

# DARE Newsletter

Vol. 4, No. 1

Dictionary of American Regional English

Winter 2001



David Carlson, DARE Fieldworker

## Notes from the City: An Urban Fieldworker's Experience

David Carlson

*In previous issues of the Newsletter, Fieldworkers have reminisced about their experiences in the West, the Midwest, and the South. In this issue we hear what it was like to comb the streets of Boston in search of representative speakers in the neighborhoods of one of our nation's oldest and most venerable cities.*

So this is dear old Boston,  
Home of the bean and the cod,  
Where the Lowells speak only to Cabots,  
And the Cabots speak only to God.

There is something oxymoronic in the notion of *Urban fieldwork*, and I can remember being somewhat envious of those intrepid DARE

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## Funding Update

David Simon

Director of Development

A year of important progress—that is what 2000 was for the *Dictionary of American Regional English* development effort. Thanks to your generosity, we received over 200 gifts from 35 states, the District of Columbia, and five foreign countries. DARE has established itself as a national effort in more ways than one and is even developing an international presence. On page 5 of this *Newsletter*, the names and states of last year's donors are listed. To each of you, *thank you so much* for helping to make sure that this monumental project is completed.

Beyond the numbers, I want to highlight some of the more creative and interesting gifts. A donor in Connecticut gave a large portion of his art collection to DARE. The artwork is being sold, with the proceeds going to support the *Dictionary*. What a wonderful and generous gesture. A number of others have made stock gifts to DARE. What thoughtful and generous decisions. These and all other contributions to DARE are very important in moving us closer to the letter Z.

The year 2001 brings an exciting new development: it is now possible to make a gift online to DARE. I know this will be convenient and a welcome step for many of you. Simply go to the University of Wisconsin Foundation's web site at <http://www.uwfoundation.wisc.edu> and follow the instructions there. Begin by clicking the link that reads "Making a Gift." When you reach "Gift Designation," click on the pulldown menu at "Area of Greatest Need," and select "Other—de-

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Fieldworkers who, like linguistic knights of old, went on their separate quests to examine the language of this vast nation in their Word Wagons. I felt a tinge of regret that I was sticking close to home—Boston, Massachusetts—rather than traveling to parts of the country unvisited before: call it Word Wagon envy. But I soon discovered that locating appropriate informants on home turf could be as difficult as searching them out half a continent away. The Greater Boston area is really many separate worlds, each with its own character, traditions, and unwritten rules. I found to my chagrin that I didn't know all of them as well as I had assumed.

I had no trouble finding informants in my hometown of Norwood, a suburban community 14 miles southwest of Boston, and I used them to practice interviewing techniques with the questionnaire. Nor was it hard to find willing people in Lynn, Waltham, or the Roslindale and Roxbury sections of Boston, where I had the assistance of a helpful talent scout. Finding the rest of the informants was a different story, however.

My biggest worry was in finding an informant in Boston's North End, which I knew to be a very tightly knit Italian neighborhood. I knew no one there. Fortunately, a friend in Amherst said that he had an aunt who lived in the North End. He gave me her address and told me to knock at the front door; when his aunt appeared at the top of the stairs, I should say, "Hello, Mrs. A., I'm a friend of your nephew Peter, the doctor." When I got to the address I recited the incantation exactly as he advised, and she invited me to come in and have a chair. It was 10 o'clock in the morning on a warm July day in 1967.

I attempted to explain the nature of the project to Mrs. A. and to ask for her help in finding a suitable informant. It was soon clear to me that she did not have a sufficient command of English to understand much of what I was telling her. Perhaps sensing my discomfort, she asked if I would like something to drink. Expecting something like coffee or orange juice or some other suitable morning beverage, I accepted. She left the room and returned shortly with a tray upon which was a bottle of Four Roses with a full shot glass and asked me what I would like for a chaser. Not wanting to reject her hospitable offer, I said, "Water will be fine." I dutifully downed the shot of Four Roses, followed by the water, thanked her for all the help

she had given me, and left. Since I did not want to search for *DARE* informants with whiskey on my breath, I went to Fenway Park for an afternoon Red Sox game. Thanks to a double off the left-field wall (also known as the Green Monster) by Rico Petrocelli, the Red Sox won!

