

DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

Fall 2005

Photo courtesy of University of Wisconsin–Madison Archives



Ruth Porter, DARE Fieldworker, in 1965, contemplating a frying pan—or is it a skillet, or a spider?

Postcards from Florida: A Fieldworker Reminiscence

Ruth Porter

As one of Prof. Audrey Duckert's graduate students at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Ruth Porter was among the first to hear about the new linguistic project that was setting up shop at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She went on to become one of the DARE project's first Fieldworkers.

On November 1, 1965, three DARE Fieldworkers—the first of their kind—left Madison, Wisconsin, in three shiny green Dodge vans, a.k.a. “Word Wagons.” I was one of these

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Funding Update

David Simon
Director of Development

The calendar is now approaching the end of 2005. The leaves have fallen from the trees in Madison, and snow is once again in the forecast. Time does move quickly.

Forty years ago, two significant events took place that greatly affected the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Those events are important to each person who cares about the *Dictionary* and reads the *DARE Newsletter*. On September 29, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act into law. That action created the National Endowment for the Humanities as an independent agency in Washington, D.C.

That same year, DARE Fieldworkers climbed into cramped Word Wagons and began interviewing informants around the country. With large reel-to-reel tape recorders, a questionnaire containing 1,847 questions grouped in forty-one broad categories, and a heavy dose of determination, the Fieldworkers began the groundwork for the published volumes of DARE. A remarkable journey was under way.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has been a special friend to us for many years, making its first grant to DARE in 1970. Since that time, NEH has been a valuable, consistent, and generous partner in our ongoing mission to complete the *Dictionary*. Currently, a one-to-one matching grant from NEH doubles the value of your private gifts to DARE. This is incredibly valuable to us, and I know it is of special importance to many of our donors. We are grateful for

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Notes and Quotes

Here are some extracts from recent letters to DARE (and print references to our project). Your comments are also welcome, via "snail mail" or through our Web site; see the mailing page of this Newsletter for contact information.

"I worked on the *Dictionary* for two summers—1967 and 1968. . . . We all had the sense that we were involved in something special. Soon after 1968 we all dispersed. But we all kept waiting for the dictionary to be completed. I was delighted when it finally did [appear] and happy that Dr. Cassidy lived to see it. He seemed so old to us back then. I chuckle when I think I am probably older now than he was then. . . . I am happy to see the work continues."

Judith Rich
State University of New York at Potsdam

"I feel inspired by *DARE's* goal to preserve regional terms from going out of use. Comparing my experiences in New Mexico to those in Maine, I realize the importance of regional flavor. There are such gems in regional speech that American English can sound like a foreign language to one from another region. It would be a shame for all of that to be lost as we homogenize."

Student in the School of Library and Information Studies
University of Wisconsin–Madison

"*Encarta World English Dictionary* Defining Moments DICTIONARY TIMELINE:

600 B.C. The earliest preserved dictionary was created. It was an Akkadian word list from Mesopotamia. . . . 1755 Samuel Johnson's magnum opus, *A Dictionary of the English Language* is published. . . . 1828 Noah Webster's magnum opus, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* [is published]. . . . 1961 Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* is published and considered controversial because of its less traditional style. . . . 1985 *The Dictionary of American Regional English* is published in sections."

From the *Encarta World English Dictionary* Web site

Postcards from Florida Continued from page 1

three, uncertain of what lay ahead, but full of anticipation at the start of such a monumental project. The young wife of Reino Maki, one of my co-Fieldworkers, wondered at my sanity for heading out on such a project alone, while I considered with awe her situation (and sanity) caring for two small children and her husband in the van for a year. Ah, youth.

An Ominous Start

Armed with two suitcase-sized, 1965-vintage tape recorders and piles of questionnaires, I was eager to start. Before I left Wisconsin, Fred Cassidy loaded my Word Wagon with dozens of boxes of books for Alice Lloyd College in Pippa Passes, Kentucky. Because I was going through Kentucky on my way to Florida, Dr. Cassidy felt it would be easy enough for me to deliver the packages. No argument from me.

On the plus side, the extra weight of the books made the Word Wagon ride more smoothly than it would have done empty. There was a problem, however. It became obvious to me as I drove up and down some very steep mountain roads in Kentucky (with their inevitable hairpin turns) that the very heavily loaded Word Wagon had a mind of its own. As one who had lived all her life until then on the mountain-free coast of southeastern Massachusetts, I was not prepared for the eastern Kentucky mountain roads. Neither was the Word Wagon. Heading down one very steep hillside, the Word Wagon picked up more and more speed. Despite my attempts to pump the brakes and hold it in second gear, I nearly met my maker in a green Word Wagon on the way to Pippa Passes, Kentucky. (I have hated mountain roads ever since.)

