. It was just a big deal. Or, we went to Daytona Beach, in the days when you could rent a whole cottage, kitchen and everything, for a hundred dollars a month. And we thought that was ridicuously expensive. And we'd spend a month at Daytona. This cottage was right on the beach. Now it would be a hundred dollars a day, at the very least. We did that. We were pretty lucky. I was very very lucky. Mom and Dad took us to see most of the country. Canada. We went to all the states, just about. We camped and we picniced. So that was great. A lot of that was during Forrest City years.

PD: During Forrest City years, was that when Brown v. Board of Education came down? Do you

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remember that?

JS: Yeah, that woul have been my senior year at Cool Springs. Now I want you to put that in your book.

PD: Cool Springs. Well, I come from Spring Hope.

JS: My high school was Cool Springs High School. I was valedictorian, Cool Springs High School, class of '54. I thought I was really something. You can picture the yearbook, can't you? The girls wore. . .

PD: Oh, yeah, Ilived through that.

JS: The girls wore a string of pearls. You were there.

PD: I was there. I was a hundred fifty miles away. Maybe not that far. It was a more rural area than Forrest City.

JS: Fighting to get dancing on the campus for the junior/senior at Meredith.

PD: Do you remember the reaction people had to Brown? Was there one, or did people ignore it?

JS: The people that were around me ignored it. And I, consequently, wasn't terribly aware of it until I got involved in civil rights, and then I realized the landmark decision that it was. But when it happened, it was like people didn't think it was going to affect them or something.

PD: When did you get involved in civil rights?

JS: I went to Union Seminary after I finished at Meredith. I messed around for a while in Chapel Hill, and then went to Union Seminary, kind of on a spiritual search, but also my thought was for ordination. It was sort of vague. That's where I was. I think it was in February or March of that year, Dr. King came up to speak. It just struck me. I loved Union, and I loved the research I was

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doing. That was my first year for the bachelor of divinity degree. When he spoke in that incredible Gothic chapel at Union Seminary, and all the scholarship and all the excitement of ideas, because it was really on the cutting edge of biblical scholarship and on the cutting edge of social gospel, theology, and everything. It was far far away from the Bible Belt. Really top notch people. Reinhold Niebuhr was the chair of Christian Ethics, and James Mallenburg was the chair of Old Testament. People whose names are the leader in the field. Many of those men are gone, but there were there. And radical in their days. And had been red baited and all that they had been through and the whole school had been. So there I was. But King spoke about what was happening, which was home. It was like why am I here, even though this is such an incredibly fine and radical and free institution? And I love it. It seemed so irrelevant, after I heard him. Then I wanted to go home and do something. And that is the whole story of my growing up, and it's the story of you and the story of so many of us. It's a hard story to tell without sounding so patronizing.

PD: Well, it was a different world back then.

JS: It was a different world.

PD: As you know, it was a very different world we grew up in.

JS: But I was in so many ways raised by black women, particularly one. You know that whole thing about the closeness of the southern black and white. Especially women and children. And yet the total segregation. And outside the South how that was not sometimes understood. Not that we understood it ourselves.

PD: But I know what you mean. I think that's a very interesting relationship.

JS: It is. Some people have tried to talk about that. It was very hard, if not impossible, to talk

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about it in civil rights circles.

PD: Yeah, I'm sure.

JS: And it was a whole area, I don't know if the gals, Connie and those gals, were dealing with it at all. But my grandmother, where I spent a lot of time, my mother's mother, over in South Carolina, in Edgefield County, had a maid and a cook who did everything for the family. All the way through to the point of feeding my grandfather his last meal, practically, when he was dying of Parkinson's and couldn't feed himself. Bath him and all those intimate, practically carrying him to the toilet, all that. After having kind of raised my mom and me and this generation and kept her own children going across the tracks. It was the classic. She would come over to the house, which was not a plantation, but it was this big Victorian house in town. She would spend the day there cleaning and cooking for us. Then along before supper, when supper was out and on the table, she would start walking for home, too proud to take a ride. She would walk across town, again, through the white part of town. It was a small town, but still it was a long walk. And she had been working so hard all day. And she's walk and walk across the tracks with a little paper bag, and she'd have in it the chicken back, the chicken neck, the gizzard, that "Driving Miss Daisy" stuff. And there she'd go and take that home to her children. It never occurred to me that my grandparents were anything but totally loving to her, and it never occurred to them that they weren't. It probably never occurred to her, then. Because they were. But they were within the times. It certainly never occurred to them to have her sit down and eat with us.

PD: Yeah, I know.

JS: But my grandmother would go in the kitchen and eat with her and would prefer to do that, often, than eat with my granddaddy in the dining room. It's that whole crazy thing.

