

DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

Fall 2012

Words of America: A Field Guide (Part 1)

Michael Adams

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The American story is told in American words, the words in journalism, novels, poems, films, diaries, letters, everyday conversation, tweets, and the back-porch tales one generation tells another. Each American word has its own story too, and America has great storytelling dictionaries, historical dictionaries filled with chronologically organized quotations to illustrate the forms, meanings, and uses of American speech. These dictionaries are informative and readable: Anyone with the time and interest can sit for hours in an easy chair and browse American culture word by word. One such dictionary, the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, covers regional and local speech for the whole United States: It is the treasure-house for the all-American word hoard.

According to this dictionary, a Wisconsin native may know a flower called a *maybell*, and so may a Michigander, but if they talk flora over a drink in Chicago, it may take awhile before they realize they are, in a sense, speaking different tongues. In Wisconsin, *maybell* means ‘lily of the valley’; in Michigan, it means ‘marsh marigold.’ The dictionary knows this because fieldworkers surveyed Wisconsin speakers with the question, “What are other names in your locality for the lily of the valley?” and Michigan speakers with the question, “What do you call the bright yellow flowers that bloom in clusters in marshes in early springtime?”



photo: Luanne von Schneidmesser

Michael Adams in the DARE offices

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Maybell was an occasional answer, a word some of us share that nonetheless underscores differences in how we know and name the world around us.

In the Appalachians, this dictionary tells us, *dew poison* means “any of various rashes or infections of the feet or legs, believed to be caused by dew; the presumed agent causing such rashes or infections.” Most of the dictionary’s evidence is from Kentucky, but the item was collected in eastern North Carolina, South Carolina, and Arkansas as well. *Dew poison*, as a quotation in the entry explains, is “ringworm on the feet. Some cases may be hookworm.” A physician from another region might be grateful for the explanation: When patients say *dew poison*, they are probably talking about what most of us call ‘athlete’s foot.’ The entry also delves into the underlying folk conception: “ ‘Dew pizen,’ presumably the poison of some weed, which, dissolved in dew, enters the blood through a scratch or abrasion,” which explains why, in the old folk song, a bachelor would keep his lover from the foggy, foggy dew.

Touring the *Dictionary of American Regional English* is a road trip of the mind from sea to shining sea. *Picayune*, from French *picaillon*, meaning ‘old copper coin,’ originally referred to a coin of little value in Louisiana, especially New Orleans. The word is first recorded in 1804. “Near the green,” the dictionary quotes from 1819, “is a horizontal fandango of four wooden horses. . . . Upon these, children canter and circulate for exercise, by paying a half-bit, here called a *pécune*.” *Picayune* “belonged” to Louisiana throughout the nineteenth century, but by now, of course, *picayune* is a more common adjective meaning ‘of little or no account or value.’ It has spread across the country, and the *Dictionary of American Regional English* locates it in Indiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Maryland, Virginia, New York, and Maine at various points in the twentieth century. Words start out local and, *e pluribus unum*, sometimes they go national.

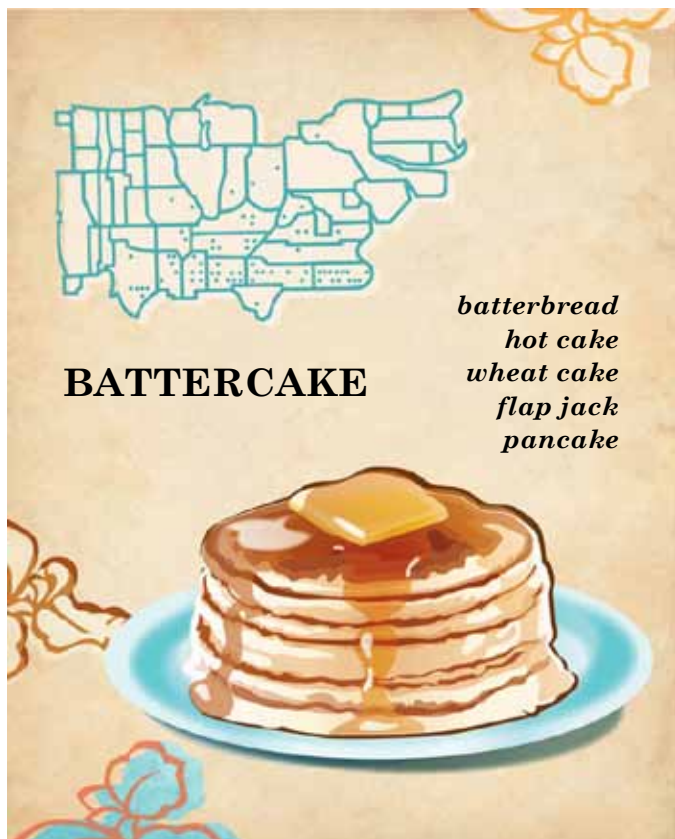
In March 2012, the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press will publish the fifth and final volume of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, familiarly known as *DARE*, providing an excellent opportunity to reflect on its contributions to dialect research and lexicography. It does not go too far to say that *DARE* has refined and renewed both disciplines. Its approach has been unusually adventurous. It speaks with authority about American regional speech and has also captured the popular imagination. It is a peerless resource for scholars, but at the same time delivers accurate information about regional vocabulary to laypersons who, until