Pensacola was my home at that time. My husband of one year was deeply engrossed in flight training at Pensacola Naval Air Station, so the Florida fieldwork project suited us well. My *DARE* assignment to interview speakers in eighteen Florida communities of various sizes was a good match and a really great opportunity for me to see Florida. I had a nice new state map with the eighteen sites circled in orange. I'm still not quite sure how the *DARE* folks picked the exact locations, but that wasn't my worry. These sites ran from far western Florida across the Panhandle to the northeast corner of the state, down the east coast all the way to Key West, and back up the Gulf Coast, as well as inland throughout the Peninsula. Starting out with no knowledge of the state, I knew it like

the back of my hand a year later. I discovered many of Florida's beautiful state parks, saw lots of wonderful places off the tourist routes, and met a large number of individuals who are among the finest I've ever known.

Finding Informants

Finding good informants was the hardest part of the task. Numerous times a postmistress, a librarian, a local minister, or someone in the county clerk's office gave me the name of a "perfect person for what you need." In the next breath, he or she would tell me that the "perfect person" had died a while back. Too bad.

After getting the name of a potential informant (preferably one still breathing), I then had to find him or her—not always easy in rural Florida, where back roads are dirt and often unmarked. Once found, the informant often—but not always—needed a little convincing to give up several days of his or her time to answer hundreds of questions. It was never a simple matter of going through question after question in several sequential days. Most informants were older and retired, so they had the time. The challenge was to get them to give it to you. (As a retiree myself now, I can appreciate their reluctance.)

The questionnaire took a lot of time and got tiring after a few hours. In addition, everybody had things to do and commitments to keep. Consequently, I found that I had to adjust to breaking the interviews up over two or three weeks' time. This might mean going back and forth between two towns and several informants, but it seemed to work well and kept people involved without wearing them out.

Peanut Heaven

On one occasion, I had to find an informant in a rural area of northern Florida just a stone's throw from the Alabama border. This is peanut country, and I am a lover of peanuts. I found the town on the map and drove to it, thinking I'd have a hard time turning up an informant because the town was so small. When I got there, I drove right through the town before I realized that this was it: two gas stations, a general store, a tiny post office, and one crossroad. I came back to the post office, but it was an unmanned office, so I crossed the street and inquired at the store. There were no other choices. The lady there sent me down the crossroad to another store. It was a rickety, cluttered old general store run by a retired schoolteacher whose family had been in the area for several

generations. This delightful lady was sitting in the back of the store, as if she were just waiting for *DARE* and me to come along. She was fascinated by the project, interesting to talk with and listen to, and full of Southern charm and grace. A few days later, as I was leaving, she insisted that I take a bag of raw peanuts picked and grown right there. She told me how to "parch" them in the oven until the skins were loose. Her helper also appeared with a bag of peanuts that her daddy had grown and that she had baked for me. I was in peanut heaven!

Because I enjoyed the peanuts so much and am such a fan of peanuts, peanut butter, and anything related, my informant called a former student and made an appointment for me to get a personal tour of the local peanut mill—the world's largest, I was told. That was an offer I couldn't resist. I spent a delightful afternoon touring the peanut mill and munching on samples. I can still smell the wonderful aroma of peanuts roasting.

Oysters, Shrimp, and Fried Chicken

Now I was on a roll, heading east along the Panhandle. Next stop was the Gulf of Mexico coast. From the far western reaches of Florida, with the influence of Pensacola Naval Air Station, to the peanut country of the Alabama/Florida border and thence south to the Gulf of Mexico coastline with its fishing towns and tourist areas, I was getting a good look at just what makes Florida so special, so interesting, and so appealing—its diversity.

The coastal town of Apalachicola is delightful. Oysters and shrimp, some of the best I've ever tasted, have put Apalachicola on the map. I was fortunate to find an informant who had worked in the business all his life and who loved to talk about it. He gave me a fascinating tour of the oyster and shrimp packing house he owned. Clearly, my knowledge of Floridiana was growing.

On the outskirts of Tallahassee I had one of my most memorable experiences of that year. I had stayed overnight at a small motel with a tiny, somewhat run-down café next to it. Since I was tired and hungry, I decided to try the café and hope for the best. It *was* the best.