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PD: It's a very complicated thing.

JS: It is complicated.

JS: And the women's relationship, the black and white women, the children and the black women. But when Dr. King spoke, now why it took all that, but it did. I had to go back to family. So people say, oh, how brave that you did this and you're a white southerner. Not at all. It was family. You went home to do what you could. Two families, I guess. One black and one white.

PD: And your parents supported you in your work?

JS: My parents supported me. They were frightened for me. They came down to Atlanta to see the SNCC office. It was on Auburn Avenue then. It was all black, everything; Auburn Avenue is black, black businesses. Most of them were quite successful, and nothing really slummy about it. But it was just so totally black. And here was their little girl. They were kind of concerned. Then when I went to Mississippi they were real concerned about that, our safety, as well they might be.

PD: Oh, yeah.

JS: But they didn't oppose it. They would rather I not be in that situation. They like, well, what will people think? Some of that, from mom. Or what will the family think? And she was right there, 'cause, my grandparents, like, what's she doing? Martin Luther King is a communist.

PD: Yeah, of course. Could you describe that office, what it was like, who was there, where you worked, in Atlanta?

JS: We started, when I got down there, well, first of all let me back up to Union when Dr. King came. I spoke with him at the reception following his address, and I asked him if I came down in the summer could I help him, could I help, whatever. He talked about the sit-ins; he talked about

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SCLC, and so forth. He said yes, and he said let me tell you who you should write to. And he gave me the name of Ella J. Baker. The great Ella Baker. So I did write Ella, and she said by all means come down. So I went. But in the meantime she was instrumental in calling, she and James, what's his name from Vanderbilt, black guy, oh dear. They called for the first SNCC conference in April of 1960 at Shaw University. Reinhold Niebuhr and other professors he knew raised a little money, gave it themselves, really, to send a carload of Union Seminary students that wanted to go to that SNCC conference. So we went down. That was really my introduction to the student movement.

PD: So you were down there at the organizational meeting in Raleigh?

JS: Yes. Then, of course, talked to Ella and Connie Curry.

PD: So Connie was there, too?

JS: Connie was there, as a NSA person. The southern project of the National Students Association, which she did for years. Then at the end of that school year, May, I guess it was, I went down and lived with Connie, moved into Connie's apartment. The SNCC office, well, we really didn't have one. We had a corner of Dr. King's office, which was, itself, fairly small, as I recall, two rooms, on Auburn Avenue. Two or three desks. It seemed like to me this was all second hand stuff. A couple of typewriters. We had a corner in there, and an old manual typewriter. He gave me some paper, I think a ream of typing paper, and some envelopes and some stamps to start writing people and to try and put together a newsletter, the Student Voice, we called it. And that's what I did. And then things were just booming. It was Ella who decided that ths student movement was going to be, was, so much more radical than SCLC, that we should go our own direction. If we were too closely linked to SCLC it was going to be a

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problem. So she really saw that right away. She was having her own problems with SCLC and was subsequently was squeezed out by Wyatt T. Walker and the black male minister people. She moved us across the street from Dr. King's office, and that was where we really started. It was a tiny little spot. You would open the door, and you were just practically on top of the desk. We had a filing cabinet and a real desk. From then on we were separate, totally, really separate. And much more radical. Dr. King himself wasn't trying to slow us down. It wasn't so much Martin as it was, or Ralph Abernethy, as it was some of the others. Some of them were right with us, really backed us, like Fred Shuttlesworth from Birmingham. Dr. King was pretty good too. He was pretty radical. Some of the men weren't. They didn't like the way we looked.

PD: How did you look?

JS: With our blue jeans, SNCC buttons, and all this stuff. Afros.

PD: Did you have an Afro?

JS: No, I didn't, but the guys did. The first guy, as far as I know, who came in to help me do anything was Julian Bond. He was a freshman at Morehouse. Lonnie King, different family. These were the Atlanta students, Atlanta student movement. A. D. King was Martin's brother. He was always hanging around. And came to a sad end; he drowned, as you know. Bob Moses came down that summer.

PD: Of '60

JS: Of '60. At the request, or at the suggestion of Bayard Rustin. He worked with Bayard in social reconcialiation in New York City. He came down. There wasn't much for Bob to do, so we decided, that's when he decided that he would go into Mississippi. It was just like going to hell. You didn't know if you would come back.

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PD: He was up for all that, he was just wanting to go to Mississippi?

JS: Yes, oh yes. He didn't know what he was going in to, but as it began to unfold for him, what this was, he was up for it. He just kept going.

PD: Could you just kind of describe him, because I've read a lot about him. He seems like one of the most remarkable and stable people. He was just an amazing person.

