

# DARE Newsletter

Vol. 13, No. 4

Dictionary of American Regional English

Fall 2010

## Two word-lovers with some of their favorite books:

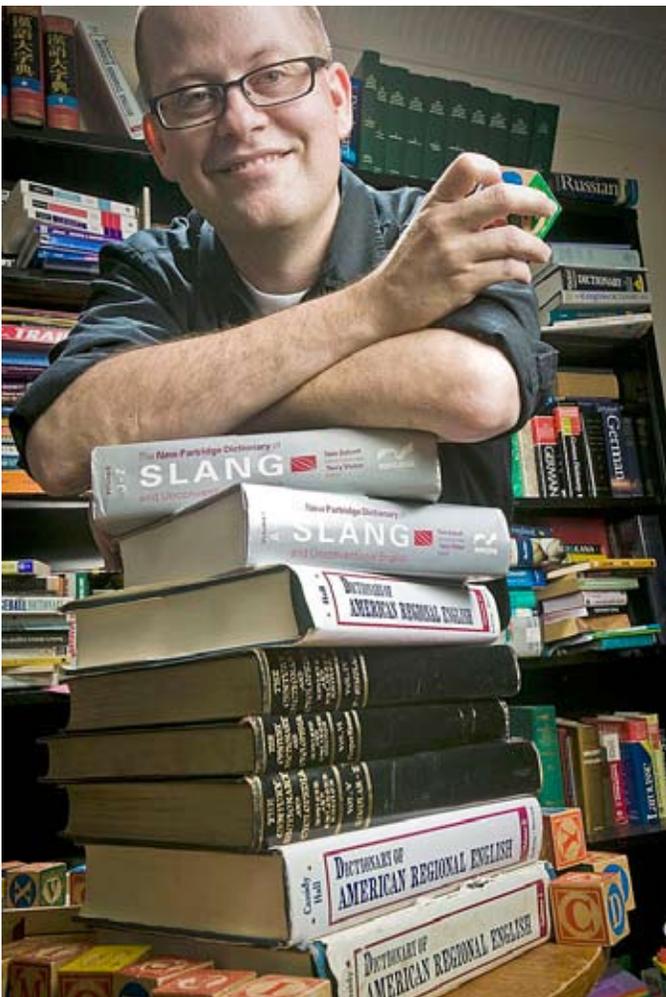
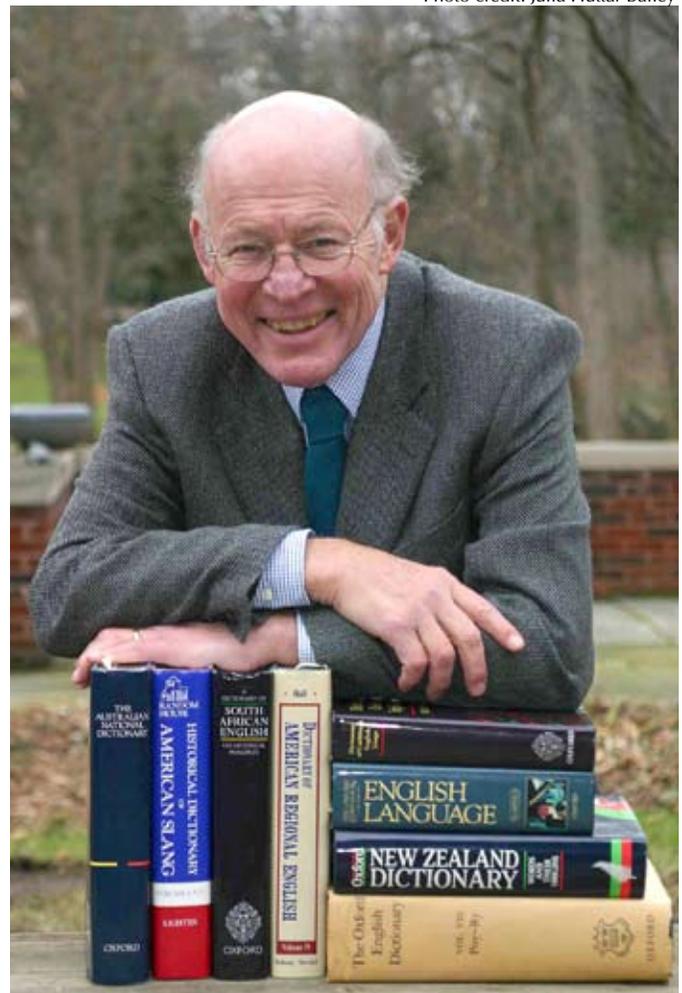