The food and the two elderly ladies who ran the place—one cooked and one waited the few tables—were truly wonderful. I had the best Southern fried chicken I've ever had. For several days I ate a breakfast and a dinner fit for royalty, even if the tables were wobbly and the floor was cracked. As I was leaving for my next *DARE* stop, I thanked the two ladies for the warm hospitality and the wonderful food and told them I'd be sure to stop

in next time I came by there. A rather cranky older woman and her two companions overheard the conversation and remarked as I left, "Do you mean she's traveling alone? What do you suppose she's up to...?" That must have rattled through many heads as people saw me trekking along with questionnaire, tape recorder, and dark green Word Wagon.

Not all meals were as good as the café's fried chicken or the fresh oysters. My staple breakfast was a package of coffee-flavored instant breakfast powder shaken in some milk. One morning in downtown Tallahassee, I stopped at a Morrison's Cafeteria to get a carton of milk. Several men from the Capitol buildings noticed the Word Wagon and me, and walked over to check us out. When they read "University of Wisconsin" on the doors, they had a million questions about the project. Soon I had at least a dozen people milling about, wondering what was going on. Unfortunately, not a one was a potential informant.

A Fieldworker Has Her Day in Court

After several more stops in rural Florida, it was time to hit the big city—Jacksonville! This was another unforgettable experience. I was directed to several informants, one of whom was a judge and a member of an old and well-known Florida family.

I had not had any court experience in my short life, nor had I ever spoken with a judge (to my knowledge), so I was somewhat in awe of her. She was fascinating to talk with and gave me several hours of her time—even canceling a luncheon she had planned to attend. We got through part of the questionnaire, but for me the highlight was attending her court the next day. She sat me up front next to her desk and started hearing cases. I was intrigued. I thought she was extremely lenient with some of the people before her, but when I asked her afterward, she explained her decisions and convinced me that she really knew what she was doing. Clearly, I was not cut out for a career in law.

Before I moved on to the next stop, the judge decided that *DARE* and I needed some publicity. She took me to Jacksonville's two (then) TV stations, where I was interviewed and videotaped. That night I got to see my TV debut, and *DARE* got a nice plug on the 6:00 and 11:00 news broadcasts of both stations.

Roughing It?

During my travels, I spent many nights "camped out" in the Word Wagon in Florida's gorgeous state parks and not-so-gorgeous but very

handy RV parks (they were called trailer parks back then). In the winter, Florida roads fill with retired Northerners and Midwesterners, many of whom tow trailers. Back in the sixties, these trailers were often Airstreams—resembling big, shiny silver dirigibles. I would pull into a park and slide the Word Wagon into a slot next to one of these big boats. Once the occupants determined that I was harmless, they would often ask me if I'd like to join them for a drink or for supper. We'd talk or watch TV and I would feel as if I had rejoined the human race. Home-cooked meals never tasted so good.

One day in February, my travels took me near the beautiful Manatee Springs State Park on the Suwannee River. It was one of the most peaceful spots I've ever seen. I decided I just had to spend the night there. On a warm, shirt-sleeve February evening, I reveled in nature walks along the river, enjoyed the profusion of birds and wildflowers, and felt a little like Henry David Thoreau. The next day, I was covered with bites on my arms and legs and had to make a fast trip to a drugstore to recover from the joys of nature. That was my introduction to Florida's "no-see-ums," tiny little biting insects that love unsuspecting Fieldworkers and can penetrate any screen.

On one stop in rural southwestern Florida, a county home demonstration agent—these people were invaluable in finding informants—recommended an old Florida Cracker lady, Ant Nettie. ("Florida Cracker" is a term used to describe native Floridians. It used to carry a slightly pejorative connotation, referring mostly to back-country folk, but now it is used with pride by any native-born Floridian.)

Ant Nettie was a delight and a terrific informant. Practically toothless, scraggly-haired, and wrinkled, Ant Nettie was cool at first. But soon she warmed up to me and to the project, and we had a great day. She made me lunch—fried pork, beans and rice, and biscuits with preserves, all home-made. There were no screens on the windows of the old farmhouse and the window shades were torn and tattered, but the house was full of warmth. There were also ants by the hundreds, probably thousands, sharing the residence and the dinner table. When I made a tape of her speech, we sat in the shady backyard and were serenaded by cardinals the whole time. When I left, Ant Nettie picked two grocery bags of oranges and grapefruits from her trees and gave me a jar of homemade kumquat preserves, a jar of homemade cane syrup, and a beautiful sprig of gardenias in bloom from a tree in

her yard. The Word Wagon never smelled so good, before or again.