JS: He was an amazing person. He had a presence the like of which I've never, never, in a really quiet, very funny and soft, kind of dry, philosophical way. Very very principled. One of the few people that was not negatively touched by the movement, didn't get into any kind of ego thing. Was there to serve. The main thing about Bob, aside from just the incredible goodness that eminates from him, the love and the goodness, was his vision of what needed to be done. The whole 1964 voter registration, the whole Freedom Summer thing, how to do that, how to get people in there. Bob had this gift of always working himself out of a job, turning power over.

PD: So he delegated really well?

JS: Always, always delegated. He would maybe put an idea very softly in the middle of the room, so softly that you could hardly hear him, and before you were aware of it he was gone. To the kitchen, or outside, or to St. Louis. Gone. And there was that thing for you to work with. It was a kind of Zen master. It was strange. Nobody's ever asked me to describe him, so I'm really stammering around, becuse he's so much he's hard to describe.

PD: What I've read is, he's awesome.

JS: He's one in a million. He had always stayed right on target. His whole thing was the individuals should be empowered to make decisions over his or her own life. That was an absolute right. And to do so nonviolently.

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PD: Well, I'm imposing on your time. I don't want to ...

JS: No, I'm fine.

PD: You're doing OK?

JS: Yes. When you want to cut.

PD: Oh, I can go on and on. This is great. I'm going to turn my tape over. [conversation resumes about interviewing Bob Moses]. I that that would be one of the things I'd most want to do, but I don't feel adequate to do it, if you know what I mean. I think he's, there's so much to him, that I would feel inadequate around him.

JS: You're very feeling that way, and I do too. But that would contradict what he is all about. I talked to him one time ten years ago and asked him if should do so and so, and said, "Why are you asking me what you should do?" Just a great guy. But then I haven't seen Bob in a long time. But I would seriously doubt if he'd changed.

PD: I hear he is still...

JS: He was already there, so why would he change?

PD: Yes, that's the impression I get. Can I take you back a little bit to Meredith College? Tell me what Meredith College was like and what you were most impressed with there, what you learned there.

JS: I loved Meredith College. I don't know if I would like it today, because it's grown and it's modern and it's lots of things. When I went to Meredith College it was four small dorms, the old campus, the old quadrangle, old brick dorms, kind of seedy looking, when they got around to cutting the grass, you know, they did, otherwise. But the marvelous faculty. It was a classical education, and I was very glad to get away from Baylor University. What did they call it, on

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every Satruday night they went out across the highways and byways to round up people for Jesus.

PD: That would be tough.

JS: It was pretty fundamentalist, on the one hand, and soriety, fraternity, football on the other hand. I didn't find a place to be. So Meredith, the fact that it was a small school, the fact that it was a woman's college where women could excel and run student government, run the newspaper, and develop ourselves. I can remember going to those old classrooms. They were in wooden buildings that had been built during the war, and they were supposed to last for a few years, and they were still standing. They are not there now. They were out in the fields in this kind of meadow was all around. It was just really country. I was an English major and sitting in those old old classrooms, hearing Dr. M_____ Johnson quote Chaucer and Beowulf. It was like "Dead Poets Society." It was the love of learning and the professors who led you through the mystery of learning.

PD: That's wonderful.

JS: Mystery of life and who questioned the institutions. Meredith was a Baptist College, but it was not fundamentalist. This was before all that backlash. The professors were excellent. It was a classical education. I wouldn't take a million dollars for it. It has enabled me, in the funny way that I have ended up making my living over the years, it has always been because of Meredith College that I could do that. Not that I went on to teach English, not that I was ordained. I did finish the degree, but not that I did any big professional thing. When I edit manuscripts and I just go through books and just taken them apart, books that are written by real writers, when I can go through that easily and fix it, it's because of Meredith College.

PD: So you fix books?

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JS: I fix books.

PD: I've got one I want you to fix.

JS: OK. That's where I get my income, such as it is, from editing, freelancing, and I do my work here at the house. This week we've been working down the street. A friend has a printing press down there. To make a little extra Christmas money. That's just our way of saying what the quality of that education is.

PD: Did you participate in extracurricular activities?

JS: Yes, I did, bigtime. I really loved it. The guys that I had gone to high school with in Forrest City were at North Carolina State and Chapel Hill and Duke and all around. They would call for fraternity parties, and very rarely would I go. I was so involved in learning, so involved in the fact that as a woman, as women, we were making decisions that didn't depend on the guy that we dated or this or that or the other thing. So I went in a totally different direction. Most of my Meredith classmates, though, did do that, did the fraternity weekends, did get pinned, did get married, did this, did that. But there were some of us who really did the women's thing.

PD: Was this sort of the first wave of that, or was this sort of tradition?