DARE, could not count on access to it. In the twentieth century, *DARE* was so far ahead of practices in both dialectology and lexicography that it sometimes seemed futuristic.

The American Dialect Society (ADS) was founded at Harvard University in 1889 by many of the same scholars responsible for the Modern Language Association (1883) and the American Folklore Society (1888), led by Charles Hall Grandgent, an instructor at Harvard (later a distinguished professor) whose name is too good to forget. In 1912, Calvin Thomas, then president of ADS, wrote that the society “was organized for the purpose of making a careful study of the characteristics of the spoken English of the United States and Canada, and incidentally of the other non-aboriginal dialects spoken in the same countries.” But as Louise Pound—professor of English at the University of Nebraska, one of the original editors of the journal *American Speech*, later president of ADS, and even later president of the Modern Language Association—surmised in 1952, there was a more specific object. “Running through the Proceedings of the Society from the beginning and throughout the whole of its existence, as a sort of theme song, is its yearning to publish a dialect dictionary.”

After several decades of mixed and largely undirected activity, a plan and method to make such a dictionary were devised by Frederic G. Cassidy, a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, who was appointed editor of the society’s dictionary in 1962. *DARE* is the result of Cassidy’s ingenuity and will to succeed where preceding editors had foundered. “The acronym ‘*DARE*’ was no accident,” Cassidy insisted. “It expressed the hope that the long time goal of the Society would at last be reached. We toasted the new title and the project on the University’s Union Terrace in good Wisconsin beer.” A formidable scholar, Cassidy was also an irrepressible word-history raconteur: He was always picking up a word someone had used and telling an interesting story about it. *DARE* fused the integrity of his scholarship with the pleasure he took in words, a pleasure he never failed to communicate, whatever the audience.

Cassidy saw the first three volumes of *DARE* into print: Volume I (introduction and A–C) in 1985; Volume II (D–H) in 1991; and Volume III (I–O) in 1996. After he died on June 14, 2000, Joan Houston Hall, named on the title pages of Volumes II and III as associate editor, took charge of the project, publishing Volume IV (P–Sk) in 2002. But even in Cassidy’s later years, she had led the daily work of making the dictionary. Less flamboyant



According to DARE, battercake was found chiefly in the South and South Midland. The term was offered in response to a question about local names for pancakes. DARE maps visualize the United States as a single undivided land mass with individual states reshaped to reflect the relative size of their populations. Map source: Dictionary of American Regional English: Volume I—A–C, edited by Frederic G. Cassidy, p. 169, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, copyright © 1985 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

than Cassidy, she shares his commitment to the highest scholarly standard and has demonstrated the patience and sometimes steely determination necessary to keep a multivolume dictionary project funded and on schedule.

Calvin Thomas observed the central role of dialect or, more broadly, variation in language structure and history: “Most persons are prone to look upon these variations simply as the errors of the ignorant—‘bad grammar’ to be avoided, ‘bad usage’ to be suppressed. The truth is, however, that these variations represent one of the most important groups or classes of facts on which the scientific study of language rests.” The significance of dialects was established long before the founding of ADS, by the New Philology of Rasmus Rask, Franz Bopp, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and others in the early nineteenth century. That movement initiated comparative historical linguistics, which articulated relations among extensive language families beginning with Indo-European. William

Dwight Whitney, one of the founders of ADS, was America’s preeminent representative of this discipline at the time.