Another unforgettable informant was a gentleman in Fort Myers. He was in his late eighties, sharp as a tack, and full of stories about Florida a hundred years ago. His father had homesteaded a farm which was taken over by the Koreshan Unity, a religious community from Illinois that settled in Estero, Florida, in the 1890s. My informant ran away from Estero at fourteen years of age and went up the road to Fort Myers, where he worked for Thomas Edison in his laboratory there. He was a fascinating, delightful old gentleman who had traveled out West as a young man, tried his hand at gold mining in Alaska, and then come back to settle in southwestern Florida, where he made a living fishing in the Gulf waters and running a palm tree nursery. When I spoke with him in 1965, he was selling some gorgeous waterfront property he owned in Fort Myers. He offered several acres to me for a few hundred dollars. Unfortunately, my husband and I didn't have any extra money at that time. Today this same property sells for over a million dollars an acre, if you can find it.

Rolling on Down the Highway to Key West

The ride from Miami to Key West was beautiful yet challenging to drive, even in the mid-1960s. Over 150 miles of two-lane road and miles of bridges span aquamarine water and connect scattered islands. In Key West I found a fine old Conch fisherman whose family had lived there for several generations. ("Conch" is the term used for Key West natives. It derives from the conch shellfish that was a staple seafood in the islands.) He gave me a fine tape on fishing, sponging, and crawfishing. Although I'd been told he might be a little shy, he talked a blue streak. In fact, his wife said as I was leaving that he hadn't talked so much at one time in all their marriage. Clearly, he was just waiting for *DARE*.

The thing that made Key West special was the fact that my husband joined me in Miami and Key West for two weeks. In between *DARE* interviews, we visited friends in the Keys, took a three-day cruise to the Bahamas while the Word Wagon went in for its 10,000-mile maintenance checkup, played tourist in Key West, and enjoyed camping in Everglades National Park as we made our way back to reality.

After completing the *DARE* work in Florida, I traveled up the coast to North Carolina, where the Marine Corps had reassigned my husband. North Carolina is more "Deep South" than Florida. I in-



Ruth Porter, 2005

terviewed some wonderful farming and fishing folks there, but also experienced some unexpected prejudice.

One elderly lady, a member of an old family in the capital region, was suggested as the perfect informant for me to interview. It seemed like the ideal situation, but she spent our first hour together railing on the problems of integration, the evils of the government, the failings of our teaching system—and, oh, yes, she felt the *DARE* project was "nonsense and useless statistics." I had no choice but to let her vent. When she finally ran out of steam, I excused myself and left.

Most North Carolinians, however, were warm, friendly, and helpful. I was treated to many delicious homemade lunches and given bags of home-grown tomatoes and other vegetables fresh from my informants' gardens. Once during an interview, my informant's wife was called to the hospital on a family emergency. They had no car, so I gave them both a ride in the Word Wagon. Their thanks for such a small favor were warm and profuse.

As I look back on that year now, I realize that the mid-sixties weren't the best of times for a college student to be driving alone through the Deep South in a van with "University of Wisconsin" pasted on both front doors. I was challenged a few times about the project, but I was young, committed to *DARE*, and didn't go looking for trouble. And trouble stayed away. Overall, the *DARE* fieldwork experience gave me reason to feel really good about the vast majority of people I met and the places I visited.

Fast-Forward Forty Years

After my year on the road with the Word Wagon, I started, quite unexpectedly, on a career in the

computer industry. Like the *Dictionary* project, the computer world of the seventies, eighties, and nineties was growing and changing rapidly. It, too, took me to lots of new places, but eventually I came back to Florida to live. It's not the Florida of the mid-1960s—not even close—but it's still Florida. ♦



DARE Showcased in Chicago

This year's Chicago Humanities Festival provided a showcase for *DARE* on November 5 when Chief Editor Joan Hall was joined by author Simon Winchester (*The Professor and the Madman*, *Krakatoa*, and *A Crack in the Edge of the World*, among many other titles) and Robert Easton, "the Henry Higgins of Hollywood," in talking about the *Dictionary*. A standing-room-only crowd of nearly 300 heard Hall describe how *DARE* has proven its worth to forensic linguists, physicians, and psychiatrists, as well as to teachers, librarians, and word lovers. The audience reveled in hearing Easton's faultless depictions of American dialects from northern Maine to southern Louisiana to coastal California, and people delighted in Winchester's British perspective on American English and his enthusiasm for *DARE*'s attempt to record our language as it *is* spoken rather than as any arbiter thinks it *should* be spoken.

