

DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

Fall 2007

On the Road in South Carolina

Ray O’Cain

Ray O’Cain’s adventures as a DARE Fieldworker were chronicled in the Spring/Summer 2007 issue of our Newsletter. This article (completed by Ray’s wife, Maureen Nery, after his death in October of 2006) continues the story of the work Ray did for DARE in his home state during the summers of 1966 and 1967.

On the way to South Carolina, I had gone through a town where the grandmother of a college friend lived, close to the site of the Revolutionary Battle of Camden. In just another day or so, through a college friend of my father’s, I got started in Cheraw, birthplace of jazz giant Dizzy Gillespie. I quickly learned a couple of lessons. Having observed Lee Pederson conduct Linguistic Atlas interviews, I was prepared for the possibility of balky informants. My first informant, suspecting government complicity, expressed unwillingness to cooperate further; he hadn’t been especially enthusiastic anyhow. I soon located another informant, whose husband began to grow resentful of my diversion of her attention. It was not easy to convince him to let her finish.

A Father’s Influence

One of my most important connections to informants was my father, who practiced medicine in Orangeburg. A Mayo Clinic-trained internist, he nonetheless fancied himself a country doctor, living out his dream to practice in his home community.

His patients came from all walks of life, and through their rapport he nourished his curiosity about local history and customs, becoming an ama-

Continued on page 2

DARE Celebrates Fred Cassidy’s Centennial

Start with a lively discussion of language in America, follow with some Jamaican music, good food, birthday cake, and appreciative toasts, and what do you have? A celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of DARE’s founding editor, Frederic G. Cassidy!

October 10, 2007, was the date for this event, which fortuitously coincided with the first day of the annual Wisconsin Book Festival. As part of the Festival, DARE was invited to host a panel of experts to talk about the *Dictionary*; this provided an ideal way to pay tribute to the man with the vision, the optimism, and the tenacity to take the idea of a dialect dictionary of the United States and make it a reality. Simon Winchester, author of *The Professor and the Madman* and *The Meaning of Everything* (both about the making of the *Oxford English Dictionary*), joined August Rubrecht, one of DARE’s original fieldworkers, and Joan Houston Hall, Chief Editor of DARE, for a conversation about American English in general and the *Dictionary* in particular.

Rubrecht’s remarks shed light on what it was like for him to go “cold” into a community, introduce himself to the local police authorities

Continued on page 6

Also in This Issue:

- In Memoriam: Audrey R. Duckert. 4
- Staff Member Profile: Julie Schnebly 5
- Funding Update. 6
- Pictures from the Centennial Panel & Party . . 7

On the Road

Continued from page 1

teur folklorist. Having taken the liberal arts portions of his education quite seriously, he also had a rather keen amateur's interest in words. The tapes of South Carolina speech I had played for Harold Orton in Michigan were conversations recorded in my father's office.

My father also served as an auxiliary informant. He went through the *DARE* questionnaire (QR) fairly systematically, making annotations, and was especially keen to give amplifying remarks and commentary on meanings, usage, and status. As a doctor, he was especially sharp on the terms for various conditions and functions of the body. I think he pretty much solved the etymology of *colly mobbles* as *cholera morbus*. And he reported what I later learned was a relic from the languages of West Africa: body parts as alienable possessions, grammatically ("Doc, I bring my leg to the doctor.").

Orangeburg, my hometown, has an unusual social structure. The seat of a large agricultural county, it is also home to South Carolina State University and Claflin University, founded and maintained for the African-American population. The faculty, almost all African-American, were some of our best-educated citizens; segregation had obliged them to pursue their studies at such distinguished institutions as Cornell, Harvard, Columbia, Indiana, NYU, and the like.

My father gained a special esteem among some of these people, since he was the first physician to transgress the long-established custom of separate waiting rooms. During his term as chief of staff at the local hospital, policies that served to differentiate the care and dignity of the sick along racial lines were modified.