Returning to the North End in a better humor, I went to the fire station and spoke to a firefighter, Mr. Biago B., and told him the type of person I was looking for. He said that he was a native of that part of Boston and was willing to answer all my questions as long as I could come to the fire station. During my five visits, Mr. B. spent his time repairing and maintaining firefighting equipment. While he never had any "free" time, we managed to complete the whole questionnaire in approximately 25 to 30 hours. [*DARE* Ed: There were more than 1,600 questions in the questionnaire.]

In Dorchester, a part of town with a mix of industrial and multi-family residential buildings—mostly apartment houses and three-deckers—I was fortunate to have been given the name of a woman who lived on Savin Hill. Strategically situated above Boston Harbor, this hill had provided the location for the American guns that forced the retreat of British ships on March 17, 1776, the first Evacuation Day. (March 17 is still a legal holiday in the City of Boston.) The informant, an Old Yankee who was related to both the Cabots and the Lowells, was extremely interested in *DARE*. But she spent so much time free-associating and commenting on the questions that our periodic interviews went from March through June without covering very much of the questionnaire. Though I enjoyed her company and appreciated her interest, my time was not unlimited; I thanked her for her help and started searching for another informant.

I thought I knew the area quite well, and from census data I also knew that there were hundreds of potential informants living nearby. I made inquiries at the kinds of places *DARE* Fieldworkers were advised to start: local churches, branch libraries, real estate offices, funeral parlors, gas stations, car dealers, and even neighborhood bars. Much to my surprise, no one knew of anyone who matched the description I gave them. Although I eventually found an appropriate informant, it took me the greater part of three weeks to do it.

It was becoming obvious to me that the traditional methods of finding informants would not always work, and this suspicion was confirmed in West Roxbury. More suburban than urban in its at-

mosphere, West Roxbury is made up of predominantly one-family houses, with neighbors being more spread out and consequently less familiar with one another. I tried all the usual institutions with no luck at all. In desperation I finally decided simply to cruise. Ultimately spotting a man on his front porch reading a newspaper, I approached him and explained what I was doing. He admitted that he himself had the characteristics of the person I was looking for, and didn't know why he shouldn't be the one to be interviewed in his neighborhood!

On Beacon Hill in the Back Bay, the bastion of Old Yankees in Boston, I was sure I knew precisely where to find an appropriate informant: the Boston Athenaeum. This venerable institution was founded in 1805 as a reading room for "gentlemen of literary interests," and it was simply unthinkable that I would not find a capable and willing informant there. I dressed appropriately (conservatively) for the occasion and approached the *sanctum sanctorum* of Boston Yankees with complete confidence. I spoke to the gentleman at the desk and explained very carefully the nature of the fieldwork, the purpose of *DARE*, and the precise characteristics of the informant I was seeking. (In my mind's eye, I saw a dapper, sophisticated gentleman like the ones discussing Dickens and Jane Austen in the classic video about language, *American Tongues*.) Much to my surprise, he said that there was no one who frequented the Athenaeum who matched the description. Dismayed and disconcerted by the shattering of my stereotype, I went to the Harvard Club, where I did find a genuine Boston Yankee who matched the profile.

I had a wonderful piece of good luck when I just happened to visit the Old Statehouse in downtown Boston. Here I found the curator of the library, who was also a member of the Old Yankee families cited in the ditty above. She was gracious and intelligent and very much interested in *DARE* and in all matters concerning the American language. Her father taught New Testament Greek at Harvard, and she was on a first-name basis with all of the Harvard presidents since her childhood. If anyone spoke the language of "well-bred ease," she was certainly the one. With her husband, a writer, she agreed to make a tape recording for *DARE* in which they talked about the changes they had seen in the community and about current relations among ethnic and racial groups in the Boston area.

