

DARE Newsletter

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Ones That Got Away

August Rubrecht

Our readers have enjoyed August Rubrecht's previous accounts of his time as a DARE Fieldworker. Here he reminisces about the role of the tape recorder in collecting the lore and language of American communities.

One of the benefits of browsing in *DARE* is the insight it gives into American history and folklore. Take, for example, the first definition of the preposition *by*: "To, at, into (the home or place of)," as when my Ozark mother used to say "Let's go by Colie's" when suggesting that we visit my uncle. Listed as obsolete by the *OED*, the usage is still current in America, and the *DARE* entry reveals why: it was reintroduced to English speakers by immigrants who used the German cognate *bei* that way.

A good many German speakers immigrated in the late nineteenth century, and citations from Wisconsin and Nebraska probably reflect that settlement period. An earlier wave of Germanic speakers had mingled with Ulster Scots in the late eighteenth century to form the stream of pioneering settlement that followed Daniel Boone's lead from southeastern Pennsylvania southward and westward into the Appalachians and continued into the Ozarks and other parts of the upper (and sometimes lower) South. Germans contributed to Appalachian folk life largely in the material culture, notably including log cabins and "Kentucky rifles" built by gunsmiths in Pennsylvania. Most elements of the linguistic culture, including songs, stories, and everyday words, were contributed by the Ulster Scots (also called Scotch-Irish). But citations of *by* from central South Carolina, southwest-

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Photo credit: August Rubrecht

Here's one that didn't get away! August Rubrecht discovered that while it's called a chub or river chub in Roxbury, NY, it's a silver bass or sheephead 300 miles away in Granville.

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Ones That Got Away

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ern Illinois, northwestern Arkansas, and western Florida demonstrate that at least this one German idiom became everyday English usage among descendants of those pioneers. The Louisiana citation for this sense of *by* could trace either to settlers from Appalachia or to German immigrants who fanned out after the Civil War from ports of entry at New Orleans and Galveston.

(By the way, I have also heard *by* in this sense from speakers whose English was influenced by Yiddish, but the *DARE* citations include no examples clearly from this source. Even the widest net lets some fish get away.)

As intriguing as entries for single words may be, more direct and obvious relations between *DARE* and American history and folk life can be found in the massive fieldwork collections on which those entries are based. Of particular interest are the *DARE* tapes. To compile a record of pronunciation differences across the country, we fieldworkers made tape recordings of free conversation, usually at or near the end of the questionnaire (QR) interview. For this purpose, the topic mattered little; within a span of an hour or less, native speakers of a language will ordinarily use all its significant sounds, called phonemes, and usually do so in a range of phonetic environments. We just tried to get people talking about topics they were enthusiastic about. The idea was that they would get so interested in what they were saying that they would forget how they were saying it, and we would get their authentic everyday speech. To ensure that we captured all the crucial pronunciation contrasts in American English, we also asked informants to read "Arthur the Rat," a contrived story written to include the sounds where they would be easy to find and compare.

The plan didn't always work. Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts to ask stimulating questions and set informants at ease, they spoke more formally than usual. Some turned taciturn with mike fright and gave only minimal answers. Some declined to make a tape at all. Despite these problems and the lack of uniformity in topics, the *DARE* collection of 1,843 tapes forms a massive body of authentic American talk that folklorists and historians, as well as linguists, can profitably explore.

Many informants made recordings rich in interesting facts and good stories, but like a fisherman, I tend to dwell on the ones that got away. Two otherwise excellent informants refused to be taped at all. In New Orleans, LA, I had to erase the part

of a tape that contained a particularly well-told, thought-provoking story because one of the informant's family members objected to it.

But in terms of sheer numbers of episodes, I regret most having no tapes of those times when informants interrupted the questionnaire to reminisce, or when they told jokes and other stories as we were just sitting around visiting. The recorder was never running then, and though I managed to net quite a few individual words on word-slips, the stories usually got clean away. This problem showed up in a big way on my very first questionnaire.

