

DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

Fall 2009

A Few More That Got Away

August Rubrecht

In the Spring/Summer 2009 issue of our Newsletter, August Rubrecht reminisced about his use (and non-use) of the tape recorder in doing fieldwork for DARE. This article continues August's account of some of the anecdotes and information he preserved in memory (if not on tape) during his time as a Fieldworker.

Fortunately, although I failed to capture hundreds of items of folklore and local history on tape, I did retain a few in memory. J.R., in Dover, DE, gave me a joke that has been a favorite of mine ever since. He was a delight to visit with when we weren't actually working on the questionnaire (QR). The joke is an old classic (updated with a reference to Medicare, enacted three years earlier) that somehow I had never heard before. For the past forty-plus years I have retold it, usually with embellishments and changes of setting. Here it is without my adaptations, pretty much as J.R. told it.

Medicare Patient

After Medicare was passed, an old woman went to the doctor and told him she wanted a physical exam. He asked her what was wrong with her, and she said, "Nothing. My nephew just told me I ought to come in and get checked over, on account of that new Medicare and all."

So the doctor asked her if she had ever had diabetes or heart disease, and other things about her medical history, but she said no, she never had been sick much, except a few times when she had a cold or the flu or something minor like that.

*He said, "Have you ever had a major operation?"
She said no.*

"Have you ever been hospitalized?"

She said no.

"Have you ever been bedridden?"

"Oh, many times, many times. And twice in a buggy!"

Always curious about the outdoors, I started conversations about fish and wildlife everywhere I went, collecting a number of local names on word-slips this way. I could also have accumulated quite a store of outdoor lore if the recorder had been running, but little of it came in the form of neat little anecdotes, so whatever I learned from specific informants has lost its separate identity and melted into my general store of knowledge. For example, D.P., of Leipsic, DE, gave me plenty of Chesapeake Bay waterman's lore that deserved to be recorded, but I failed to make notes about it in my journal. Now I remember nothing specific except one incredible tidbit that probably deserved to be forgotten. He told about poling a boat along a canal through the marsh; suddenly a hen mallard flushed close by. Frustrated that he didn't have his shotgun in hand, he pointed his push-pole like a

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gun and shouted “BANG!” He claimed the duck dropped dead. He said it with a straight face.

I do, though, recall one neat little anecdote about natural lore—a just-so story told by A.R., of Donaldsonville, LA, at question Q13, *Names around here for the vulture*.

In the South there are two kinds, the turkey vulture and the slightly smaller black vulture. Both have featherless heads; the turkey vulture’s is pink or red, and the black vulture’s is black. The common name across the South for vultures is *buzzard*, and A.R. called the turkey vulture *king buzzard*. I can’t do justice to his speaking style, so what follows is a summary.

Why the King Buzzard Has a Red Head

The black buzzards fly around and watch the king buzzard, to see what he will do. When he finds a cow or horse or something lying on the ground that looks like it might be dead, the king buzzard goes down first, to check it out. He walks all around it, and if he doesn’t see any movement, he sticks his head up its ass. That’s what turns his head red. If it still doesn’t move, the other buzzards know it’s safe, so they fly down and start to feed too.



When I mentioned this bit of folklore to a friend who knows about birds, he said that (except for the gruesome test for signs of life) it demonstrates accurate observation of vulture scavenging techniques. Turkey vultures seek food using their sense of smell as well as their keen vision, so they actually do often find and fly down to carrion first. Black vultures look for food on their own, but they also watch turkey vultures, and when they see the bigger birds descending on a carcass, the black vultures join them.

Three of my favorite stories were told by Mr. and Mrs. W., of Grayson, LA. Someone had rec-

ommended C.W. as a potential informant. When I went to see him, he was not at home, but his wife, M.W., was. I explained to her about needing to interview someone born in the area who had never lived anywhere else. Her eyes brightened, and she exclaimed, “C.’s your man! He’s been futher up a ‘simmon tree than he’s ever been away from home.”

Both M.W. and her husband turned out to be excellent informants, and fun to visit with besides. The family practically adopted me while we worked on the QR. They told good stories, some of which I condensed in my journal or in letters home. I have tried to reconstitute them here the way they told them, with only partial success. For one thing, they told the anecdotes on local characters. When I wrote the summaries down later, I could no longer remember any names except the first name *Gene* in the story about getting lost in the swamp. That name stayed in mind because it was featured in the punch line. A minor problem is that I can’t avoid coloring the retelling with my own style; however, the flaw is not a glaring one because I come from the same cultural tradition: settlers who moved west out of Appalachia.

