

# DARE Newsletter

Vol. 6, No. 1

Dictionary of American Regional English

Winter 2003

## A Scientific Portrait

Roland L. Berns  
Science Editor

When I tell people that I earn my living writing science entries for *DARE*, I'm never quite sure what they think I do. Maybe they think my work is as dead as those regrettable frogs in high school biology. That's not what it feels like to me. Most of what I do here feels very much alive—in fact, life is at its center. Natural science entries in *DARE* deal with folk and regional names for our birds, insects, plants, mammals, reptiles, and fish. By way of those names, *DARE* touches on the remarkable ways of the living world around us. But most of all, *DARE* has to do with the people who did the naming. Their words often reveal as much about them as about the things they named.

One of the first things you notice when you look at regional names for plants and animals is how we tend to put a human spin on things. There is a shore bird, the American avocet, which is also known as *bluestocking* from the color of its legs and feet. But it has a more telling name: "From its perpetual clamour and flippancy of tongue, [it] is called by the inhabitants of Cape May, the Lawyer."<sup>1</sup> *DARE* in fact has seven *lawyers*, two more that fly and four that swim. The other birds (the black-necked stilt and the double-crested cormorant) are noted either for their noise or the length of their bills. The fish (the burbot, the bowfin, the gray snapper, and the schoolmaster) tend to be cunning and hard to pin down:

"That . . . is a species of ling; we call it in these parts a lawyer." "A lawyer!" said I;

*Continued on page 2*

1. Wilson, *American Ornithology* 7 (1813 [1824]), 132.

## Funding Update

David Simon  
Director of Development

IV. V. There does not seem to be much difference between these two Roman numerals. However, there is a world of difference between them in regard to the *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

Volume IV of *DARE* was published in December 2002. As many of you know, it included the letters P through Sk. Volume IV is currently available in most good bookstores (and from a number of Web sites, including amazon.com and buy.com). You can also use the coupon on page 8 of this newsletter to order it directly from our publisher, Harvard University Press.

It is thrilling to read the many positive reviews and comments about the latest volume of *DARE*. While working on Volume IV, we were excited to be extending the *Dictionary's* reach into the latter portion of the alphabet—to Sk.

Now it is a different experience. The *DARE* staff is hard at work on Volume V (Sl–Z). When it is finished, Professor Frederic G. Cassidy's dream will have been realized.

Our 2002 donor list is printed on page 5 of this newsletter. I want to extend a huge "thank you" to each and every person on that list for helping us complete Volume IV. That was a *major* accomplishment. It was the result of a true team effort, as hundreds of people came together in support of *DARE*. Your generosity this past year has enabled us to be sure that bookshelves across the country will now hold four printed volumes of *DARE*. Thousands of people can now open and enjoy Volume IV of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

*Continued on page 4*

“why, pray?” “I don’t know, . . . unless it’s because he ain’t of much use, and is the slipriest [sic] fish that swims.”<sup>2</sup>

People name only the things they notice, so it isn’t surprising that their admiration finds its way into regional names. Of course, there are all kinds of admiration. Among the names for bitterns and herons are *shit-across-the-creek* (“It was said that if the bird ate a frog on one side of a creek and flew, it would shit it out before reaching the other side.”), *shit-a-quart*, and *shit-a-rod*.<sup>3</sup> “It is evident,” the naturalist Waldo McAtee remarked, “that the popular mind has been impressed with both linear and volumetric aspects of heron shitting.”<sup>4</sup>

Other names in *DARE* are windows into the way we think, the way the “popular mind” makes connections. Dragonflies and snakes are found together in swampy places, and some interesting beliefs have grown up around this fact. In the South and Midland, a prevalent name for the dragonfly is *snake doctor*: “The two bumps sometimes seen on the snake-doctor, just behind his wings, are called his saddle-bags, and in them he is reputed to carry medicine for the snakes.”<sup>5</sup> It must be strong medicine: coming upon a mortally wounded snake,

a beautiful insect—the “snake doctor”—alights on the head of the still squirming serpent. It gently and soothingly raises and lowers its transparent wings, accompanying this action by a peculiar movement of the head. In the course of a few minutes, the stump-tail [moccasin] shows signs of life . . . and soon he squirms to the edge of the water and disappears. . . . Remember this: *Unless you cut off a snake’s head, a “snake doctor” can bring it back to life.*<sup>6</sup>

A similar kind of association is behind a salamander’s being called a *spring keeper*. Because salaman-

ders are found in clean-running springs, it was decided that one causes the other. In his *Virginia Folk-Speech* (1912), Green records the belief that the salamander keeps the water flowing and good, and that “if you kill the spring-keeper the spring runs dry” (p. 410).