Thus one of his African-American patients escorted me around town in search of the sort of informant I was seeking, a woman who was a housekeeper for one of the faculty families. I was also introduced to her brother, a funeral-home owner in Georgetown, who in turn made it possible to meet informants on the Santee River Delta. He arranged for me to be escorted about to tape-record several interesting people. I doubt these recordings for *DARE* could have been made otherwise. A few years later I met this man again: he was chairman of his county's Democratic Party, and we renewed our acquaintance at state Democratic conventions in the seventies.

Another connection from this patient took me to a prominent businessman in Columbia. Though I tried several times to see him, he proved to be

too busy. In the same building as his office, I came across a voter registration project spawned by the Voting Rights Act. I looked in, chatted briefly with a young man around my own age about what progress they were making, and extended my wishes for their success. This fellow was James Clyburn, who now represents South Carolina's Sixth Congressional District in Washington, D.C.

Finding Informants (and the Occasional Controversy)

I also got a lot of good leads to informants from academic friends. Raven McDavid, a native of Greenville (where I now live), provided introductions to one of his boyhood chums, whose family owned a large textile mill. Not only was I linked to one of the man's former employees, an excellent informant, but I got a tour of a modern textile plant, one that I passed daily on my way to work when I moved to Greenville years later.

Another contact Raven provided came through one of his former classmates at Furman University, Milledge Seigler. This man was well connected in various places around the state and pointed me in the right direction to do research in York and Greenwood Counties.

In Greenwood, I met the Solicitor—the South Carolina term for what most folks know as the State's Attorney or District Attorney. An elected official whose jurisdiction encompassed several counties, he was a considerable political figure.

As we were about to part company, I made a serious error by being unable to resist making a remark about Senator Strom Thurmond, who had recently bolted to the Republican Party, essentially over the issue of race relations. I cracked to the Solicitor about how well Thurmond was getting along now that he had made the biggest step in his career crusade against the Democratic Party.

Well, I got a blistering comeuppance and was treated to a five-minute jeremiad on the "realities" of race relations. That five minutes was probably the short version. Thanking the Solicitor, I backed out the door. I had voted against Thurmond in 1966, and the Solicitor's efforts failed, for I voted against Thurmond five more times (at six-year intervals).

My Colonial History professor gave lots of good advice on the selection of communities. His family in Greenville connected me to Gil Rowland, a local newspaperman. Rowland took interest and wrote a story on *DARE*, but he also sounded me out for commentary on several current issues. Having cer-

tified my position on race relations, he offered me an introduction to a worker at the Penn Center in Frogmore on St. Helena Island, near Beaufort. Penn Center lays claim to being the first school for freedmen, with construction of its quarters in 1865. (*Face of an Island*, by Edith M. Dabbs, shows historic photos of the school and island life.) During the sixties Penn Center served as a retreat for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I didn't meet Dr. King and my contact was away, so, time being short, I had to work Beaufort pretty much cold.

One college friend bore a surname reliably identifiable as Orangeburg County and environs. But he was a dead cold Upcountryman in his speechways, and by no means could he pass as part of the families I knew. I met his family in a small town at the very foot of South Carolina's small mountainous region and was relieved to find that his father's roots were as I predicted. Moreover, I was directed to a very good informant, whose hospitality I enjoyed for several days.

Interviews and Expectations

I learned early, fortunately, that the tape recorder really changes dynamics. After the QR portion of one of my first interviews was finished, I made a last appointment to record "Arthur the Rat" and some free conversation with this informant. Well, she greeted me at the door dressed in her Sunday best, her husband and children were all neat and scrubbed, and we moved to the most formal room in the house. My tape recorder, sitting in a prominent place in the room, must have been the reason for the formality. The interview was anything but casual or spontaneous, and I never again let the recorder be the center of attention.

All *DARE* interviews began with the taking of biographical information (to be sure that the informant's background was not unrepresentative of the community, and to fulfill our programmed distribution of social types). An elderly Charlestonian I interviewed was a member of Charleston's blue blood. The blue bloods represent the families longest settled, who live in the area below Broad Street and are usually privately schooled and mostly Episcopalian. Their speechways define the local standard. I first asked how long his family had been in Charleston. He stated that his paternal line arrived around 1690. Presently I asked about his mother's family, and he said her side of the family hadn't arrived until much later. I pressed on—how much later? "About 1730," he replied.