The Oxen Sulled—M.W.

One time two boys was a-haulin’ something with a team of oxen, and the oxen sulled. They just stopped, and they wouldn’t go forwards nor backwards, no matter what the boys done.

Somebody told ‘em if they would just go off in the bushes and take off all their clothes, then come out naked on their hands and knees, that would make the oxen move.

So they tried it, and sure enough, them oxen started up—but it worked a little too good. They had a regular runaway, and it took the boys a long time to catch up and get ‘em stopped and settled down.

Besides that, when they come back, they found out the boys that told ‘em the trick had run off with their clothes.

Lost in the Swamp—C.W.

One night two boys went coon-huntin’ in the Castor Creek swamp, and they got lost out there. ‘Course, it’s easy to get turned around in the swamp even in the day-time. At night it’s worse, you know.

They run around in circles for a long time, a-wonderin’ where they was at, till finally they stumbled onto the creek. They held up their lanterns and looked up and down the creek, and finally one of ‘em turned to the other, and he said, “I be damn, Gene, are we on this side of the creek or the other side?”

Now that's what you call confused, ain't it? That's confused.

New Clothes—C.W.

One time back when everybody had mules and wagons instead of trucks, a man from around here took a load of cotton to the gin, and the price was up, and he got more money than he expected to.

His wife had been after him to get some new clothes. The ones he had on was all faded and ragged, and they had been patched so many times, even the patches had patches. So before he left town to go home, he stopped and bought him a new shirt and a new pair of overalls. New underwear too. He said, "Huh. I reckon I'll show her a thing or two!"

Well, on the way home, when he crossed the bridge over the creek where there was a swimmin' hole, he stopped the mules, and he figured as long as he had new clothes, he ought to put 'em on so he could really show 'em off when he come up to his wife. He said, "I reckon I'll show her a thing or two!"

So he took off all his old dirty clothes and thowed 'em in the creek and just let 'em float on down. He laid his new clothes out on the bank, and he jumped in the creek to wash off. He swum around for quite a while, and when he come back up on the bank, his new clothes was all gone. Somebody had come along and stole 'em. He went up on the bridge and looked up and down the road, but he didn't see nobody. He followed the creek down a ways a-lookin' for his old clothes, but they was gone too.

So he got back up on the wagon and just sat there for a minute a-wonderin' what his wife would think when she saw him a-comin' home buck naked like that, and he went [cluck-cluck to the mules], "Heh, heh. I reckon I'll show her a thing or two, anyway!"

It isn't just stories I failed to record, either. I never prompted informants to sing on their tapes; this omission was by design. Songs often include words that are archaic or otherwise alien to the everyday speech DARE was designed to document. Also, musical rhythm and melody replace the timing and intonation of regular speech. Folk songs don't count as ones that got away, then, since I wasn't trying to catch them.

Then there were folk practices that couldn't have been caught on audiotape even if the recorder had been running. Some I regret, some not. To define *straw broom*, L.P., of Clinton, LA, showed me how to make one. She cut a handful of sturdy sedge grass and trimmed the stems to the same length, then tapped the butt ends on a level surface to

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Coming in Volume V

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>toggle worm</i> | The catalpa worm (<i>Ceratonia catalpae</i>); hence <i>toggle worm tree</i> a catalpa. (Sth) |
| <i>whopper-jawed</i> | Crooked, askew. (Chiefly Midl) |
| <i>wiggletail</i> | A mosquito larva. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl) |
| <i>wild pear</i> | A serviceberry. (Chiefly NEast, esp ME) |
| <i>wild turnip</i> | The jack-in-the-pulpit. (Chiefly NEast) |
| <i>willipus-wallapus</i> | A fictitious animal; a steamroller. (Sth, S Midl) |
| <i>wine plant</i> | Rhubarb. (Esp NEast, Gt Lakes) |
| <i>witch doctor</i> | A dragonfly. (Esp S Midl) |
| <i>witchwood</i> | A mountain ash, esp <i>Sorbus americana</i> . (NEng) |
| <i>wizzle</i> | To shrivel, become wrinkled. (Esp NEng) |
| <i>wob</i> | To wad, crumple. (Chiefly NEng) |
| <i>wolf over the river</i> | A game similar to pom-pom-pullaway. (Chiefly TX, Lower Missip Valley) |
| <i>woods colt</i> | A child born out of wedlock. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl, SW) |
| <i>wop</i> | A bittern or night heron. (Chesapeake Bay) |
| <i>wopse</i> | A wad, tangle. (Chiefly NEng) |
| <i>wopse (up)</i> | To twist or wad. (Chiefly NEng) |
| <i>work alive with</i> | To crawl with, be alive with. (Esp Sth, S Midl) |
| <i>work-brittle</i> | Eager to work; energetic, industrious. (Esp Midl) |
| <i>worm tree</i> | A catalpa. (Sth) |
| <i>worrit (or wart)</i> | To vex, tease, nag. (Formerly scattered, now esp TX) |
| <i>wudge</i> | A wad, lump. (Esp NEast) |
| <i>wudge up</i> | To wad, crumple. (Esp NEast) |
| <i>yard broom</i> | A coarse brush-broom or leaf rake. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl) |