Like many of my later informants, N.L., of Clarksville, AR, dreaded making a tape. Afraid he wouldn't give the kind of information I was after, he insisted on running through his planned remarks with the tape recorder turned off to see if I approved. He talked for nearly an hour about many topics. I chafed at the fact that we were wasting all that good material, and chafed even more the next day, when we talked with the recorder running, because where his taped remarks covered the same topics as the day before, N.L. merely summarized the previous conversation without many details; fortunately, he also covered new material, in which he provided more detail. Even though the topics didn't matter as far as the phonological value was concerned and the tape he made was actually quite good, I couldn't help thinking how much richer the recording would have been as oral history if it had included both conversations.

Just about the only detail I remember now about the rehearsal conversation is something N.L. said in a story about hitching rides on freight trains as a young man following the wheat harvest through Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. The remark has no significance as history or folklore, but you can understand why I remember it if you know how he answered question NN24, *Humorous substitutes for stronger exclamations*: "Why the son of a _____!"

N.L. immediately answered "Gun," and then added earnestly, "I never say 'son of a bitch.'" Telling about his wheat harvest adventures a day or two later, he mentioned riding in a boxcar with several companions, some of whom were troublemakers. With his voice rising in indignation, he told how when the train stopped at a siding, one of the troublemakers insulted everybody one last time, jumped out of the car, slid the door shut, "and they locked the son of a bitch on the outside!"

Something similar happened several months later. In Kinderhook, NY, I needed someone to supplement the main informant by answering sections on farming and the outdoors and by making a tape. I was referred to several old-timers, and the one with the time and energy to spare was E.I., an eighty-year-old retired ranger and guide from nearby who lived alone. Following standard practice, I did not take the recorder in for the initial interview. Usually that choice is wise, but not this time. We talked from dusk to dawn, or rather he rambled on all night about whatever came to mind, and I listened. It was practically impossible to keep him on track in the QR and just as hard to herd him back when he wandered off. There were many questions he never did answer directly. By flipping back and forth in the QR as he talked and by making notes on word-slips, I checked off or wrote down as many conversational answers to the skipped questions as possible, and later filled in a few from memory. The rest remained NR (no response). If the recorder had been on, I could have done a much more thorough job by replaying the eight or so tapes the conversation would have required. On the other hand, it's possible I could not have forced myself to sit through it again. Perhaps, if transcribed, it would have come off as a stream-of-consciousness monologue full of subtly intertwined threads that revealed to careful readers a profound and edifying unity, like James Joyce's *Ulysses* or a segment of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. But I suspect not. The recording we made the following afternoon was, if I recall, of standard length for a DARE tape.

I also remember too few details about one delightful evening and night in that same community. In this case no informants were involved, so using up recording tape would have been fiscally irresponsible as well as socially inappropriate. But if recordings existed, social historians might find them of interest today.

First I visited with the family of a librarian and her physician husband, who graciously invited me to dinner. My journal notes remind me that during and after dinner we talked poetry, and the couple's daughter, who was leaving the next morning for a job with VISTA, read from *The Thurber Carnival*. These parts of the evening, enjoyable as they were, had no particular relevance to folklore or history, but another did. On the topic of the civil rights turmoil of the mid-sixties, we had a lively discussion about personal and collective morality from the perspective of northern liberals. I enjoyed the conversation immensely, even though I was a little

offended by the notion of collective morality. The husband thought that because I was raised in the same state as those redneck racists he had seen on TV horribly abusing blacks during the integration of Little Rock's Central High School, I should feel some responsibility for their behavior. A recording would be of interest to historians looking for first-person reactions to media coverage of the civil rights struggle, especially if, to provide contrast, recordings existed of the racist comments from Arkansas and Louisiana I reported in "Fieldwork and Racial Tension" (*DARE Newsletter* 2.4 [1999]).

After I went "home" to my campsite, the son of the owner of the campground took me out to his favorite country tavern, which had pool tables and served steamed cherrystone clams till the wee hours. We played a little pool. Then I told a story or two. Then somebody sang a song and we all joined in. I told another story. We sang more songs. We kept it up till two a.m. closing time. A recording of the festivities would have turned up very few new stories or songs, since I already knew my own repertory and the songs we sang were old standards. An audio recording might have been worthwhile anyway. Though my own contribution to the storytelling was all out of proportion, others did manage to get a few stories in edgewise, and as a singing group I thought we were pretty good. Heck, why the false modesty? I thought we were magnificent. The DARE tape recorder might have preserved an example of what an impromptu pool hall hootenanny in 1968 (a year before Woodstock) could sound like. On the other hand, it might have killed the spontaneity, so it's probably just as well I didn't trot out the machine. And honestly, as for our singing, chances are better than even that we didn't actually sound nearly as good as I thought we did in the warm glow of good companionship, cherrystone clams, and beer.