He turned out to be an excellent informant, taking interest in the QR and exhibiting immense pride in his city. He received me with the greatest warmth, and at the conclusion of each of our several sessions, he invited me to have a taste of Scotch and some little savory tidbit.

I would warrant that my African-American informant about seventy miles up the coast on the Santee River Delta, given any semblance of documentary materials, would have traced his ancestry back at least two hundred years. He, too, had an obvious grace and dignity, and he was quite responsive and willing to illuminate his responses. He was a good instructor, giving me lessons on rice cultivation. His first name was July, and I asked if he had a nickname, hoping to score an Africanism as Lorenzo Turner had years earlier. I got the name, but never could get it connected to Africa.

I would have guessed that his world was probably well circumscribed, and the extent of his travel would be an occasional trip to Georgetown, thirty-odd miles up the coast. On the contrary, he seemed to be quite aware of and connected to distant places. He often had extended telephone conversations with his children, who called from New York or elsewhere.

Reencountering *DARE*

Of course, I was hardly finished with *DARE* at the end of my time in the field. Fairly early on, I had determined that I would do some sort of dialect study in South Carolina. I drew on my *DARE* experience in carrying out the research for my doctoral dissertation on the social variants in the long-established hallmarks of Charleston speech. These hallmarks were undergoing changes occasioned by a regional and subregional pattern of migration resulting from the World War II effort. What I carried over into any future work—and my career was varied—was the ability to appreciate the knowledge and skills of nonacademic people.

My linguistic interest lay fallow until a few years ago. Following a period of disability related to a cornea transplant, I came to own my first computer and eventually rambled onto the *DARE* Web site. Soon after, I came across the word *pull* (to give one a ride on a bicycle) in President Carter's memoir, *An Hour Before Daylight*, and sent a note about it to *DARE*. In my youth, riding two on a bicycle built for one was a widely disregarded proscscription, akin to a similarly disregarded warning that a BB gun was likely to put somebody's eye out.

The fact that neither of these eventualities ever occurred secured us in our boyish wisdom. Though *pull* was widely used in my boyhood, I had never found it anywhere in my fieldwork and I surely didn't have written evidence. I was quite excited, not only to come across this word, but to read about a kind of farming quite similar to what I had known (and to gain a genuine commonality with President Carter).

Some time later I sent along *work brittle* from Bobbie Ann Mason's Kentucky memoir. I recalled this term as a choice in the QR, but had never before encountered it. As a result of passing along citations, I began receiving the *DARE Newsletter* (and was invited eventually to contribute to it). These reminiscences are the result, and I have been pleased to have the opportunity to recount some of the events of what proved to be a significant time in my life. ♦



Photo credit: University of Massachusetts-Amherst

In Memoriam: Audrey R. Duckert

It is with great sadness that we report the death on September 6, 2007, of Audrey R. Duckert, longtime friend of *DARE*. In the late 1940s as a graduate student, Audrey worked with Fred Cassidy to develop the Wisconsin English Language Survey, a project that tested the methodology and the questionnaire that would later be used in *DARE*.

In a profile of Audrey in the Fall 2002 issue of this *Newsletter*, she explained how the *Dictionary* got its name:

"It was July of 1965, and we had just received a generous grant from the U.S. Office of Education to enable us to start the fieldwork. The QR was ready for use; it had been tested in a pilot survey in 50 communities in Wisconsin. Fred and I were having a celebratory cup of coffee in the morning sun on the lakeside terrace of the Memorial Union, and he said we really needed to give the dictionary a working title. So we fell into step the way we had in formulating the questions for the QR. Harold Wentworth's *American Dialect Dictionary* had been published in 1944, and we wanted to avoid confusion with it, so what we needed was a brief, unambiguous but open-minded title that would be easy to remember and cite. *Dictionary of American Dialect* (*DAD*) seemed possible, but we were aware of how often the word *dialect* was misunderstood to mean language that was different in ways that were comic or bizarre. After another cup of coffee, we worked out the premise that the language we were collecting might reflect the age of the speakers who used it, but that it should also be the everyday language of the region in which it was used. One of us used the word *region*, apparently, because at that point we put the word *regional* into our trial titles. Then *Dictionary of American Regional English* emerged, and one of us said, 'And the acronym is perfect.' Then we smiled and said in unison 'DARE,' and hooked little fingers, because that is what people are supposed to do when they say the same thing at the same time."