I also had other serendipitous experiences. I felt that linguistic Boston would not be adequately represented without some material from an Irish cop from Southie (South Boston). On a whim, I stopped at a location where an off-duty police officer was directing traffic around a construction site on the Cummins Highway. I approached him and told him what I was looking for. He responded that he was an Irish cop from Southie and that he would be happy to be interviewed. So I followed him to construction sites and, in the breaks when he was not directing traffic, went through several sections of the questionnaire with him.

Another piece of luck for me was my meeting with Mr. Alfred S. of Waltham, who was recommended to me by one of the other informants in that community. Mr. S. lived in an old farmhouse on a separate piece of land at the edge of the Beaver Brook Reservation. His family dated back to the first settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and he still lived on land that had been granted to his family by King Charles I in 1632. When I told him about *DARE* he was very interested in the project and a very helpful informant. To make certain that I recorded his responses accurately, he spelled several of them for me. He was also very eager to correct my mispronunciation of *Trapelo Road* when I put primary stress on the second syllable. He explained that there were traps both above and below the dam on Beaver Brook, with separate roads going to the traps: a trap above road and a trap below road. His house was located where the traps were placed below the dam; hence, *Trapelo Road* has primary stress on the first syllable, and the /b/ is assimilated into the /p/. During one of our sessions he invited me into his front room (the interviews were held in his sitting room) to celebrate the one hundredth birthday of the wallpaper! That was a first for me. (The wallpaper was in excellent condition.)

Oxymorons notwithstanding, my experiences in Boston were probably no different from those of Fieldworkers across the country—difficult, frustrating, annoying, and time-consuming, but always rewarding and worthwhile. And August Rubrecht's demythologizing of life in a Word Wagon (in the Fall 2000 issue of the *DARE Newsletter*) has cured me of any Word Wagon envy. Besides, where would I have parked a Word Wagon in Boston?♦



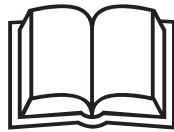
## Funding Update

*Continued from page 1*

tailed below." In the large box at the bottom, type either "Dictionary of American Regional English Fund" or "Frederic G. Cassidy DARE Fund." After filling in the gift processing information, just click on the box at the bottom to submit your gift.

All gifts are tax-deductible and will be matched on a one-to-one basis by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I hope you will consider joining our list of contributors—online or through the form at the bottom of this column. When using the form below, make out your check to *DARE/UW Foundation* and mail it to *DARE, c/o University of Wisconsin Foundation, 1848 University Avenue, P.O. Box 8860, Madison, WI 53708, Attn: David Simon.*

Please give me a call at (608) 263-5607 if you would like to discuss the easiest way to make a gift of stock or a deferred gift. Or you can send e-mail to david.simon@uwfoundation.wisc.edu. Let's work together to make 2001 an even better year for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. On to Z!



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*Beth Gardner, Senior Proofreader*

## Staff Member Profile

*In this continuing series, David Simon interviews Beth Gardner, DARE's Senior Proofreader.*

**Q:** How did you first become interested in regional English?

**A:** I hadn't done much traveling outside Wisconsin before I left the state to go to college. On my first day in the dormitory, I asked someone, "Is there a bubbler [see Volume I of *DARE*] on this floor?" To my amazement, she replied, "You're from Wisconsin, aren't you?" As I got to know students and professors from other parts of the U.S., I became fascinated with their exotic (to me, anyway) accents and the unfamiliar expressions they used. Then I took a public speaking course and discovered that *I* also spoke with an accent! Our instructor, who hailed from the East Coast, made the Midwesterners in her class practice a tongue-twisting phrase: "I will marry merry Mary." It took a great deal of effort for me to form three distinct pronunciations for those last three words, as I had grown up pronouncing them all ['meri].

**Q:** What are your job responsibilities as Senior Proofreader?

**A:** Most of my time is spent proofreading the text of *DARE*; this goes beyond the usual concern with spelling and punctuation to involve typographic coding and some rather complicated matters of *Dictionary* format. I also proofread various reports and grant proposals and assist in the production of this *Newsletter*. Other tasks include maintaining the bibliographic database of sources quoted in *DARE* and working with the rest of the production staff to compile and proofread the *Index* to each volume of *DARE*.