Photo credit: Jesse Winter

← Grant Barrett, co-host of the public radio program *A Way with Words*

Photo credit: Julia Huttar Bailey



Richard W. Bailey, Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature, the University of Michigan →

## **DARE in the News**

**Joan Houston Hall  
Chief Editor**

Last spring I received a welcome call from *Wall Street Journal* reporter Dale Buss. Back when he was a student here at the UW–Madison, Dale frequently walked by the DARE offices, wondering what this project was all about. On reading that Volume V was close to publication, he decided it was time to find out!

His article about DARE, which appeared in the June 12 issue of the *WSJ*, was in turn seen by a staff editor for *Newsweek*. Like most writers, Tony Dokoupil is fascinated by the variety in American English. He thought *Newsweek* readers would be also, so he asked me to write for the magazine's "My Turn" section.

Both articles are reprinted below for those DARE *Newsletter* readers who may not have seen them. I am delighted to share them with you, and I appreciate the willingness of both publications to allow me to do so.

As this *Newsletter* goes to press, we are very close to sending the text of Volume V to Harvard University Press for publication on its 2011 fall list! To ensure that we meet this goal, our energies are now firmly focused on the sometimes tedious but always essential end-of-volume details.

As we work toward that end, all of us at DARE send sincere good wishes for your holiday season! ♦

## **DARE to Be Finished—Maybe Next Year**

### **The Dictionary of American Regional English gets ready to close the book on its already 45-year-old project**

by Dale Buss

It's axiomatic that even on the East Coast long sandwiches go by a host of names: hero (especially New York City), grinder (chiefly in New England), hoagie (mainly in Pennsylvania and New Jersey) and submarine (everywhere). Only if you're an aficionado of the Dictionary of American Regional English are you likely to know that when kids still play hopscotch, they may call it "potsy" in Manhattan—but it's "sky blue" in Chicago.

And it's surprising how many different names Americans have for that strip of ground between the sidewalk and the street: "boulevard," "grass plot," "parkway" and "tree bank" are among them.

So after a child abductor in the '90s left a note demanding that ransom be deposited in a trash can "on the devil strip" at an intersection, a forensic linguist used this dictionary to help solve the crime—because the term was common only in a small part of Ohio.

For 45 years, DARE has been documenting America's geographically variant vocabularies. Despite the conforming effects of air travel, television and the Internet, neither mobility nor media seem to be able to erase regional patois.

"In speaking and writing and talking with strangers, we tend to use a more homogeneous vocabulary," said Joan Houston Hall, who has headed DARE for the past decade. "But in daily lives, those words vary. There's a whole panoply of words not found in normal dictionaries that we use without thinking."

These words are the stuff of DARE, which is supposed to be completed by next year. The first four volumes were published by Harvard University Press, in alphabetical order beginning in 1975. Now, a dozen surviving DARE researchers and editors working in a library building on the University of Wisconsin, Madison, campus are putting the finishing touches on the final volume, "Slab–Z."

That news would have pleased the project's founder, Frederic Cassidy, who died in 2000; the epitaph on his tombstone is "On to Z!" The linguist came up with the idea for DARE and got it funded by a U.S. Office of Education grant. In the manner of the Depression-era Federal Writers' Project to collect folklore from across America, DARE researchers descended on 1,002 locations across the U.S. Calling their subjects "informants," they conducted casual conversations with about 3,000 townspeople—often tape-recording them—as fodder for DARE word-parsing and pronunciation keys.

"I started a lot talking about fishing and wildlife with informants because that was a big interest of my own," recalled August Rubrecht, a DARE field worker for a year who went on to become a linguist at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. "I collected a lot of local names on word-slips that way."

The bulk of the field research was completed by 1970, but the near half-century required to compile DARE is exceeded in philological lore only by the 71 years it took to complete the Oxford English Dictionary. DARE's "newest" editor, Roland Berns, has been there for nearly 20 years. Putting the book together is the literary equivalent of constructing

a medieval cathedral or erecting one of the Great Pyramids. But funded by federal grants and such “soft” money donors along the way as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and thousands of individual check writers, the DARE crew has heeded the founder’s eternal exhortation.