Dialectology thus developed alongside historical comparative philology and historical lexicography. In 1876, Georg Wenker (1852–1911) sent a set of forty passages of literary German to some 50,000 schoolteachers and asked them to translate them into the local dialect. Nearly all the teachers responded (44,251), and Wenker plotted some of the data onto maps in *Sprachatlas des Deutschen Reichs*, the first linguistic atlas, published in 1881. This pioneering research on German dialects was continued by Wenker’s assistant, Ferdinand Wrede (1863–1934), who saw the first volume of the *Deutscher Sprachatlas* into print in 1926.

Wenker’s work led by example to Jules Gilliéron and Edmond Edmont’s *Atlas Linguistique de la France*, published in nine volumes from 1902 to 1910. Gilliéron and Edmont elicited their data by a novel and influential method: They constructed a questionnaire of nearly 2,000 items that Edmont, an avid bicyclist, administered to bemused speakers around France. Lexicographical interest in dialect grew simultaneously and alongside that of linguistic geography, two branches from the same New Philological root. The English Dialect Society was founded in 1873. The eighty or so glossaries of local words published under its aegis were a central component of Joseph Wright’s six-volume *English Dialect Dictionary*, published in parts between 1898 and 1905.

The first North American dialect survey was conducted in 1896, through the mail, by George Hempl, then a professor at the University of Michigan. His questionnaire included about seventy-seven items, the most famous of which provides evidence for the *greasy/greazy* line between northern and southern speech. According to Richard W. Bailey, himself a dialectologist and lexicographer, “Hempl’s materials provide a historical snapshot of American speechways, and it is quite a good photograph when we judge its results against the findings of more thorough and ‘scientific’ research conducted by his successors.” Later dialectologists may have criticized his work as crude, but “Hempl set the agenda for future work. His idea was a simple one: respectful attention to the English language.”

Cassidy knew Hempl’s work, of course, but Hans Kurath and the project he led, the ambitious Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada, was the more immediate and significant influence on *DARE*. The atlas project was planned in meetings of the Present-Day English section

of the Modern Language Association throughout the 1920s, prompted by recent publication of the French and German atlases. New England was chosen as the region to pilot the program, and fieldwork on the basis of a questionnaire began there in 1931. *The Handbook of the Linguistic Geography of New England* by Kurath and his colleagues appeared in 1939, followed by three volumes of the *Linguistic Atlas of New England (LANE)*.

The *LANE* questionnaire included 750 questions, and fieldworkers asked all of them of 416 informants, representing 213 New England communities, eliciting 312,000 bits of dialectal information. Informants were asked a question that would elicit words like *wasp*, *hornet*, or *yellow-jacket*; by locating responses on a map, one could see where the *wasp* users lived versus the *hornet* users, etc. The maps were marked with isoglosses, which are lines supposedly indicating a boundary of usage brought into relief by the plotted bits of data. By bundling isoglosses, it was supposed, one could reliably identify dialect areas and confirm an inventory of terms, pronunciations, and other features (double negation, for instance) associated with one dialect rather than another.

Cassidy intended to produce a historical dictionary of American regional English, but he also wanted to represent the current state of regional usage. He wrote, "The aim was to determine which words and phrases now used by speakers of American English were limited geographically to broad or narrow regions, to smaller localities, and even to single communities or groups of speakers." Eventually, Cassidy and his colleagues administered a survey of 1,847 questions (more than twice as many as in the *LANE* questionnaire) to informants from 1,002 communities across the country. Devising and conducting such a survey is a formidable task, and Cassidy, with the help of his student Audrey Duckert, wisely ran a pilot program, the Wisconsin English Language Survey (WELS). Like its predecessors, WELS depended on a questionnaire; Cassidy and Duckert had recourse to the mail, perhaps because, for most of the year, Wisconsin cannot be comfortably traversed by bicycle. The WELS material—some 90,000 questionnaire responses, including those identifying *maybell* as a synonym for *lily of the valley*—was ultimately absorbed into the *DARE* database.