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## Coming in Volume IV

Volume IV will go through the end of Sm-; this issue's preview offers a selection of intriguing regionalisms from the first half of the letter S.

<i>sarvice(berry)</i>	A plant of the genus <i>Amelanchier</i> ; also called <i>juneberry</i> , <i>shadbush</i> . (Chiefly Appalachians, Pacific NW, Rocky Mts)
<i>school butter</i>	Used as a taunt to schoolboys to initiate a fight. (Sth, S Midl)
<i>scotch</i>	To prevent (esp the wheel of a vehicle) from moving by use of a chock. (Sth, S Midl)
<i>schnibble</i>	A scrap, small piece. (Chiefly German settlement areas)
<i>scope</i>	A tract, expanse (of land, woods, etc). (Sth, S Midl)
<i>shammock</i>	To shamle, saunter, "mosey." (Chiefly Appalachians)
<i>sheepshead</i>	A card game. (Chiefly WI)
<i>shool</i>	To roam or idle about; to saunter. (Chiefly Atlantic, esp NEng)
<i>show out</i>	To make a display of oneself; to brag, show off. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl)
<i>sic 'em</i>	In the phrase <i>not to know sic 'em</i> : To be very ignorant or stupid. (Chiefly Inland Nth)
<i>siditty</i>	Conceited, pretentious. (Among Black speakers)
<i>sill cock</i>	A water faucet on the outside of a building. (Scattered Nth, N Midl, esp NEng, Upstate NY)
<i>skeester</i>	A fellow, guy; a mischievous child. (Esp S Atl)
<i>skeet</i>	To skip or skim (a stone) on water. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl)
<i>skelly, skelsy</i>	A children's street game involving shooting weighted bottle caps into a series of numbered squares. (NYC)
<i>skift, skiff</i>	A thin layer of snow or ice. (Chiefly Inland Nth, Midl, West)
<i>sliding pond</i>	A playground slide. (NYC)
<i>slim</i>	Unwell, peaked. (NEng)

## Staff Member Profile

Continued from page 4

**Q:** What do you like best about your job?

**A:** I am constantly amazed by the scope of the DARE project. If you work for a dictionary, any knowledge or talents you may possess and any bits of trivia you carry around in your head will eventually come in handy. Whether you've studied Latin, French, barbershop harmony, or tap dance, at some point your field of expertise or interest will be of use in the construction of an entry.

**Q:** What aspect of your work do you think people might find surprising?

**A:** When I tell casual acquaintances what I do for a living, some of them assume that writing a dictionary is dull, dry work done by stuffy people. I think they would be surprised to know how lively and good-humored the members of the DARE staff are and how passionately they care about their work. Anything from the proper placement of a comma to a disputed etymology can spark a heated discussion (often followed by a hearty round of laughter).

**Q:** What words in DARE have you found especially memorable?

**A:** My fellow proofreader, Elizabeth Blake, and I have lamented the fact that we are frequently asked this question and can never produce a satisfactory answer. The nature of our work sometimes requires us to focus more on the form and structure of entries than on the headwords themselves. Nevertheless, some "DARE words" are quite unforgettable. For example, *hot spit and monkey vomit* (an exclamation of annoyance; see Volume II) is indelibly etched in my memory, but it isn't exactly a great conversation starter, especially at a dinner party.

**Q:** Tell me about your interests away from the Dictionary.

**A:** Much of my free time is spent making music. I play the trumpet in a community band and often play at weddings as a soloist or part of a small brass ensemble; I also sing in two local choirs. Like the rest of my colleagues at DARE, I enjoy reading (especially British mystery novels). On summer weekends, I like to do volunteer work—and watch Shakespeare under the stars—at American Players Theatre in Spring Green. During the winter months, I have to settle for watching figure skating on television and doing the occasional counted cross-stitch project. ♦



## Ask a Fieldworker

If there's something you're dying to know about what it was like to be "in the field," send your query in to the DARE office and we'll pass it along to some of our Fieldworkers.

A Madison reader asks, "What was the most unusual thing you ate or were offered to eat in the course of your fieldwork?"