Logophiles are thrilled. Writer Tom Wolfe once called DARE his “favorite reading.” It’s like digesting an endless William Safire “On Language” column. In fact, the late Safire was a huge DARE fan. Cassidy had contacted the former Nixon speechwriter and New York Times magazine regular. They had lunch in Washington, concluding with a discussion about who the “Bibb” in Bibb lettuce could have been—and became lifelong friends.

Food terms are plentiful; anatomy and medicine also generate immense differentiation in vocabulary. But Cassidy “often said that we found more words for drinking and fighting than anything else,” according to Ms. Hall.

The richness and variety of American language come through in a selection of terms destined for the final volume. In the South, for instance, to be “swimmy-headed” means you’re dizzy. An “upscuddle” is a noisy quarrel in Appalachia. “Wizzle,” in New England, means to wrinkle. In Texas, a “yo-yo” is a weed cutter. And a “zanjero” is a local official in charge of irrigation ditches in the Southwest.

There’s parochial joy in combing DARE for pieces of your personal heritage. For Wisconsin natives like me, they include “bubblor”—the largely local term for a public drinking fountain because Kohler, the Wisconsin-based sink and toilet manufacturer, came up with a device that had a “bubbling valve.” “Sheepshead” is a complex card game that only Wisconsinites seem to know how to play. And “kringle” is a rich, flat pastry filled with fruit preserves or other goodies and baked in an oval ring—of Danish origin but familiar mainly in southeastern Wisconsin.

Yet, even at the end, DARE will carry only about 60,000 entries, or barely 1,300 for each year of the project. “It’s almost like they interrogate words with the same thoroughness that science uses to ‘interrogate’ genes,” said Mark Johnson, a Milwaukee-based journalist who is writing a book on DARE.

Indeed, DARE has a dated quality, and in a way that is purposeful. It’s history, in large part; the project isn’t meant to serve as some sort of real-time reflection of the latest slang. Yet an accompanying weakness of DARE seems to be a paucity of new local terms stemming from the major waves

of immigration from Asia and Latin America that occurred after the original research for DARE was conducted.

Ms. Hall is gradually trying to convert DARE to a living document by moving it online. And there are still terms that she hasn’t heard. One came up recently, originally suggested by an Ohio University student. A “yard-ache,” the editor of DARE discovered, is an unruly child—at least in parts of Ohio. ♦

*Mr. Buss is an author and journalist based in Rochester Hills, Mich.*

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## Funding Update

Jon E. Sorenson  
Director of Development

I’ve just returned from another productive meeting with the *DARE* Board of Visitors. Its members are some of our most loyal advocates, generous with their time and money. Every spring and fall the Board gathers to get updates from Chief Editor Joan Hall, discuss fundraising, and help move the final volume “on to Z.” With publication of Volume V only a year away, this dedicated group of supporters, like many of you, is cheering Joan and her team on to the finish of this important phase of the project.

A good portion of the meeting was also spent discussing the exciting opportunity to bring all five volumes of *DARE* into the digital age with an interactive electronic version. Details are still being worked out, but the hope is that *DARE* will continue to be a vibrant resource, with electronic additions and updates provided regularly.

Thanks to all of you who have supported this important work, and advance thanks to those who will continue to support the incomparable *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

To make a year-end gift to *DARE* by check or credit card, please use the coupon that appears on page 6 of this *Newsletter*. To make a gift of appreciated stock, or if you have questions about other giving opportunities, please call me at (608) 262-7211 or e-mail me at my *new* address, <jon.sorenson@supportuw.org>. ♦

## Coming in Volume V

<i>so</i>	Used with <i>don't</i> (or other negative auxiliaries) to indicate agreement with a preceding positive statement (e.g., "I like cake." "So don't I!"). (Chiefly NEast)
<i>speed breaker</i>	A speed bump. (Sth, S Midl)
<i>spend</i>	To express (an opinion). (sAppalachians, Ozarks)
<i>spendy</i>	Expensive. (Chiefly Nth, esp NW)
<i>stinking Benjamin</i>	A trillium ( <i>Trillium erectum</i> ). (Chiefly NEng)
<i>stodge up</i>	To put together (a meal); to cobble (something) up, usu in an improvisatory way. (Esp NEng)
<i>stout</i>	A shock of corn or other grain. (Chiefly NY)
<i>straw, pine straw</i>	Pine needles, esp dry, fallen ones. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl)
<i>stubbleberry</i>	Deadly nightshade ( <i>Solanum nigrum</i> ). (Upper MW)
<i>studs</i>	A fit of stubborn opposition, balkiness—usu in phrr <i>take</i> (or <i>get, have</i> ) <i>the studs</i> . (Chiefly Sth, S Midl)
<i>teaberry</i>	A wintergreen, usu <i>Gaultheria procumbens</i> . (Chiefly C Atl)
<i>time about</i>	By turns, alternately. (Chiefly S Midl, esp sAppalachians)
<i>titrivate</i>	To fix up, adjust, manipulate. (Chiefly ME)
<i>tom fuller</i>	Hominy; a Choctaw dish made with hominy. (Chiefly OK)
<i>tom walkers</i>	Stilts. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl)
<i>tonic</i>	A carbonated soft drink. (Chiefly NEng, esp MA; also wMD)
<i>zaguan</i>	A vestibule; a porch, protected entry area. (Chiefly SW)
<i>zep</i>	A submarine sandwich. (PA, esp sePA)