A Few More That Got Away *Continued from page 3*
make a bundle with the end square and even. She tied one end of a long cotton cord around that end and wound it a couple of times. Then she dropped the cord, pressed it down with her foot, pulled up on the bundle with both hands, and began winding it against the taut cord, regulating the tension with pressure from her foot. When she had wound nearly all the cord around the thick part of the stems, she tied it off (I don't remember what kind of knot) and handed me the broom. The tightly bundled grass felt as solid as a wooden handle, though somewhat larger—about an inch and a half or two inches in diameter.

Later on, I bought a camera to record my travels and soon realized I could photograph things that are hard to define in words. Besides lexical items, I took pictures of local architecture and artifacts and of people fishing, hunting, donning rain gear as a crossing guard, and playing Russian checkers. Nothing quite so unusual as L.P. making that broom. But even if I had possessed a camera at the time, a still photograph—even a series of them—could not have captured the process adequately. A movie camera, though justifiable for folklore research, would have been overkill in a lexicographic study. The handy portable videocassette recorder and the even handier camera phone lay far in the future, unforeseen except by science fiction writers and a few visionaries working in electronics labs.

If such devices had been available, it would have been interesting, back there in Grayson, LA, to record M.W. carding cotton to make batts for quilting. Her two wooden carding combs were rectangular, with a handle on one of the long sides and rows of wire teeth projecting from one face of each comb. Mrs. W. would lay tufts of cotton fiber on one comb, then press the other comb down on top and stroke them firmly against each other. After several strokes she would lift the top comb, and there would be a flat rectangle of fluffy cotton, which she would lay alongside the ones she

had already completed. She said she bought raw cotton cheap at the gin. She admitted it would also cost very little to get big sheets of batting at the dry goods store already made up, but she enjoyed doing it the old-fashioned way. She let me try it. I found it very hard to make nice even rectangles like hers and saw that it would take hours of practice to perfect the technique.

As I said, a video recording would have been interesting. But since M.W.'s carding vocabulary was standard, it would not have added to the *DARE* lexicon. Also, it would have been hardly necessary as a record of a dying craft. People still card cotton and wool nowadays, and some of them record themselves doing it and post the videos on YouTube. Internet craft sites provide detailed carding instructions. So the fact that I failed to capture the process in 1967 hardly matters now, though I could not have known that at the time.

My inability to record L.P. making a straw broom does matter, however. In an admittedly cursory Internet search using the key word *straw broom*, I could find no relevant videos. A search using *brush broom* turned up an advertisement for a broom-making class with a photo showing students making brooms similar to L.P.'s, but again no video of the process. My verbal description above is a poor substitute for watching it done.

My attempts to capture informants' stories in writing are also inadequate. Written text just can't reproduce the pacing, the intonation, and other nuances of pronunciation a teller uses to bring a story to life. At least written text is better than nothing, which is what I caught when I forgot stories so thoroughly that I can't even write them down.

But brooding about the situation does no good. Let's ignore the ones that got away and turn our attention to the tapes that were actually made, with the speakers' nuances preserved. I don't mean just the ones I sent back to the office, but all 1,843 tapes in the *DARE* collection. You can hear differences in pronunciation for yourself in the examples of "Arthur the Rat" available online (see the next column for details). Gradually, segments of conversation are being put online as well. [*DARE* Ed: Look for an announcement in a forthcoming *Newsletter*.]

The full archives of recorded conversation are available to scholars and other professionals who agree to keep personal information confidential. Perhaps some of them can extract good stories (whether true or fictional) from those conversations without betraying anyone's trust, so that all of us can enjoy the benefits of the ones that didn't get away. ♦

“The information in *DARE* about Dutch is flawless, I must say. Often you find in dictionaries wrong spellings of Dutch words or nonexistent forms or wrong meanings—but none of this in *DARE*.”