### August Rubrecht answers:

In regard to foods, I was lucky to be assigned to Louisiana. Just about everyone knows that southern Louisiana's Cajun and Creole traditions offer many delicacies often thought strange in other parts of the country—jambalaya, boiled crawfish, cush-cush, and boudin, for example. However, this cuisine, although even more geographically localized in 1967–68 than now, was already so widely (and justly) esteemed that it hardly seems appropriate to call the dishes unusual.

So I will answer "raccoon meat." I went along on a coon hunt one night in northern Louisiana with one of my informants, C.W., and his two sons. Two of the three coons we got were young. The family said these would make very good eating and invited me to help eat them at supper the following evening. I said I never had eaten raccoon, but would certainly accept.

Growing up in the Ozarks, I had eaten quite a lot of small game, but only squirrel and rabbit. Once I tried groundhog, but didn't like it. Some of the neighbors ate raccoon, but nobody in my extended family would touch coon or 'possum meat. Mom said she tried 'possum once, as a girl, and had to spit it out. You can understand why I was a bit apprehensive. I had accepted my informants' invitation because eating the meat was the proper way to consummate the hunt, not because I actually expected to like it. On the other hand, the family and I were on such good terms that I knew they would understand if I tried the meat and couldn't eat it. In fact, I half expected the teenaged boys to tease me about it. I even thought up a wisecrack to come back with, just in case they did.

They did. Mrs. W. had breaded and fried the meat, then simmered it in gravy. One of the boys tasted his and looked at me mischievously. He said, "Something's wrong. This tastes like it's got kerosene in it. See what you think, August."

I took a bite, savored it, and looked around the table. Everyone waited for my reaction. I said, "Hmm. Tastes a lot like housecat."

## Notes and Quotes

We always enjoy hearing from our readers, and we hope that others of you will also take the opportunity to be in touch.

"I received two newsletters and am in 7th heaven. I guess I have been a "closet" linguist for years. . . . Keep me on your mailing list. I know you must miss your colleague—we all need someone in our life like him, don't we? I was enchanted by the respect and love he must have worn like a priceless coat. How wonderful to leave those memories behind."

Madeleine Lindaas  
Olympia, Washington

"You helped me before, in my manuscript editing, and it led me to obtain the first three volumes of *DARE*, which I absolutely love and are extremely valuable in my work."

Dennis Billuni  
Spring Valley, California

"I am sorry to have written at such length [about *trotlines*, *shitepokes*, and *shipsters*], but I love words, and I think that *DARE* is an absolutely wonderful project. Surely it must already have rescued many thousands of words from certain oblivion."

Joe Kolupke  
Adams State College  
Alamosa, Colorado

"I have told a number of friends about the *DARE* website [*DARE* Ed: <http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/dare/dare.html>], and reports are trickling in about how my friends are enjoying the quizzes!"

Diane Snider  
Sparta, New Jersey

We all had a good laugh, and then I said something like, "No, really, the meat is fine and I *love* the way it's cooked." I managed to eat my share, but I have never eaten it since.

### Patt VanDyke missed out on the raccoon:

I'll have to think about what I ate. I know what my dog Kolo ate that was strange: geraniums, avocados, dresses, coats, electric wiring under the dash of the Word Wagon. . . . One time when I was out of money, I cooked dried lima beans one rainy,

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cold Saturday. The dog got into the leftovers that night, and the next morning, while I slept, she had a strong bean reaction and had diarrhea all over the front seat. When she saw what she'd done and how upset I was about it, she turned around and threw up all over it. Roughly the same reaction to the geraniums, only that was in a sparkling clean Word Wagon that I had spent hours mucking out.

Most of my strange food was food I made myself when my money ran out. I did insult someone mightily once who offered me food. A woman whose husband dragged her to a campground to dry out periodically offered me leftover navy beans and apologized for the facts that she had only a dishful left and that they had been reheated a few times before, so that they were very soft. I picked up on the first part of her apology and said, "Oh, that's a nice mess!" I meant "serving," of course, but she was offended and did not believe people called a serving of anything a "mess."  
[DARE Ed: See **mess** n **1a**, in Volume III.]◆

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