But wait, I have drifted from the topic. I had no professional reason or personal impulse to make a permanent record of these good times, or the ones with the English Department at Loyola University in New Orleans, or old friends in Tennessee (one of whom I married after the year of fieldwork was over), or an especially congenial family in Boonville, NY, or many others. We anglers can't claim a fish gets away unless we're actually trying to catch it.

There were, however, many stories I had professional and personal reasons to capture. Most of them escaped so completely that I can't remember them at all. In a bar in the New Orleans neighborhood called the Irish Channel, I did a

questionnaire with multiple informants, interviewing whichever one happened to be available on a particular afternoon or evening. The bar was a neighborhood social center where the regulars came to play out their roles in a sort of ongoing improvisational comedy. Every evening would have provided material for an episode of a sitcom like *Cheers*. One bartender was the joke-telling specialist; if I was working with a different informant who wanted me to hear a particular story, he would call H.R. over to tell it. H.R. was good. But the recorder was never running then, and I was always too busy trying to focus the informant's attention on the questionnaire to jot the jokes down, and now I can't remember any of them. All I remember is laughing a lot. H.R. did make a tape full of fascinating information about New Orleans parades, but I kick myself for failing to ask him to tell some of his many jokes. ♦

In the next installment I will tell about material I failed to capture on tape but did manage to store in memory.

Funding Update

Jon E. Sorenson
Director of Development

This summer in Madison has confirmed the old adage that "there are two seasons in Wisconsin: winter and construction." Maneuvering around cranes, closed streets, shifting traffic lanes, and bewildered tourists has been quite a challenge. I think the chaos has scared away the lightning bugs that were ubiquitous last year, but plenty of katynippers (more commonly known as mosquitoes) seem to have taken their place.

Six stories above any standing water, in the DARE offices in Helen C. White Hall, a team of dedicated professionals continues the important work of preserving our linguistic heritage. Volume V will become a reality soon, but not without the dedication and support of our generous friends. This is a strange time for philanthropy. Many people have less than they did a year ago, but the "power of many" still seems to hold true. Any gift of any size, when bundled with others, adds up to a significant portion of our operating overhead. Your gifts, combined with federal and foundation grants, ensure the completion of our important work and make a big difference.

For more information about all types of giving opportunities, please call me at (608) 262-7211 or

e-mail me at <jon.sorenson@uwfoundation.wisc.edu>. If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation by check or credit card, please use the coupon that appears on page 7 of this *Newsletter*; you can also make a gift online at <www.dare.wisc.edu> (follow the "Donate to the dictionary" link).

I hope you are enjoying your summer. We are most thankful for your interest, support, and generosity. ♦

Coming in Volume V . . . in Photos

DARE Production Assistant and Technical Typist Cathy Attig is a talented nature photographer. As she inputs the text of the *Dictionary*, she often discovers variant names for the flowers and plants she has captured on film (or with her digital camera). This is a picture of *Dicentra cucullaria*—**Dutchman's breeches 1** in Volume II, and soon to be **snowboys 2**, **soldier's cap**, and **staggerweed 3** in Volume V.



Another of Cathy's photos spotlights *Echinacea purpurea*—see **purple coneflower** in Volume IV and watch for **snakeroot b(13)** in Volume V.



Two *DARE* Editors Retire

Joan Houston Hall
Chief Editor

The Fourth of July brought a new kind of independence to two of *DARE*'s longtime editors: Senior Science Editor Sheila Kolstad and General Editor (and former Bibliographer) Leonard Zwilling retired on that day.

Sheila Kolstad was *DARE*'s first employee, hired at the start of the project in 1965 as a student assistant. Because of her background in natural science, she was instrumental in setting up the data files that correlate scientific with folk and regional names for plants and animals. She worked for a time as a Pre-Editor and also did some fieldwork (see the Spring/Summer 2005 *DARE Newsletter* for Sheila's tale of unexpected adventure as a field-worker in the Kentucky coal mining region during a period of labor unrest).

