

DARE Newsletter

Vol. 11, No. 1

Dictionary of American Regional English

Winter 2008

How Much of a Good Thing Is Too Much?

Joan Houston Hall

When the DARE project first began, no one foresaw the day when staff members would have personal computers (and access to the vast world of cyberspace). As technology has expanded, so have the resources available to DARE Editors. This article by Chief Editor Joan Hall, reprinted from *Dictionaries*, discusses some of the challenges of integrating Internet searches into research for DARE entries.

When Volume IV of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cassidy and Hall 1985ff.) appeared in 2002, I was occasionally asked how this volume might differ from the first three volumes, published between 1985 and 1996. The answer was easy: it benefitted from the Internet. While the same is true for every contemporary lexicographic effort, for dictionaries with dated quotations the benefits are particularly striking. Even with the limited number of electronic sources available to the DARE staff in the late 1990s,¹ we were able to greatly expand the date ranges for our entries on both ends of the spectrum. We were also often able either to confirm or disprove our hunches about the regional distribution of a particular word or phrase.

The word *scrid* provides a good example. In our paper files we had three citations for this term,
Continued on page 2

1. Our earliest ventures into electronic research were usually restricted to the two *Making of America* sites (<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/index.html>, <http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/moagrp>), the Library of Congress's *American Memory* site (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html>), and *Google* (<http://www.google.com>).

DARE in the Early Seventies

Michael M.T. Henderson

We love to hear from former staff members and are pleased to share Michael Henderson's memories of his days as a DARE pre-editor. After earning a doctorate in linguistics from the University of Wisconsin in 1972, Michael taught for a year at the University of Libya before returning to Madison and joining the DARE project, where he worked from September 1973 through June of 1975. He then embarked on a long and satisfying academic career at the University of Kansas, achieving tenure within four years. Now retired, Michael still lives in Lawrence, Kansas.

Two of the happiest years in my career were the years I spent at DARE, working with pages of computer-printed data gathered by DARE's many fieldworkers. The mainframe computers at UW-Madison would crank out these data and print them in descending order of frequency, so that the standard, expected answer would appear first. For instance, the most frequent answer to a ques-

Continued on page 4

Also in This Issue:

DARE Ed. Steps Down as DSNA Exec.4
Contributors to DARE in 20075
Students Search the Internet for DARE6
DARE's Loss Is Lansing's Gain6
DARE Editors Attend Conference6
Word Mavens Fête DARE6
Pictures from NYT Event7

How Much Is Too Much? *Continued from page 1*
which is a variant of the British dialect word *screed*, meaning 'a fragment.' All of our citations were from New England, and they all had the sense 'a piece, a bit, a scrap.' They dated from 1914 to 1982. On their own, they would have made an acceptable entry for *DARE*. But as soon as we gained access to *The Making of America*, I was able to push the date of the first quotation back from 1914 to 1877, then 1869, and finally 1860.

The three antedatings were all from New England, and they fit our definition well, so they expanded and corroborated our initial evidence very nicely. But our last quotation was still from 1982. I was curious about whether the word was still being used in 2000. So I did a *Google* search on the term and found a couple of interesting examples.² One was from Pennsylvania, where Susquehanna University's "Web Central" posted the question, "How can one ever hope to find that annoyingly evasive *scrid* of information . . . in such a large pool of digital information?" How indeed? I didn't have any way of identifying the writer of that question, but although Pennsylvania is not in New England, it seemed close enough not to do too much damage to the clear regional pattern. I could simply change the label from *New England* to *chiefly New England*.

But the second example was initially disappointing. It was on the web site of a lathe maker who suggested that the best fix to a problem with a casting was to "make a pin that's a *scrid* longer." Obviously this was our word, but the disappointing thing was that the lathe maker was from Palo Alto, California. I was about to quote him with a California regional label, regretting that my distinct regionalism had spread not just to Pennsylvania but to California, when I decided to send him a quick e-mail message and ask where he had learned the word. Within ten minutes he responded, saying, "I remember exactly when I first heard it—my girlfriend from Maine used it and I had never heard it before, so I had to ask her about it." With that gratifying bit of news, I solidified *chiefly New England* as *DARE*'s regional label.

The additional time that it took to do this Internet research in 2000 was surely justified by the expanded date range and additional evidence for the use and the regionality of the term. But what amount of effort would be justified today for the

same headword search? The question is a very real one for *DARE* Editors, since the number of valuable digital resources has skyrocketed in the last decade, and we have to make conscious choices to exclude all but those that are most likely to be useful (or perhaps those that are least troublesome to use). Recently I decided to repeat the electronic search process to see how the *scrid* entry might look were we to edit it today.