Nicoline van der Sijs
Coeditor, *Dutch Etymological Dictionary*
Author, *Cookies, Coleslaw, and Stoops: The Influence of Dutch on the North American Languages*
(Amsterdam University Press, 2009)

“Arthur the Rat” Online

If you'd like to listen to samples of “Arthur the Rat,” go to <<http://digidoll.library.wisc.edu/AmerLangs/>> and click on “Guided Search.” Put “Arthur” (without quote marks) in the first box and click on “Search.” This will bring up the full collection, in alphabetical order. If you want to search a particular state, add its name in the second box and choose “Place/Time” in the second pull-down menu. (If the state name has two parts, choose “As a phrase” in the first menu.) At this point, 844 of the 1,257 examples of “Arthur the Rat” are available. ♦

Video Lecture on *DARE* Available Online

If you'd like to hear a talk about *DARE* given by Chief Editor Joan Hall, go to <www.dare.wisc.edu>, click on “Educational Resources,” and select “Video Lecture.” This was a talk given to a Reference Materials class for the UW's School of Library and Information Science in the fall of 2007. ♦

Funding Update

Jon E. Sorenson
Director of Development

I recently met with a collector of dictionaries and longtime donor to *DARE*. He pointed to an empty space on his large, jam-packed bookshelf and asked me when it might be filled. I thanked him for his patience and support and told him that we expected Volume V to be published in 2011. He breathed a sigh of relief and asked what he could do to help us along. I replied that if he continued with his annual gifts, as he had done so generously in the past, this would be the most helpful way to bring the project to completion. I also pointed out that he had good company in the many individuals, foundations, and government agencies that have been tireless in their support of *DARE* and are also waiting for that space on their bookshelves to be filled.

All of us at *DARE* appreciate your patience, generosity, and faith in a project that has been the recipient of consistent gifts that have been put to good and immediate use. This has truly been a labor of love on the part of Chief Editor Joan Hall and her dedicated team, and we look forward to giving a gift back to all of you in the form of the

“I enjoyed hearing you [=DARE Chief Editor Joan Hall] yesterday on Wisconsin Public Radio. It is always great fun when you are a guest. I am a former teacher of English. I was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, and have always had a particular interest in the origins and regional differences in language, so I particularly enjoyed hearing you. . . . Thank you for your wonderful work. I hope to hear you on the radio again soon.”

Dianna Lawrence
Waukesha, Wisconsin

completed Volume V. Until that day arrives, please know that your support is appreciated and vital.

If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation by check or credit card, please use the coupon that appears below. As always, I am happy to answer any questions you might have on how to give to *DARE* and to provide information on making gifts of property or appreciated securities or including *DARE* in your estate plans. Feel free to give me a call at (608) 262-7211 or e-mail me at <jon.sorenson@uwfoundation.wisc.edu>. As we enter what is traditionally regarded as the season of giving, a donation to *DARE* in honor of a friend or family member might be the perfect holiday gift. ♦

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Looking It Up

Paul Baker

Senior Editor Luanne von Schneidemesser recently ran into Paul Baker (who worked at DARE as a graduate student in the mid-eighties) at an event celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the Friends of the UW–Madison Libraries. Paul subsequently sent us this essay about his longtime fascination with dictionaries.

I recently purchased a copy of the massive *Oxford English Dictionary*. The thirteen-volume set was printed in 1933 at Oxford's Clarendon Press. Its faded covers and loose spines celebrate decades of use—by students chained to an assignment they couldn't wait to finish, and by word nerds looking for entertainment.

That purchase completes a circle. Long ago, I stumbled into a freshman composition course called "Writing about Poetry." Our instructor insisted that we look up any words we weren't sure of. He browbeat us into setting aside our standard collegiate dictionaries in favor of the *OED*. Beyond finding definitions, he wanted us to see words in their historical context: how a given word derived from French and Latin and Sanskrit, or from Greek or German or Old Frisian. How have writers historically used the word?

There was no World Wide Web, so using the *OED* meant hiking to the university library. Its cavernous reading room offered a rather Dickensian environment, with dark paneling, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, heavy wooden chairs, and tables outfitted with lion-claw feet and green-shaded lamps.

Each of the thirteen dictionary volumes was cinder-block heavy, so it helped to be strong. And it helped to be patient, because it took *time* to find a definition. You flipped through oversized pages, scanned down through columns of etymological prefaces and pronunciations and definitions and their supporting literary citations. Five or six minutes later, you could finally choose a definition that seemed best suited to the context of the assigned poem. One word down, dozens more to go.