But one hardly need invent strange tales when the reality is so rich. One of the pleasures of researching science entries is simply learning what goes on. The harmless hognose snake is also called *spreading adder* or *blowing viper*. If threatened, it hisses violently and spreads out its neck like a cobra. If an aggressor still advances, plan B is to roll over (with its tongue out) and play dead. Plan C is just more of plan B: if a curious enemy should turn the snake over, the hognose simply flips over again to show how dead it is. In a more lively vein, the *spinner shark* gets its name from a peculiar feeding behavior: it swims rapidly upward through a school of fish, snapping its mouth open and shut while spinning. It breaks the surface

jumping or shooting up from the water nearly vertically, falling back with a spectacular splash, and in so doing making about four complete revolutions on its axis. In spring the spinners are quite common along the east coast of Florida and it is sometimes possible to see fifty in the air at one time.<sup>7</sup>

And then there are the *roller birds*:

In the vicinity of Dothan, Alabama, bluejays are often called ‘roller birds,’ because when the chinaberries are ripe, they sit in the trees and gorge themselves on chinaberries until they grow drunk. Then they tumble out of the trees and roll on the ground, and the cats creep out and eat them as they lie there.<sup>8</sup>

Since eating (or being eaten) is one of the most practical ways we relate to the natural world, what

2. Hammond, *Wild Northern Scenes* (1857), 45.

3. *Shitquick*, another name for the great blue heron, found an extended application at Lake Okechobee, Florida: “As the badge worn by wardens of the National Audubon Society bore the figure of a heron, local citizens dubbed the organization the Shitquick Society.” (McAtee, *Nomina Abiteria* [1945], 26.)

4. *Ibid.*, 25. In a similar vein, the great blue heron is admired for its strong-flavored flesh, and in North Carolina bears the name *forty-gallons-of-soup*.

5. Shands, *Mississippi Speech* (1893), 58.

6. Texas Folklore Society, *Publication 5* (1926), 8.

7. LaMonte, *North American Game Fishes* (1946), 10.

8. Rayford, *Whistlin’ Woman* (1956), 229. This lesson in temperance shows only one of the ways in which writing science entries is morally improving. Another is in having one’s categories stretched, so that one develops a certain Zen-like calm in the face of inconsistency. Take for instance the fact that the *red oak* (*Quercus rubra*) is also *black oak*, *gray oak*, *yellow oak*, and, just for good measure, *leopard oak* too. This broadens one’s understanding of *red*. The *Texas oak* (*Q. texana*) also goes by *red*, *spotted*, *striped*, and *yellow-butt*, but what this does for one’s concept of Texas is perhaps less clear.

to eat and what not to is a frequent topic in the science entries. Something that came to me cumulatively was the impression that at least half of all plants are emetic or purgative (or both), and that many of these produce “powerful,” “drastic,” “violent,” or “explosive” effects. For our knowledge of these matters we can only thank our ancestors. To judge from some of the common names—*Indian cherry*, *Indian hippo*, *Indian physic*, *Indian tea*—a number of these were gifts to the White man.

Not all questions of edibility have black-and-white answers. In the case of mushrooms, one man’s omelet may be another man’s poison:

The species known as False Morel, though considered edible by some authorities, has caused the death of many eaters.<sup>9</sup>

When you consider the large number of people who eat false morels, the incidence of poisoning is rather low.<sup>10</sup>

Scientists have discovered that the Conifer False Morel develops a compound similar to one used in the manufacture of rocket fuel.<sup>11</sup>

Although generally considered poisonous in North America, [the milky cap] is sold commercially in Finland.<sup>12</sup>

We try to represent all points of view.

Remarks about fish also offer a spectrum of opinions. At one sense of *sheepshead* (or *sheephead*) there were 10 *DARE* responses at the question about freshwater fish that are good to eat. But 14 Informants from the same area offered the same response for freshwater fish that are *not* good to eat. Somewhere in between were the Informant from Michigan who noted that sheephead are used in cat food, and the Minnesota Informant who remarked that Iowa people eat them.

Of course there are sometimes inconsistencies between what others are said to eat and what *they* say they eat. A (White) *DARE* Informant from Louisiana remarked about the gizzard shad that “Some people eat ‘em, mostly ‘mongst colored

people. . . . It’s a fine food, I mean for other fish . . . any kind of catfish’ll eat ‘em.” In Pederson’s *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* (1986), a (White) Georgia informant says that shad are “undesirable fish” which he “gave to colored people.” A (Black) *LAGS* informant from Mississippi says of this bounty that gizzard shad are “not fit to eat, hardly.”