My choice of sites to search was influenced not only by the additional options available to us, but also by a small research project that my colleague Luanne von Schneidemesser and I undertook in 2004 to evaluate the usefulness of particular web sites. The details of that project are spelled out in Hall and von Schneidemesser (forthcoming), but for now it is enough to say that we concluded that our core collection of electronic references to be searched regularly should include both of the *Making of America* sites, *American Memory*, *Wright American Fiction* (<http://www.letrs.indiana.edu/web/w/wright2>), *ProQuest* and the *ProQuest* historical newspaper collection (<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb>),³ and *NewspaperArchive.com* (largely for antedating research: <http://newspaperarchive.com>), as well as *LexisNexis* (<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>) and *Google* (usually for postdating research). (*Documenting the American South* (<http://docsouth.unc.edu>) and *Core Historical Literature of Agriculture* (<http://chla.library.cornell.edu>) are searched when the headword fits within these categories.)

It will surprise no one to read that the process took significantly longer and that the results were less conclusive than in the original exercise. It was rapid work to revisit the *Making of America* and *American Memory* sites and find that nothing new had been added. *Wright's American Fiction*, which was new to us since the Volume IV work, quickly yielded an antedating quote from an 1854 novel set in New England. So far, so good.

But tackling the newspaper collections proved to be both time-consuming and frustrating. While we usually find that a search of *NewspaperArchive.com* is productive despite the shortcomings of the site, in this case hundreds of hits for *scrid* were actually instances of *said*, or less frequently *send* or *sold*. *ProQuest* yielded two citations, both of which turned out to be a syndicated article referring to *DARE*'s entry for *scrid*. And *ProQuest Historical*

2. Although there were many irrelevant hits at that time, it was not particularly time-consuming to identify the two pertinent uses.

3. We select the *Historical New York Times*, the *Historical Chicago Tribune*, or the *Historical Los Angeles Times* depending on the provenance of the word being searched.

New York Times failed spectacularly, with ninety hits, most of which were classified advertisements, and none of which contained *scrid* in any sense at all. *LexisNexis* was equally unproductive though mercifully much less bountiful.

Google, *Google Groups* (<http://www.groups.google.com>), and *Google Book Search* (<http://books.google.com>) offered impossibly large and diverse yields, with *SCRID* appearing often as an acronym for a large professional society, as a popular blogger's moniker, as the name of a rock band, and as a word in Old English and Germanic texts. Of the sporadic examples of the appropriate sense, most would have required excessive amounts of time to try to determine regional labels. A few, however, were immediately rewarding:

What is served at a Maine dinner when a guest requests a scrid? (from an online help desk)

Today every scrid of express, mail and LCL freight is transferred plenty of times. (from a book about railroads in Maine)

Scrid: A tiny piece. (from a web site called "Speak Like a Mainer")

A little piece of white nylon fell outta one; a scrid of a lady's slip. (from a novel by Maine native Stephen King)

A number of others were suggestive of New England, with contexts involving moose hunting, backcountry snowshoeing, and mountain climbing. Others were verifiable by doing a *Google* search on the writer. Most, however, offered no clues at all as to the provenance of the word *scrid*.

For *DARE* Editors, the need to append a regional label to a quote whenever possible adds significantly to the time spent with each citation. The nineteenth century books and periodicals in *The Making of America* and *Wright American Fiction* are often fairly easy to contextualize, making these sources relatively efficient to use (as long as the word being searched is not a common one with multiple senses). And the newspaper citations proffered by *NewspaperArchive.com* often demonstrate clear and identifiable instances of local use. But the sheer volume of examples and the diversity of sources offered up by a *Google* search can be too much of a good thing.

How then would the *scrid* entry look if it were written today? Surely it would include the new 1854 quotation as a nice antedating:⁴

1854 Payson *Totemwell* 47 NEng, "Are you sure there is'nt [sic] any [pepper] there?"
"Not a scrid!"

It would also include the four demonstrably New England quotations mentioned above (each is short and obviously apropos and was found quickly). While it is true that several dozen hits for the appropriate sense were not identifiable as New England venues, it is also true that, with one exception (a Philadelphia restaurant review), the available context does not allow the assigning of any regional label. So with all the additional unlabeled evidence that is "out there," is it still legitimate to apply *chiefly New England* as a regional label for *scrid*? I believe that it is. The quotes from the online help desk and "Speak Like a Mainer" reinforce the popular perception that *scrid* is still a stereotypical feature of Maine speech, and the other two citations corroborate that nicely in contexts of natural speech. The use of *chiefly* in the *DARE* regional label provides appropriate caution, and until someone can demonstrate that the other examples of *scrid* are being used naturally and habitually in other parts of the country, I do not feel that this selection of quotes misrepresents the facts.