Afterward, Cassidy and Duckert completely rewrote the questionnaire for *DARE*. But, as Cassidy later reflected, "What questions would it contain and on what principle should they be chosen?" Approximately 40,000 items that had already been

collected and published in *Dialect Notes* and the *Publication of the American Dialect Society* were analyzed. Cassidy and Duckert then abstracted forty-one categories, covering words for concrete items and activities of everyday life as well as words reflecting attitudes, feelings, and opinions. They also devised open-ended questions to elicit words and phrases relevant to the categories: "What are names for a sloping outside cellar door?" "What do you call the kind of owl that makes a shrill, trembling cry?" "What games do children play around here, in which they form a ring, and either sing or recite a rhyme?" "What are some joking or uncomplimentary names for lawyers?" and 1,843 others.

The open-endedness is an important innovation in dialect research. In previous efforts, salient features were assumed by the questions. As Cassidy put it in 1973, "the Atlas was set up to determine the geographical distribution of a series of alternate terms *already known to vary*" (emphasis mine). The editors of *LANE* knew that people would use either *bucket* or *pail* and that an isogloss would depend on the distribution of that choice. Kurath was an arch-empiricist, but *DARE*'s method, which collected material hitherto unknown as dialectal evidence, was yet more empirically "pure."

With that open-ended questionnaire, designed to elicit the details of regional speech throughout America, eighty fieldworkers, mostly graduate students, hit the road in 1965. "The first few," Cassidy reflected, "were sent out in campers that we called 'Word Wagons,' though one classically inclined colleague dubbed them 'Logomobiles.' But these proved too comfortable; production was slow; we had to go to a 'piece-work' system, paying a fixed sum for each questionnaire satisfactorily completed." By 1970, the questionnaires were collected and it was time for editing to begin; one basis for each entry of the dictionary was the mass of 2,500,000 questionnaire responses collected in the field. ♦

Michael Adams is associate professor of English at Indiana University in Bloomington and author of, most recently, Slang: The People's Poetry (Oxford, 2009) and, with Anne Curzan, the third edition of How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction (Pearson Longman, 2009). He is currently editor of the quarterly journal American Speech.

NEH has been supporting the Dictionary of American Regional English since 1976, when the project was awarded a \$567,684 grant. Since July 2001, DARE has received six grants, totaling \$3.45 million, in support of volumes four and five.

Volume VI Preview

We are excited to announce that Volume VI of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* will be on bookstore shelves in mid- to late December, with an official publication date of January 2013! You can pre-order your copy using the coupon on page 8 of this newsletter; it offers a 20% discount on any volume of *DARE*, as well as free shipping.

In addition to the complete Index by Region, Usage, and Etymology to *DARE*, the full text of the *DARE* Questionnaire, and sections of the *Data Summary* (responses to the *DARE* Questionnaire), Volume VI contains contrastive maps, both geographic and social. By kind permission of Harvard University Press, we present three examples of social maps to whet your appetite for the forthcoming volume. (Visit < <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/dare/> > for more about this as well as earlier volumes.)

The Volume I entry for **baker's bread** labels that headword "*old-fash[ioned]*." This map, showing the age group as well as the geographic location of each *DARE* Informant who used the word, provides a visual representation of the social label.

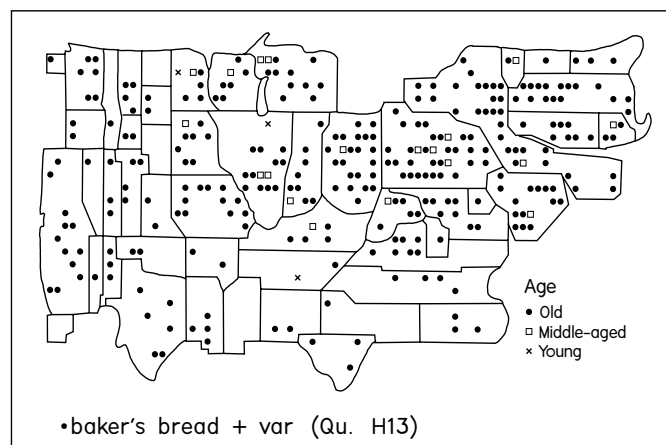
The entry for **icky** in Volume III characterizes the word's usage as "*esp[ecially] freq[uent] . . . among women*." This map shows not only the geographic distribution of the word, but the sex of the *DARE* Informants who used it—as you can see, most of them were female.