After finishing her Master's degree at the UW-Madison, Audrey worked for three years as an editor of dialect entries for *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. Academia called, however, and she enrolled at Radcliffe College (now part of Harvard) to earn a Ph.D. in linguistics. She accepted a job at the University of Massachusetts in 1959 and stayed on the faculty until her retirement a few years ago.

Unable to let go of lexicography, she volunteered to read galleys for the *Oxford English Dictionary's Second Supplement*, commenting particularly on the entries for American English terms. And she served as Adjunct Editor for *DARE*, carefully reading entries and making valuable suggestions for improvements.

A lively and provocative teacher and an insightful critic of lexicography, Audrey was an admired member of the American Dialect Society and the Dictionary Society of North America. She is missed. ♦



Staff Member Profile

In this ongoing series, Beth Gardner interviews the newest member of the DARE team, Proofreader Julie Schnebly.

Q: What brought you to *DARE*?

A: In June, I left my job of five years as a volunteer coordinator to “follow my bliss.” Although that position was greatly rewarding in many ways, I just knew I wasn’t doing what I do best or what I truly loved. So I started to test-drive some other career interests and happened upon an ad for a work-study position at *DARE* in August. I’ve always had this notion that I would enjoy working on a dictionary, and my past experiences proofreading have always been extremely rewarding. So I e-mailed Cathy Attig and, lamenting that I was not eligible for the student position, asked whether or not *DARE* needed any volunteers. It was then that she told me about the proofreader position that was opening up, and I met with her the very next day to learn more about *DARE*, volunteer projects, and the proofreader position. I began volunteering on a project with Luanne von Schneidemesser the following week that compares the T headwords in *DARE* to the T’s in the *Dictionary of Canadianisms*. It was love at first entry. Of course, I applied for the proofreader position and never looked back. I am just thrilled to be here every single day, and it is humbling to be a part of this project. For now, I have definitely found my bliss!

Q: What do you like best about working at *DARE*?

A: I really enjoy the work itself. I find it both relaxing and stimulating all at the same time. I love learning new words every day and collecting interesting anecdotes. I have also really enjoyed meeting everyone who works at *DARE*. They are all so nice—helpful and fun to work with.

Q: What part of your duties do you find most challenging?

A: *DARE* has its own ways and means, and sometimes it feels like learning a whole new set of rules to a card game I thought I knew how to play. But that has actually been what makes the job interesting.

Q: What aspect of working on the *DARE* project has been the most surprising to you?

A: I am surprised at how people respond when I tell them I work for *DARE*. People love to talk about how they talk! Inevitably, somebody wants me to look something up or asks whether or not something is in *DARE*. It has made me realize how important language and place are to people’s identities.

Q: What *DARE* entries have you found especially memorable?

A: I love the phrase *find a tee-hee’s nest with a ha-ha’s egg in it* (to laugh inappropriately). I’ve been trying to work it into my daily conversations, but so far it hasn’t caught on.

Also, I found *tree claim* to be especially poignant because that is probably what the farm I grew up on was originally. A tree claim is a parcel of treeless public land allotted to a settler on condition that a certain proportion of it be planted with trees. I always wondered why we had a beautiful ten-acre woods on our farm. I assumed it was uncleared land, but now I know that our 160-acre homestead included the creation of that woods. There is even a quote from a newspaper near where I grew up (Albert Lea, Minnesota). The entry made me feel connected to history in a very personal way.

Q: What are your interests away from the *Dictionary*?