As a mirror of America, *DARE* doesn’t always show us a pretty picture, and this is as true of the natural science entries as of the general entries. Even in the names of our plants and animals we see the record of our divisions: *nigger baby* (three of them—two plants and a fish), *nigger bass*, *niggerbelly* (a catfish), and *nigger boy* (a limpkin) take us only through *b. Niggerhead* records thirteen plants, one bird, and assorted clams—in addition to nine other senses.

Nor have we treated our fellow creatures better than ourselves. In some entries the earliest quotations offer accounts of fantastic abundance: birds gathering in such numbers that they break the limbs off trees, fish swarming so thickly that one might walk across their backs. And the last quotations remark on how many more there used to be. Or that there aren’t any more. No Carolina parakeet, no ivory-billed woodpecker, no emerald trout.

Sometimes, though, in a wonderful exception, *DARE* records a restoration. “Nearly exterminated” in Louisiana in 1899, the snowy egret came under the protection of the Audubon Society. It was recorded as increasing in numbers “in a few localities” in 1928, and as “a regular nesting bird” on the Pecos in 1961. Finally, in Florida in 1969, “The snowy egrets make their homes in swamps and marshes and add beauty to these wide flat stretches of land.”<sup>13</sup> No less than the rest of *DARE*, the science entries show the best and worst of us, and present us with a portrait of a laughing, wildly imaginative, and very imperfect people who may yet be wise. ♦

*Roland L. Berns has been a Science Editor at DARE since 1990, before which he worked there as a researcher. His interests include figure drawing, calligraphy, and strange foods.*

9. Hylander, *Plant Life* (1942), 58.

10. Ammirati *et al.*, *Poisonous Mushrooms* (1985), 119. It is not clear just what “rather low” means.

11. Lincoff, *Audubon Field Guide to Mushrooms* (1981), 337.

12. *Ibid.*, 686.

13. Longstreet, *Birds of Florida* (1969), 24.

## Notes and Quotes

Here are a few excerpts from recent announcements of the appearance of Volume IV.

"Here is the big news in the world of lexicography: DARE IV has come out of the wordwork. The Dictionary of American Regional English—repository of the most delicious dialect sources and most colorful evidence of the Americanization of the English language—has now covered letters P to Sk."

William Safire, "On Language"  
*New York Times Magazine*, December 8, 2002

"The New Year brings a happy present for lovers of the American language: Volume IV of the massive Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE) is hot off the press. . . . The newly published volume . . . is a browser's delight. . . . Dipping into DARE is like eating peanuts."

James J. Kilpatrick  
"Covering the Courts," January 2003

"Ever wonder what a preacher's nose is? (The rump of a cooked chicken, in areas of the South.) Or a skinny malink? (A derogatory term New Yorkers use to describe an emaciated person.) . . . [T]he dictionary recalls the spirit of legendary folk chronicler Alan Lomax more than that of Noah Webster. With material from thousands of face-to-face interviews conducted between 1965 and 1970, as well as diaries, letters, novels and all other manner of written material, the dictionary is a fascinating history of American English."

Seth Mnookin  
*Newsweek*, December 9, 2002

"Ever since the mid 1960s, DARE has been wending its meticulous way through America's regionalisms, gathering up centuries' worth of citations for the likes of *paddywhack*, *schnitz*, and *shuck*—which last word, come to find out, can be any of three verbs and two nouns. In DARE you'll also find schematic maps showing, for instance, the distribution of people who call soda 'pop.' Alas, we'll have to wait patiently for *Vol. V* to learn where people call it 'soda.'"

Barbara Wallraff  
*Copy Editor*, December 2002–January 2003

## Funding Update

Continued from page 1

Now I ask you to help us complete Volume V. We can jump-start that effort with gifts from you—the individuals who care about language and the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Please know that your continued financial support is absolutely necessary to our work to reach the letter Z. I hope that many of you will become first-time donors to DARE this year. That would mean a great deal to everyone associated with the DARE effort. Any gift that you decide to make is tax-deductible and will be matched on a one-to-one basis by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

All gifts to DARE, large and small, are greatly appreciated. You can make a gift by filling out the form below. Checks should be made out to DARE/UW Foundation and mailed to DARE, c/o University of Wisconsin Foundation, 1848 University Avenue, P.O. Box 8860, Madison, WI 53708, Attn: David Simon.