The map for the Volume III entry **lunch** n 1 uses distinct symbols to distinguish *DARE* Informants by community type, demonstrating that the word was used chiefly by speakers in small cities, villages, or rural areas, rather than in large cities or urban areas. ♦

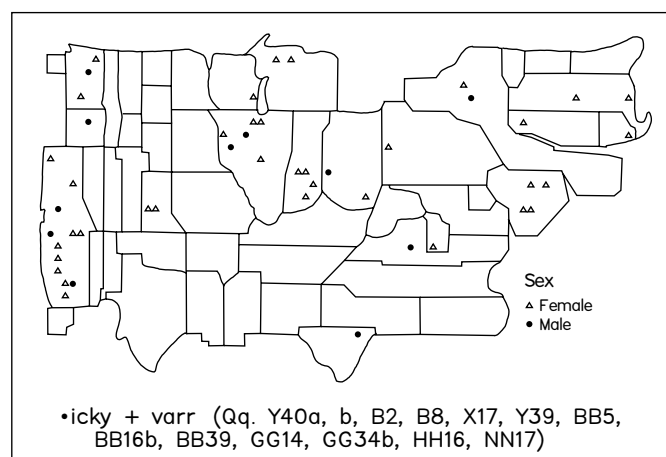
“As a journalist and humorist who focuses on language, I find *DARE* to be one of a handful of indispensable sources in my work. There is nothing else like it, and anyone who cares about American English needs to be aware of the wonders found in its pages. *DARE* is a lexical and historical treasure. If I knew a stronger word than ‘treasure,’ I’d use it.”

Mark Peters
Empire State College, State University of New York
Language columnist for *Babble* (<www.babble.com>)

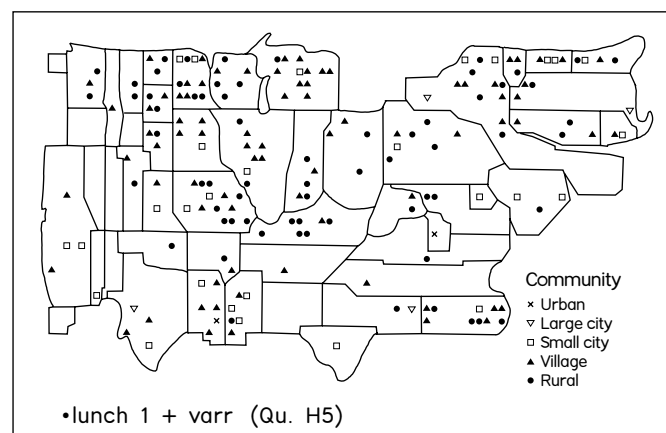
baker's bread [Bread that is not made at home]



icky [Sticky; unpleasant]



lunch [A snack]



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Staff Member Profile

In this continuing series, Beth Gardner interviews Project Assistant Trini Stickle, who is working on multiple projects involving DARE audio recordings while pursuing a Ph.D. in English Language and Linguistics at UW–Madison.

Q: How did you first become aware of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*?

A: I've been wandering the halls of Helen C. White since spring semester of 2006, when I began to take classes as a special student. I would read the information posted on the sixth floor about the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. I learned more about the making of the *Dictionary* and its recordings of people in each state when a fellow M.A. student, Alyssa Severn, began working for *DARE* in 2008.

Q: What are your primary job responsibilities at *DARE*?

A: One of the great things about working at *DARE* is that I am able to do a lot of different and interesting tasks. I primarily work with audio and text materials that are being posted on the American Languages Online (ALO) website (<<http://csumc.wisc.edu/AmericanLanguages/>>). When completed, this will allow the public to listen to short excerpts of the *DARE* recordings that are representative of the dialects spoken around each state and across the U.S. For the excerpts chosen, I review or create transcripts of the audio text, and I write introductions that accompany the audio clips on the ALO site.

Q: How does your work at *DARE* relate to your research interests?

A: My primary area of interest is linguistic and interactional competency throughout the lifespan, particularly changes that occur due to aging or age-related morbidities. Using naturally occurring talk, I use conversation analysis and interactional linguistics to document stasis and decrement of various competencies (e.g., syntactic, articulatory, interactional, pragmatic) in the talk by and with participants whose epistemic identity may be in jeopardy due to normal senescence or various dementias.