A: Mostly I enjoy spending time with friends, family, my partner, Nate, and our cat, Ygritte. I’m interested in environmental causes and human rights issues. Nate and I have spent this last growing season working on an organic vegetable farm in exchange for a weekly box of vegetables, which has greatly increased my interest in cooking and learning about local food production. I volunteer with the DNR in the spring as a frog surveyor and have also volunteered with many youth lit-

eracy and homework programs. I really enjoy hiking, biking, and canoeing as well as traveling and studying languages. My guilty pleasures are puzzles, card games, reading fantasy fiction (two of my favorite authors are George R.R. Martin and Naomi Novik), and watching sports. Although I've been converted to the Badgers and Brewers after living here for nine years, I am still a hard-core Vikings fan. This makes me either extremely loyal or a glutton for punishment—possibly both! ♦

Funding Update

Jon E. Sorenson
Director of Development

Fred Cassidy would have turned 100 on October 10. When Fred's hundredth-birthday celebration was announced, many of his old fans, students, and colleagues sent contributions in his memory. During his lifetime, in addition to putting in decades of editing and hard work on *DARE*, he was also a tireless fundraiser, finding creative ways to keep the project going on a combination of federal grants and the incredible generosity of individuals and foundations. It is no surprise, then, that even after his death, his fundraising efforts continue. His name still brings in gifts, and his work continues to inspire those who love language. Even though he isn't here in body, his spirit continues to propel the project forward to completion.

I hope you will consider a gift in Fred's memory to help complete something he poured his heart and soul into. There are many ways to give, including gifts of appreciated securities and real estate. Please note that this is the last year to give a charitable rollover distribution from your IRA if you are 70½ years old or older. If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation by check or credit card, please use the coupon that appears on page 8 of this *Newsletter*. I am happy to answer any questions about giving opportunities and hope you will consider *DARE* in your personal philanthropy. Feel free to give me a call at (608) 262-7211 or e-mail me at <jon.sorenson@uwfoundation.wisc.edu>. Finally, and most importantly, many thanks to our supporters, who continue to contribute to the excellence of this project through their generosity. There is indeed much to celebrate on the occasion of Fred's centennial! ♦

DARE Celebrates

Continued from page 1

(remember that this was 1967, and the country was in turmoil), find a place to camp in his "Word Wagon," and then find people who had lived there all their lives who were willing to spend many hours with him talking about language. While he encountered some skeptics, most of the people he met were exceptionally welcoming and very generous with their time.

Hall focused on ways in which the *Dictionary* has proved to be useful, not only to the people one might expect to use *DARE*, but also to some unanticipated user groups. She illustrated the utility of this reference tool to librarians, who were initially assumed to be primary users, and to law enforcement agencies, family doctors, psychiatrists, gerontologists, and language therapists as well.

From Simon Winchester, audience members learned about his early encounters with potentially embarrassing differences between British and American English, and then enjoyed the circuitous tale of his discovery of the "madman" William C. Minor and Winchester's determination to make the man's story public. While many in the audience were familiar with *The Professor and the Madman*, most had not heard the story of the emergence of the book into the public eye. (Never underestimate the power of a *New York Times* review on a rainy Labor Day Monday!) His work on the history of the *Oxford English Dictionary* made Winchester particularly eager to learn about the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, and he has been a fan of *DARE* since meeting Fred Cassidy and the staff in the spring of 2000.

At a celebratory party following the panel discussion, guests heard some of Fred Cassidy's favorite Jamaican music, enjoyed good food and conversation, greeted three of Fred's children and three of his grandchildren, and proposed toasts to a life-size, stand-up photo of the honored guest himself. As Hall explained, Fred's rallying cry during the last year of his life was the spirited phrase, "On to Z!" While the rest of the staff embrace the sentiment, they have also looked to the future of *DARE*, toward an ongoing electronic edition, and join Dr. Seuss in crying, "On Beyond Zebra!" ♦

Pictures from the Centennial Panel and Party ➤

Top: August Rubrecht, Joan Hall, and Simon Winchester during the panel presentation.

Middle: Jon Sorenson, Joan Hall, and Ginny Bormann at the party afterwards.

Bottom: The cake.



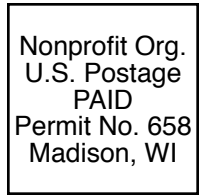
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Postal Return Address:
Dictionary of American Regional English
University of Wisconsin–Madison
6125 Helen C. White Hall
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