But how much of this research would have been appropriate for a *DARE* Editor on a daily basis rather than as a test case for this article? We would have spent little time with *NewspaperArchive.com* after recognizing how frequently the OCR system misread other words, and we would have discontinued the *Historical New York Times* search after checking only a few hits. Since we already had two twenty-first century quotes from the original *Google* search, we could not have afforded the time to search *Google*, *Google Groups*, and *Google Book Search*, let alone any other sites we might have thought potentially useful.

Although it tends to be hard for detail oriented, language-loving lexicographers, we must first recognize that we cannot have it all. We have to ask whether our current evidence gives an adequate and representative picture of the word's history and regionality. If a quick *Google* search suggests

4. The pleasure of antedating our own as well as other dictionaries is tempered by the knowledge that it probably will not be long before someone else scoops us with an even earlier example found through another electronic resource.

that the word has become so widely used that the regional label no longer holds, we can modify the label with a qualifying phrase, suggest that the term was formerly regional but is now widespread, or we can simply decide not to include the word. But we cannot afford to track all the elusive and tempting hits that might contribute to the perfect entry. The abundance of evidence can become a curse rather than a blessing. So rather than quote Oliver Twist's "Please, sir, I want some more," as we did when we first had access to electronic resources, we must now push away from the table and say, as some of our *DARE* Informants do on being offered additional food, "My sufficiency is suffancified; any more would be superfluous." ♦

Originally published in Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America 27 (2006): 149–154. Reproduced with permission of the Dictionary Society of North America.

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DARE Editor Steps Down as Dictionary Society Exec

After serving for nine years as Executive Secretary of the Dictionary Society of North America, *DARE* Editor Luanne von Schneidemesser has passed the torch to Lisa Berglund of Buffalo State College. As administrator of the Society, Luanne spent countless hours managing finances, membership, reports, and agendas and coordinating the society's two publications. To show its gratitude to Luanne for these years of dedication, the Society presented her with a handsome light-catching prism engraved with a message of thanks; a troupe of Society singers also celebrated her tenure with a musical tribute both tuneful and witty. ♦

***DARE* in the Seventies** *Continued from page 1*
tion such as "Last night I got kind of tipsy. I guess I _____ too much" might be "drank," followed by "drunk," and then "imbibed" or "swilled." These, and a few more responses given by two or more people, would be followed by what we pre-editors called "oncers" (a term disliked, I recall, by Professor Cassidy)—responses offered by only one informant.

My main job was to go through the printouts, combining matching but misspelled entries—e.g., "highway," "hihgway," and "hiway." Most of these were simple transcription errors introduced when responses were transcribed from fieldworkers' notes to punch cards (which were then used to enter the data into computer programs, which would then combine identical records and print each response in descending order of frequency). For a question like "The time when the sun first comes into sight, that's _____," there might be 450 responses for "sunup" and 375 for "sunrise," followed by a few for "dawn" . . . and then the oncers would start. Some of the funniest ones came along when, apparently, the informant had misheard the question, answering "dusk" or "midnight." As a last resort, we could go to the original Questionnaire, trying to decode the fieldworker's handwriting. Finally, after spending many editor-hours, we would dump the whole thing onto Professor Cassidy's desk so he could make the final decision.

One of my personal favorite responses was given to the question "When you're buying something, if the seller puts in a little extra to make you feel that you're getting a good bargain, you call that _____." Answers included "baker's dozen," "bonus," "booty," and "lagniappe," but near the end of the oncers appeared the response "wax beans." This so delighted us that it became, in our house, the standard way of referring to a tip, a gratuity, or anything extra (and, presumably, desirable).

I'm sure that by now *DARE*'s office staff have microcomputers and access to the raw data, which was sanitized by those of us who were working in the mainframe days. I also assume that many more errors have been uncovered, but don't have to be shipped out in printouts to be pencil-corrected by humans and transcribed back onto punch cards. In conclusion, I'll reassert that every day I worked as a pre-editor at *DARE*, I had more linguistic fun than in a month before or since. ♦

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The *Dictionary of American Regional English* is grateful for the support of these donors in 2007. Gifts were received by the *Dictionary of American Regional English* Fund, the Frederic G. Cassidy *DARE* Fund, and the Richard Maxwell Fund for the *DARE* Project. Because this is a national project, it is particularly meaningful that gifts were received from thirty-five states and the District of Columbia (and our neighbors to the north and south as well). Please consider joining the ranks of *DARE* contributors in 2008 by using the coupon on page 8.