My work at *DARE* intersects with my interest in the language use of older persons in two significant and related ways. First, many of the Informants who were chosen to talk with *DARE* Fieldworkers in the 1960s were older persons. So, I am able to get a better understanding of the variety of speech patterns through their talk and differences due to variations in dialects. I am also able to listen for the ways that the younger Fieldworkers talk to older persons—accommodations that are meant to facilitate conversation, such as slowing down one's talk, using repetition, or rephrasing, as compared with those same features in talk directed at younger Informants. Secondly, working at *DARE* (and, specifically, from talks with Joan Hall), I have become aware of potential problems of dialectal differences and the accuracy of diagnostic tests for dementia. Of particular interest are picture naming tasks. The variety of names for common objects such as animals, tools, plants, or vegetables is evidenced in the volumes of *DARE*. Comparing the regional terms to the standardized "correct" ones provided in the manuals for these tests could highlight diagnostic problems. I can imagine inaccuracies in evaluating someone like my own mother, who grew up in rural Mississippi. If she were asked to identify a grocery bag, she might respond by saying "poke," which for most people is not a noun but a verb. Dialectal issues could also cause evaluation problems for syntactic patterns and phonetic articulation, especially for older persons who have left their regional homes to be with family at this point in their lives.

Q: What is the most enjoyable aspect of your work at *DARE*?

A: I find the most enjoyable part of my job is that every day I get to hear the voices of individuals; I hear the stories of their families and community. I am not just reading about them or reading the text of what they said, but I actually get to hear their words, laughter, sighs. I feel privileged to lis-

ten to them. This gives me a very real connection to the people who so kindly sat and talked with the Fieldworkers of *DARE* during the 1960s.

Q: Have you encountered any *DARE* tapes that you've found especially memorable?

A: Every night I come home with great stories swirling around in my head. I'm constantly retelling them to my family. While I enjoy the narratives about towns, communities, and family life, I am most drawn to the people who tell about some skill or trade. Through their telling, they teach me how to do things. These lessons remind me of spending time with my grandfather, who taught me how to do so many tasks on our farm. Listening to the *DARE* files, I have "learned" how to tend bees, fox hunt, even make a whiskey still. While I may never do most of these things, I feel that at points in my life, I will use some of the knowledge I've gleaned from listening to the recordings.

Q: When you have a rare moment of spare time away from your studies and your work, what are your interests?

A: Right now, life is pretty full with my work and research. I like to take breaks to create something—which usually means I bake or cook. I find the physical act of making something allows my brain to think about the things I am reading about without conscious direction. When I sit back down to work, I feel I have a little more clarity. I also volunteer at the Middleton Senior Center, helping seniors learn how to use various computer programs and other forms of technology. And I try to spend time just talking with family, friends, and people in my neighborhood. I just hope I spend as much time listening to them! ♦

Funding Update

Jon E. Sorenson
Director of Development

2012 was a great year for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. We celebrated the completion of Volume V with a shindy, got all of the materials for Volume VI to Harvard University Press, and are working toward launching the digital edition of *DARE* in late 2013.

In addition to offering greatly expanded search options, the digital version will link *DARE* Tape quotes to audio files, enabling users to hear the voices of the original *DARE* Informants.

Even after "digital *DARE*" is released, our determined staff will not be resting on its laurels. A dictionary is a living document. Updating and adding

entries, making plans for new fieldwork, and investigating the ever-growing wealth of resources available through online databases, libraries, and archives will require ongoing staff time and attention.

Your support of *DARE* has been consistent and generous and brought us to this important milestone. The investment made by all who have contributed time and money to the project over the years is paying off in so many ways, but continuing support is necessary to keep this investment sound.

Why not consider ordering copies of Volumes V and VI of *DARE* (note the discount coupon on page 8) for people on your holiday gift list? I hope you will also consider a year-end gift to a project that continues to be most worthy of your philanthropy. Please use the coupon below to make a tax-deductible donation by check or credit card. If you would like to discuss gifts of property or appreciated securities, or if you are thinking of including *DARE* in your estate plans, please give me a call at (608) 262-7211 or e-mail me at <jon.sorenson@supportuw.org>. Thank you for bringing us to Z, and thank you for helping us go beyond. ♦

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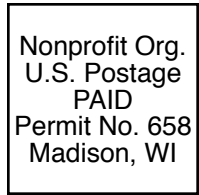
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