## How to Speak American

by Joan Houston Hall

As a professional linguist and lifelong word lover, I always assumed I had a good handle on regional differences in the way people talk. But in 1975, when I arrived in Madison, Wis.—the seventh state I've called home—I discovered major holes in my lexicon. "Would you like some *bakery*?" a friend asked, referring, I soon learned, not to an actual pastry shop but to the pastries within. BRATS ON THE TERRACE, proclaimed a local poster, not in an effort to segregate unruly children but to invite people to eat bratwurst alfresco. I soon had a long list of new vocabulary words, including *bubbler* (water fountain), *kringle* (a kind of pastry), and *golden birthday*, which occurs the year a person's age and birth date align (when someone born on the 10th turns 10, for instance).

I've been working on similar lists ever since. As chief editor of the Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE), a massive effort to collect and record local differences in American English, I spend my days researching the countless examples of regional words and phrases and trying to track their origins. Launched in 1965 at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the project is based on thousands of interviews, newspapers, government records, novels, letters, and diaries.

When I joined the team as assistant editor, we were working on alphabetical volume one, A–C, which Harvard University Press published about a decade later. Three volumes on, we have picked up some nice compliments (Tom Wolfe called DARE his "favorite reading"; William Safire deemed it "absolutely remarkable") and notable users, including scholars, writers, physicians, lawyers, dialect coaches, and forensic linguists, one of whom pinpointed a kidnapper based on a regionalism (*devil strip*—Google it) used in his ransom note. Next year we're scheduled to publish the final installment (Slab–Z).

But even as we near the finish line, I encounter a common misperception: people seem to think that American English has become homogenized, making the dictionary a catalog of differences long since flattened out by media, business, and population shifts. There's a grain of truth to that. Certain regional terms have been weakened by commercial influences, like Subway's *sub* sandwich, which seems to be nibbling away at *hero*, *hoagie*, and *grinder*. It's also true that strangers tend to talk to each other in a somewhat homogeneous vocabulary, and that more Americans are moving

away from their linguistic homes as they relocate for school, work, or love.

But DARE's research shows that American English is as varied as ever. The language is diversified by immigration, of course, but also people's creative license and the resilient nature of local dialects. We have dozens of ways to refer to a remote place, for instance, including *the boonies*, *the sticks*, *the tules*, *the puckerbrush*, and *the willy-wags*. The proverbial village idiot, in such a place, might still be described as unfit to *carry guts to a bear* or *pour piss out of a boot*. If his condition is temporary, a Southerner might call him *swimmy-headed*, meaning dizzy. And if his home is dirty, a Northeasterner might call it *skeevy*, an adaptation of *schifare*, the Italian verb "to disgust."

As these examples suggest, the regionalisms that persist are often not those we learn from

books or teachers or newspapers; they are the words we use with friends and family, the phrases we've known forever and never questioned until someone "from away" remarked on them.

Still, it's the nature of language to change, and it's possible that many of DARE's entries will eventually be dislodged from daily use. When that happens, the forthcoming electronic version of DARE will amend the record. So we'll always have a guide for how to speak American. ♦

*Hall is the chief editor of the Dictionary of American Regional English (familarly known as DARE).*

(This article originally appeared in the August 9, 2010, issue of *Newsweek* and is reprinted by permission.)

## DARE Board at the Department of the Interior



Photo credit: George E. Hall

In November the DARE Board of Visitors met in Washington, D.C. While there, they took the Department of the Interior Museum Murals Tour, led by guide Diana Ziegler. The group viewed photographic murals by Ansel Adams and mural panels painted by artists including Maynard Dixon, Allan Houser, Gifford Beal, and John Stuart Curry—art that made the Main Interior Building a "symbol of a new day" during and after the Great Depression.