After a time away from Madison, Sheila came back to *DARE* as an Editor in 1976. It was soon clear that the plant and animal entries would benefit greatly from her scientific expertise, so as our Science Editor (later Senior Science Editor) she concentrated on this very significant part of the *Dictionary*. Her development of a system in which the most common name for a plant or animal is chosen as a "collector entry" is unique to *DARE*. The "collector" is identified by scientific name, and references are made to all the synonyms. The synonyms in turn are defined simply by reference to the collector. This system is very efficient, especially where there are many alternate names (**bittern**, for example, with fifty-four synonyms, and **mayapple**, with twenty-seven).

In recent years Sheila has also been an associate of the New Zealand Dictionary Centre and has been involved in the Origins of New Zealand English (ONZE) project at the University of Canterbury. We wish her well in these endeavors.

Leonard Zwilling ("Lenny" to his friends and colleagues) came to *DARE* in 1986, taking the half-time position of Bibliographer on the retirement of Goldye Mohr, who had been with *DARE* since the beginning. After about six months, when there was an opening for an Editor, Lenny was selected. He did dual duty as half-time Editor and half-time Bibliographer for many

“Your work is so fascinating. The next time some department talks about interdisciplinary, they should just look at what *DARE* is doing.”

Linda Gentes
University of Wisconsin–Richland

years, gradually moving toward full-time editing when our need was greater there.

With a working knowledge of Sanskrit, Hindi, Mongolian, and Tibetan, as well as facility with French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Yiddish, Lenny had the kind of broad linguistic knowledge that is extremely valuable in lexicography.

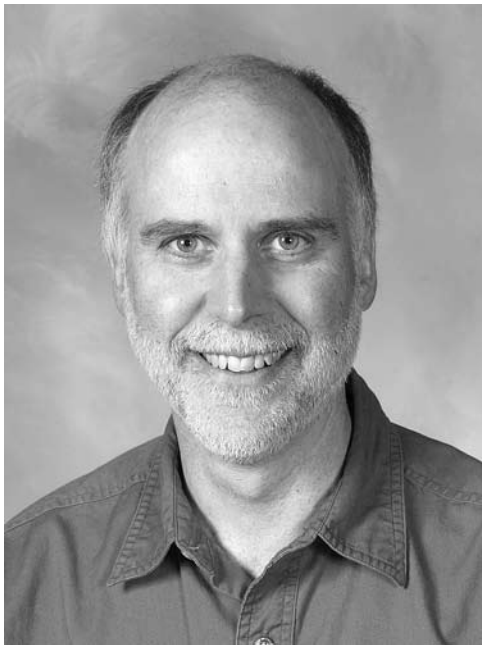
He also brought to *DARE* a wide-ranging knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American culture, from movies to popular song lyrics, cartoons, boxing, and politics. All of these topics are relevant to the kinds of regional and folk terms that we include in the *Dictionary*, and Lenny was happy to share this knowledge with colleagues.

An immediate retirement project for Lenny is to publish (with Michael Sweet) the first complete and unabridged translation from the Italian of *Historical notices of Tibet, and an account of the Mission and travels in that country by Father Ippolito Desideri, of the Society of Jesus, written by Himself; 1712-1733* (quite a mouthful, but typical of the period). This is the earliest full and accurate description of Tibet, treating its flora, fauna, topography, agriculture, commerce, social organization, arts, and crafts, but its greatest value is in its exhaustive exposition of Tibetan Buddhism.

We're not sure this sounds like "retirement," but we certainly applaud the project! ♦



At Lenny's retirement lunch: George Goebel, Leonard Zwilling, Joan Hall, Julie Schnebly, Roland Berns



Where Are They Now?

While attending graduate school at UW–Madison, John Heasley worked as a Project Assistant for *DARE*, verifying quotations cited in the *Dictionary* and performing a variety of other tasks. After leaving *DARE* in 1990, John embarked on a career in education. He teaches English at Richland Center High School and was the recipient of a 2009 Kohl Teacher Fellowship, an award recognizing Wisconsin educators for excellence and innovation in the classroom.