If you are interested in discussing a gift of stock or a deferred gift, please give me a call at (608) 263-5607 so we can discuss the easiest way to make that type of contribution. Or you can contact me by e-mail at <david.simon@uwfoundation.wisc.edu>. Thank you very much for your interest in the *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

On to Z! ♦

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## Staff Member Profile

*In this continuing series, we profile graduate student Project Assistant Kate Peterson. Kate is finishing a Master's degree in the School of Library and Information Science and is assisting with the electronic version of DARE's bibliography.*

**Q:** Have you "always" wanted to be a librarian?

**A:** I have always loved libraries and enjoyed using them to find information, books, and so much more, but the idea to be a librarian was late in coming. I had that "eureka" moment in a very mundane way. Four years after graduating from Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, and after a slew of different jobs, for some reason I was reading *U.S. News and World Report's* ranking of library schools. Suddenly my heart started to pound and something inside of me screamed, "Yes!" I haven't looked back.

**Q:** How has your background in library science been useful in your work at DARE?

**A:** I took a course in cataloging the summer before I began this position. Cataloging is extremely important because librarians decide the best ways for users to find the items they are looking for. Cataloging combines the information in the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules and a librarian's skill to pull out the best subject descriptions from an item. Knowledge of cataloging is helpful when working on the bibliography because we need to facilitate DARE users' ability to find the original item we are quoting from. There are additional challenges with some of the older materials, and most of the items in our bibliography are historic.

**Q:** A librarian needs to be very computer-literate these days. What electronic skills do you use at DARE?

**A:** I have learned both how to use and to create electronic resources, including databases and Web sites. I use the University of Wisconsin-Madison library catalog, MadCat, as well as WorldCat, a catalog of over 44 million items from libraries across the world, to find records and verify information. The majority of my time is spent working in a bibliographic database program called ProCite. Citing electronic and Internet resources is an interesting challenge as well.

**Q:** What kind of library work do you hope to do when you graduate this spring?

**A:** After I graduate in May, I hope to work in an academic library as a science librarian. I have a background in biology, and I look forward to using

it in the future. Generally, a science librarian is responsible for helping students and faculty with their reference needs, instruction, and collection development. I am amazed at how many scientific resources have been used at DARE.

**Q:** What do you enjoy most about DARE?

**A:** I enjoy working with all of the staff members and listening to their weekly sparring over words. I also enjoy working with the bibliographer, Lenny Zwilling, who has a story to go along with just about every book in the bibliography! It is exciting to see the bibliography begin to take shape as well. Like each volume, the bibliography is a combination of so many people's efforts—it is overwhelming to think about and be a part of.

**Q:** With almost 9,000 items currently in the bibliography, it must be hard to choose, but do you have any favorite titles?

**A:** I particularly like *The Farm and the Fireside; or, The Romance of Agriculture*, by John Lauris Blake, published in 1852, and *The Great American Book of Sidewalk, Stoop, Dirt, Curb, and Alley Games*, by Fred Ferretti, published in 1975. ♦



## DARE Editor Wins Award

Luanne von Schneidemesser, DARE's Senior Editor for Production, has just been granted the Laurence Urdang-DSNA Award for 2003. The \$2,500 award, generously provided by lexicographer Laurence Urdang and judged by the Dictionary Society of North America, will be used to format the Web version of DARE's *Indexes*. As many of our *Newsletter* readers know, Luanne and our production staff have produced *An Index by Region, Usage, and Etymology to the Dictionary of American Regional English, Volumes I and II*, and *An Index . . . to . . . Volume III*. (The *Indexes* allow readers to find all DARE entries that include particular regional, social, and etymological labels, such as **chiefly New England**, *old-fashioned*, or "Norwegian dialect.") The first two volumes were published as issues of *Publication of the American Dialect Society*, but the *Index to Volume IV* will be posted on the DARE Web site. Luanne will use the award to hire a student to format a combined *Index* to all four volumes of DARE so that it will be readily available to anyone who visits our site. ♦

# CELEBRATING VOLUME IV

To mark the publication of Volume IV, *DARE* threw a big party for friends on campus and in the Madison community. It was held January 31st in the beautifully restored Harrison Parlor of historic Lathrop Hall on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus. There was lots of good food and wine, a jazz ensemble provided entertainment, and a drawing was held for a copy of the new volume. We were very pleased that so many of our friends and supporters could join us for this celebration.



◀ Joan Hall making a few remarks to the guests. Behind her are DARE staff members (from left to right) Roland Berns, Leonard Zwilling, Kate Peterson, Elizabeth Blake, and George Goebel.

Photos by George E. Hall

▼ Guests examining volumes of the Dictionary and one of the poster exhibits.



▲ Ryan Meisel (saxophone) and Luke Palmer (keyboard) adding to the festive spirit.

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