### Where Are They Now?

Scot LaFaive served as a *DARE* Project Assistant from 2005 to 2007 while earning his M.A. in Applied English Linguistics at UW–Madison. He spent many hours searching the Internet for possible *Dictionary* citations; as this interview with Beth Gardner shows, he remembers those days fondly (for the most part!).

**Q:** What originally brought you to *DARE*?

**A:** The high cost of a graduate education! I was looking around campus for some kind of assistantship so that I could save myself tuition expenses when I came across a *DARE* ad seeking a Project Assistant. As a linguaphile, I jumped at the opportunity and applied immediately. What better way to spend my time and defer tuition than by looking up words and citations? I interviewed with Luanne von Schneidemesser and Joan Houston Hall, and they sent me home with a citation look-up test. I don't remember which exact word I had to research (somewhere in the *sm-* area, I believe), but I must have done well, since I was soon hired.

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

**A:** I loved the language best. Learning new words and new meanings for old words was great. I also enjoyed sifting through old newspapers from the turn of the twentieth century, back when journalists were like storytellers.

**Q:** What were some of your most memorable assignments?

**A:** My most memorable assignment? *Snipe*. No question. I don't remember how many senses that one terrible word has (let's just call it a lot!), but I do remember spending days on end trying to sort through the citations to get just the right one for each sense. If I never see a snipe again, I will die happy. Unfortunately, considering how many birds around the country go by that name, I'm likely to see one very soon. . . .

**Q:** Tell us about your career since leaving the *Dictionary*.

**A:** After leaving UW–Madison and then Madison altogether, I began my (part-time) career as a freelance writer. Since 2008 I've done freelance work for an area newspaper, some local magazines, and one Web site. But these were always side projects, and it wasn't until just two months ago that I finally found a full-time position in my field. I am now happily employed at Globe University in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, as the resident writing instructor. I still write freelance on the side, but my days are

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spent trying to purge fragments and run-ons from the minds of our youth.

**Q:** Do you ever use *DARE* in your work?

**A:** I do wish I had the need for *DARE* in my work, but I don't. Still, I have been able to work *snollygoster*, one of my favorite "*DARE* words" from my time there, into a couple of lectures.

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

**A:** I write in my free time, and I am currently in the process of submitting a proposal for a comic book miniseries to publishers. I also have a fondness for horrendously awful B movies of all eras, mostly of the sci-fi and horror genres, which has kept me in close contact with *DARE* Editor Roland Berns, as we both share the same affliction of bad taste. ♦

### In Memoriam: James J. Kilpatrick

The staff of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* and its Board of Visitors honor the memory of our word-maven colleague and Board member, syndicated columnist James J. Kilpatrick, who died on August 15, 2010. From his first introduction to *DARE*, Jack celebrated the rich variety and quirky creativity of American English. We regret that he did not live to see our letter Z. ♦



Photo credit: Universal Uclick

### Snapshots and Schnibbles

In March, *DARE* Editor Luanne von Schneidemesser gave a talk on "German Words in American English" to the German Interest Group in Janesville, Wisconsin. She later corresponded with Mary Bohn about some words Mary had mentioned during the question-and-answer session following the presentation. Mary's great-grandparents emigrated to Wisconsin, and both of her parents (born in 1905) spoke only German until they started school. Of the word *schnibble* (a scrap or small piece; see Volume IV of *DARE*), Mary wrote: "My three-year-old grandson was cutting paper with a scissors. I said, 'You are certainly making lots of schnibbles out of that paper.'" She also sent us a photo of Casey making schnibbles. Thanks, Mary! ♦



### *DARE* on Twitter

Thanks to Erin McKean, a member of *DARE*'s Board of Visitors, *DARE* is tweeting a word a day to our followers on Twitter. If you'd like to receive these abbreviated entries from the first four volumes of the *Dictionary*, sign up at <<http://twitter.com/darewords>>. Recent offerings include *julebukk*, *izzard*, *goozle*, and *elbedritsch*. ♦

**DARE Newsletter**

*Postal Return Address:*

Dictionary of American Regional English  
University of Wisconsin–Madison  
6125 Helen C. White Hall  
600 N. Park St., Madison WI 53706

(608) 263-3810  
<http://www.dare.wisc.edu>

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