John recently shared some memories of his days at *DARE* with Beth Gardner.

Q: What originally brought you to *DARE*?

A: I was a graduate student in English, interested in income and health insurance and somewhat intrigued about what was happening on the sixth floor of Helen C. White Hall. Gerry Esch was moving on as a Project Assistant and said that *DARE* was a great place to work. He was right.

Q: What do you remember most vividly about working at *DARE*?

A: I remember morning coffee breaks and the lively conversations. The UW should have offered seminar credit. I also remember visiting just about every library on campus to verify quotations. I loved the ceremonial way that the staff of the rare book rooms brought out the first editions for me. I appreciated all of Roland Berns's tips on how to best approach the guardians of the books. I was

honored to provide information for the **hoagie** entry.

Q: What do you enjoy most about teaching high school students?

A: Low impulse control. Where else do you get to see a spontaneous reenactment of Ahab versus Moby Dick, Hester Prynne as a cheerleader, a *West Side Story*–choreographed assassination of Julius Caesar on March 15, or the musical version of *Giants in the Earth*?

Q: How do you and your colleagues make use of *DARE* in the classroom?

A: About once a year, a student in class will report that “Mr. Heasley wrote a whole dictionary.” I show them the credit page of Volume II with my name at the bottom. *DARE* helps when it’s time to talk about racism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *DARE*’s documentation of the “N” word goes on for pages. I read them aloud, and then we talk about the creation of race in America and why none of the words are complimentary.

Q: Tell us about some of the award-winning educational programs you’ve created (including what has been described as “our planet’s only summer school course in Martian Literature”).

A: Inspired by Homer Hickam’s *Rocket Boys*, our school celebrated the first fifty years of the



John recently toured “Planet Trek Dane County,” a series of signs along a twenty-three-mile trail from Madison to Mt. Horeb enabling bikers and pedestrians to see the major bodies of our solar system represented on an accurate scale of size and distance. He reports that the golf ball in his hand “represents Mars on the trail’s scale of 200 million to one.”

Space Age with our October Skies festivities. We launched a balloon to an altitude of nineteen miles and watched as it transmitted TV images back to us. Our parachute made it all the way across Lake Michigan. We had rocket launches at our stadium and a visit from Viroqua astronaut Mark Lee.

Martian Literature is a summer school course that explores the “fourth rock from the sun” through stories, films (mostly bad), astronomy, history, rocketry, art, and music. I hope it encourages students to have an optimistic vision of the future. You can meet the Martians on YouTube (search “Richland Center High School”).

Q: What do you like to do in your leisure time?

A: I bike and hike and snowshoe in the appropriate seasons. I also volunteer for the Jet Propulsion Lab as a Solar System Ambassador. ♦

“Whad’Ya Know?” “Not Much, You?”

A widely syndicated Associated Press article about *DARE* by Madison-based reporter Ryan Foley last March resulted in quite a barrage of publicity for the project: Chief Editor Joan Houston Hall was asked to do radio interviews for stations in Portland, Dallas, Chicago, Milwaukee, Grand Marais, Minnesota, and Concord, New Hampshire, as well as for National Public Radio’s *Weekend Edition Sunday*. (To listen to the NPR interview or read a transcript of it, go to <www.npr.com> and enter “Joan Hall” at the Search prompt.)

Not to be outdone, the producers of Michael Feldman’s *Whad’Ya Know?* (on Wisconsin Public Radio) invited Hall to be a guest. She is shown here with Feldman during the live broadcast on June 13. (This portion of the program can be heard at <www.notmuch.com/Show/>; click on “June 13, 2009,” then on “Part A.”) ♦

Dictionary Society Honors *DARE* Editors

At its biennial conference in Bloomington, Indiana, in May, the Dictionary Society of North America named *DARE* Editors Joan Houston Hall and Luanne von Schneidemesser as Fellows of the Society. They join eleven other scholars and lexicographers who currently share the designation. *DARE*’s founding Editor, Frederic G. Cassidy, was named a Fellow in 1985, and Adjunct Editor Audrey Duckert joined the ranks in 1991. ♦

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