As that semester progressed, I found myself less driven to race to the "best" definition and more likely to enjoy browsing. The dictionary experience became less about the destination and more about the journey:

journey ('dʒɜːni), *sb.* . . . [a. OF. *journee* (12th c.), *journee*, F. *journée* day, day's space, day's travel, work, employment, etc. (in OF. also travel, a conference, etc.) = Pr., Sp., Pg. *jornada*, It. *giornata*:—pop.L. **diurnāta*, f. *diurnum* day, *sb.* use of neut. of *diurnus* of the day, daily, f. *dies* day. . . .]

On their archaeological digs in Kenya, Louis and Mary Leakey sifted through layers of sediment that spanned millennia. The earth was their time machine. The *OED* became mine.

After that freshman year, I took more courses in English lit and finally came out as an English major. I was a word person, no question. And I realized I would eventually need to *own* my own set of the *OED*. It would sit on my shelf. It would be my friend.

This is how a fetish develops. An enjoyable experience, repeated often, drifts from its original context and becomes replaced by an inanimate object. A student's quest for knowledge, or even just for a good grade, devolves into lust for the physical object housing that knowledge: the printed book. Sheaves of paper, bound in boards.

Not long after, the Book of the Month Club offered a free copy of the Compact Edition of the *OED*. You just signed up and promised to buy three more books within a year. Those two big volumes came in a box with a magnifying glass. You needed that glass, because the text had been reduced to one-quarter of the original size. Each line of type was thinner than a pencil lead. They chose a grade of paper so thin that you could kind of see through the pages.

I read about the peculiarly obsessive people, including James A.H. Murray, who brought the *OED* into being. (Obsessive, but not dangerous. That one-man publishing house Samuel Johnson famously defined *lexicographer* as "a harmless drudge.")

In Memoriam: William Safire

About that same time, a group of us twenty-somethings went to Europe for part of the summer. After seven weeks of getting along (more or less) in countries where most people did not speak English, it was a godsend to finally enjoy a few days in England. There we visited the intellectual nursery known as Oxford University, if just for one day. We saw the libraries and colleges and leaded glass windows where the *OED* and other cultural artifacts were conceived and born.

Several summers later, I found myself in Madison, Wisconsin, helping produce a dictionary. At the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, we student hourlies created citation slips. Each slip included one word, a quotation using the word, and a reference to the source. There were dozens of slips for any given word. The slips were eventually bundled and handed over to an editor, who would compose a definition.

Even in his "retirement," *DARE* founder Frederic G. Cassidy came in to work nearly every day. As a member of the American Dialect Society, he had argued decades ago for a uniquely American dictionary, reflecting regional language patterns and based on historical principles. His reward, and his punishment, was to lead the project.

That summer, the first volume (A–C) was at press and was scheduled for publication in the fall. Years of research and editing and chasing funds were about to produce the first concrete artifact. The staff were pumped. Morning coffee breaks transcended water-cooler chat. Cassidy was a storyteller, all the editors had traveled a lot, and nearly everyone had mastered some form of arcane knowledge.

There I learned that a dictionary, no matter how comprehensive, provides a snapshot. That's all it can do. Over time, language reinvents itself. About 600 years ago, a businessman/politician/poet named Geoffrey Chaucer began writing in a new bastard language called English. If you plop down a copy of his *Canterbury Tales* in front of any well-educated friend, you will see one perplexed person. That's where the *OED* comes in really handy.

Now look forward 600 years. If there are still humans, and if they still read, they will find Mary Higgins Clark unfathomable. They'll certainly need a set of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. ♦

Paul Baker is currently Senior University Relations Specialist at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. He will be the subject of a "Where Are They Now?" feature in a future issue of this Newsletter.

The staff of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, the *DARE* Board of Visitors, and the project's many admirers throughout the country honor the memory of our colleague and friend William Safire, who died on September 27, 2009. Bill introduced the readers of his *New York Times Magazine* column "On Language" to the *Dictionary*, which he called "the most exciting linguistic project going on in the United States." His frequent references to *DARE* and to its founding editor, Frederic G. Cassidy, were significant contributions to the success of this ongoing venture.

Bill also wrote political commentary for the *New York Times*, receiving the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1978. Over the course of his distinguished career, he worked as a senior White House speechwriter for President Richard Nixon, a radio and television producer, a U.S. Army correspondent, and as president of his own public relations firm. He also served as chairman of the Dana Foundation. We value his service on *DARE*'s Board of Visitors, and we celebrate his ability to play with language and to embrace the many wonders of American English. ♦



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

William Safire, Frederic Cassidy, and Senator S.I. Hayakawa at the 1986 "Hero Luncheon" given by the Library of Congress in honor of the publication of Volume I of DARE

DARE Newsletter

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