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Students Search the Internet for *DARE*

At the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, undergraduate students in Connie Eble’s class in the History of the English Language were able to get course credit and help *DARE* at the same time. Working with a selection of Volume V entries that were written before *DARE* Editors had access to some crucial Internet sources, the students carefully searched specified databases, hoping to find quotations that either antedated or postdated the ones we already had. Their efforts were fruitful! The students were able to antedate more than a third of the entries (one by 124 years) and postdate about half (one by 88 years).

DARE’s thanks and appreciation go to Emily Horton, Rebecca Foster, Chad Barton, Michelle Hicks, Theresa Nicholas, Elizabeth Overcash, Alston Brake, Parker Wood, Kimberly Francisco, Melissa Jones, Jessica Swoveland, Natalie Zuchino, Laurin Gioglio, Catherine Wilkerson, Matt Casey, Peter Cruz, Jenny Goddbiff, Sarah Hess, Jennifer Young, Laura Castrodale, Goeun Lee, Beth McCann, Lisa Dixon, Shakia Mayes, and Stephanie Mitchell. Perhaps there is a budding lexicographer in the group! ♦

DARE’s Loss Is Lansing’s Gain

DARE recently lost one of its very loyal volunteers when Paulette Sharkey moved to Lansing, Michigan. Paulette not only helped out at *DARE*, but also spent many hours assisting Luanne von Schneidemesser with administrative details for the Dictionary Society of North America. Paulette was similarly generous in volunteering her musical skills to the Madison community, so we are sure that numerous organizations in Lansing will benefit from her presence. Thank you, Paulette! ♦

DARE Editors Attend Conference

Joan Hall and Luanne von Schneidemesser attended the joint meetings of the American Dialect Society and the Linguistic Society of America in Chicago January 3–5. Kathryn Remlinger, Joe Salmons, and von Schneidemesser presented a joint paper, “Revised Perceptions,” dealing with the dialects of Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and Hall served in her capacity as Past President of the ADS. ♦

Word Mavens Fête *DARE*

Celebrating the vitality of American English, word lovers came together in New York on March 18 to chat with *New York Times Magazine*’s “On Language” columnist William Safire, *New York Times* Crossword Puzzle Editor Will Shortz, and *DARE* Editor Joan Houston Hall. At a festive breakfast hosted by Jack Rosenthal, President of the New York Times Company Foundation, guests heard the story of Bill Safire’s meeting with Fred Cassidy and his becoming an instant fan of *DARE*; they heard about the differences between British and American crossword puzzles; and they heard how *DARE* has proved to be a surprisingly useful tool for detectives, family physicians, and psychiatrists, as well as for linguists, librarians, and writers.

Held on the fifteenth floor of the New York Times Building and overlooking the Hudson River, the gathering offered guests a spectacular view. The conversation spanned the reach of the entire country, as Hall shared words and expressions from every region of the U.S. and guests chimed in with their own favorites. All in attendance concurred that the completion of *DARE* is a high priority for language lovers and that the forthcoming electronic edition will bring new attention to this rich resource.

Following the breakfast, Rosenthal provided a tour of the new Times building, pointing out features of the building’s “green” architecture, such as the glass “curtain wall” that reflects light and changes color throughout the day; the energy-efficient installation of heating and cooling equipment beneath the floor rather than in the ceiling; and the magnificent, open-to-the-sky atrium with a birch forest that offers a bit of woodland serenity in the midst of urban hustle and bustle.

Participants included representatives of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, and the New York Times Company Foundation, *DARE* Board of Visitors members Simon Winchester and Donald Oresman, and other enthusiastic supporters. *DARE* is proud to be in such good company! ♦



Pictures from the *New York Times* Event

Host Jack Rosenthal with speakers William Safire, Will Shortz, and Joan Houston Hall. Development Director Jon Sorenson and DARE Board member Donald Oresman are at right.



Photo credit: George E. Hall



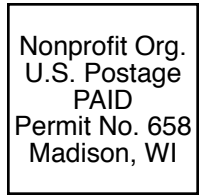
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DARE Board member Donald Oresman shares a joke with former DARE Fieldworker David Goldberg, Joan Hall, and former DARE Editor Jennifer Ellsworth.

Host Jack Rosenthal with NYT Magazine "On Language" columnist William Safire.



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