JS: I think so, the first wave. We didn't know that. We didn't articulate that, as such. But that's what it was. And it fed into that eventually.

PD: Was there any connection between that movement and the civil rights movement, and then the civil rights movment generating even more awareness of the women's movement?

JS: No, there was a gap. We were doing our studies along those lines. My roomate was president of student government. She was from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and she was a history major. She was doing really radical papers, digging into what was happening in Rumania, digging into

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what was happening here and there and the other thing. Raising the questions. I was doing it in religion, which was my double major, and went on, as I said, to seminary with that. Raising the questions, why this, why that? Which landed us, her as student government president and me as her sidekick and the loud mouth, before the North Carolina Baptist Convention to plead, or demand, we didn't plead, dancing be permitted at Meredith College.

PD: Now, what year was this?

JS: This would have been '57.

PD: Well, that's amazing. That was my freshman year at Wake. And we had the big dancing thing that year.

JS: Well, that was the year, because it was my junior year and it was for the junior\senior. Which was going to be held on campus in the cafeteria. We were decorating it up and making it really fancy, and we wanted to dance.

PD: Did you convince them?

JS: We did. But they recanted later, as I recall.

PD: Yeah, I remember the recanting part. That's when, I think, we walked out of chapel on the recant part.

JS: I had a run-in with some of those same men some years later. Did you ever know Carlyle Marney?

PD: I knew who he was.

JS: Well, he and Dad were in Paducah at the same time. Marney was at the Immanuel Baptist, and Dad was at First Baptist. So Elizabeth and Marney and Mom and Dad were real good friends. I grew up with their girls. Marney was always my mentor. He invited two or three of us

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from Mississippi to come to Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte when he was pastor to talk about Mississippi to the North Carolina Baptist gathered at Myers Park. I guess it was part of the convention. I don't know quite what the name of that group was, but I remember the men who were there. They were some of the same ones who had sat on the dancing issue.

PD: Had they sat on it in the to let you dance way or the other way?

JS: Both. Some of both. They had similar reactions along the Mississippi issue. But we presented our, made our statement. We talked for one solid day, at the end of which Marney got up, as only Marney could. Did you ever see him?

PD: I don't remember. He may have spoken in our chapel. He probably did. Everybody else that was a Baptist spoke there. But I don't remember.

JS: He was so far out. So he got up, he was a big east Tennessee mountain man, and he said something, said that communion would be served for those who thought they could take it. And he left. He left. Meaning I can't take it. He was there through my time. But that was '57, the dancing thing. And we danced on campus, and then I think, no more. That was the last one, the first and last, for some time.

PD: Yeah, I don't remember when Wake finally, I mean, we would do it on the sly, but it was not legalized for a long time, I think when Wake finally broke with the Baptists over that and a number of things.

JS: I can remember the face, almost, of the student body president from Wake Forest who came to that meeting in '57. A couple of guys came from Wake, and I think a gal. And Meredith, at least. Maybe another school or so. But Wake Forest was right there. You were really our ally that whole, well, we were one another's ally, that whole fight.

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PD: Even when I got to Wake, the first year, when I grew up in my little home town, nobody would talk openly about the movment, about race relations, or Brown, or anything. It was like everybody whispered. But then when I got to Wake, everybody was talking about it. It was the first time I had ever really been able to express what I thought.

JS: And you went straight to Winston?

PD: Yeah, went straight to Winston.

JS: Did you know a Stephanie Painter?

PD: Yeah. Yeah, I knew her and went to school her brother. Her brother was a little bit younger than me. Hall Painter.

JS: Yes. Well now, Stephanie was a year younger than me, but she was a good friend in Forrest City. And then, of course, Hall and Lad, she had an even younger brother.

PD: I didn't know him.

JS: Were my brother's buddies.

PD: Yeah, I knew her.

JS: Hall was a big partier.

PD: Oh, totally.

JS: Party person.

PD: Totally partier. I'm not sure that he ever did anything else. I don't know.

JS: I don't know if he finished school or not. The Demon Deacons.

PD: Yeah. Well, I think maybe if we stop here, what we can do is let this kind of be the grounding of the whole thing, and then next time I can draw you out more on your experiences in SNCC and in Mississippi.

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JS: That's kind of where we are at. When I finished Meredith, as I said I messed around a while, then I went to seminary for a year, then civil rights movement, and finished the seminary years years later in Wake Forest, at Southeastern. Yeah, OK.

PD: Now I sent you two books.

JS: Oh, did you?

PD: Before I knew you were an editor, and now I wish I could call them back. But they're in the mail. So you can see what kind of work I do.

JS: I am really glad to get those.

[Talk continues about address, arrangement for next interview]

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