The Festival drew thousands to its wide array of talks by well-known authors, historians, and performers. ♦



Robert Easton, Simon Winchester, and Joan Hall at the Chicago Humanities Festival, November 5, 2005

Funding Update

Continued from page 1

the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

As 2005 draws to a close, I hope you will join us in our continuing journey by remembering the *Dictionary of American Regional English* in your philanthropic endeavors. Many people make gifts to nonprofit entities at the end of the year. I hope you will include *DARE* and the Frederic G. Cassidy *DARE* Fund in your 2005 giving.

Any gift that you decide to make will be tax-deductible and will be matched on a one-to-one basis by the aforementioned NEH grant. You can make a cash or credit-card gift by filling out the form at the end of this column. All gifts will be appreciated very much and will move us one step closer to completing a one-of-a-kind linguistic journey of more than four decades.

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 talk about the easiest way to make that type of contribution. Or you can contact me by e-mail at <david.simon@uwfoundation.wisc.edu>. Your gift will make a difference. I thank you for your interest in the *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

On to Z! ♦

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David Nunnery, Project Assistant

Staff Member Profile

In this ongoing series, Beth Gardner interviews Project Assistant David Nunnery, who verifies quotations cited in DARE by checking them against the original sources. David is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English at UW–Madison.

Q: Where did you live before coming to Wisconsin?

A: I'm a tenth-generation North Carolinian, and a graduate of the University of North Carolina. Wanting to get out of the country—I was, and suppose still am, a boy from the provinces—and thinking I'd be less likely as time went on to fling myself away in such a fashion, I slunk away to Russia on a one-way ticket (so I couldn't get freaked out and hurry home), to teach for a year at the Slavic Anglo-American School "Marina" in Moscow, trying desperately not to freeze. After a year courting death in Moscow, I taught in a genuinely dangerous couple of North Carolina high schools for four years, and now here I am.

Q: What are your primary job responsibilities at DARE?

A: I'm a "look-up person," which means that I spend my time grubbing around in campus libraries, sending Interlibrary Loan (ILL) and UW Library System requests by the double handful, checking request slips from the Editors, and being in general an affable and harmless drudge.

Q: What part of your work do you find most challenging?

A: The ILL process makes me weep. Lots of waiting, usually for snippy rejections and the occasional absurdity—last week I got a microfilm of what was supposed to be an obscure nineteenth-century California newspaper, but turned out to be a fourteenth-century Latin treatise on poisons (Petrus de Albano's *De Venenis*, if anyone's interested).

Q: What is the subject of your dissertation?

A: I'm a dissertator in eighteenth-century British literature. To the extent that my dissertation exists, it's called "Sociability and 'Struggles for Happiness' in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*." This next bit is more than you want to know, but the dissertation situates Samuel Johnson amid various eighteenth-century British discourses of happiness and sociability, and uses that "situating" as a conceptual tool for reading the *Lives of the Poets*, his last great work. I could get into the theory stuff (about inductive, "information-bearing" biography and its relation to the "cultural logic of modernity"), but that would be repellent to pretty much everyone. The dissertation, such as it is, has virtually nothing to do with Johnson as a lexicographer, which I admit suggests a character flaw on my part.

Q: What sort of position do you plan to seek after finishing your doctorate?

A: Thinking about the academic job market gives me sharp abdominal pains—turns out the youth of America aren't battering down the doors to get at *Humphry Clinker* and the "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot." More's the pity. Anyhow, my primary interest is eighteenth-century British literature and intellectual history, but I'll giddily teach Brit-lit from *Beowulf* ("Hwaet!") forward to the end of the eighteenth century, after which culture and learning go into precipitous decline, so far as I can tell. If someone would also let me have at the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, and the Bible, that'd be just dandy: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," and all that eighteenth-century hooey.

Q: When you have a rare moment of free time, what are your interests?

A: I fritter away my time in indolence, making tolerable company for my significant other, Amy, and now and again filling the kitchen with smoke and profanity when the biscuits go awry. I serve the whims of three animals—Koshka, Trilby, and Dingbat—and do my part to lower the property values in the Monroe–Dudgeon neighborhood with old country music, lest I become entirely de-racinated from being so long outside the South. ♦

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DARE Staff Changes

Barbara G. Wolfe, our Office Manager since March of 2004, has left the *Dictionary* to accept a part-time position in the UW–Madison Center for Jewish Studies and devote more time to her graduate studies in the field of public administration. Financial Specialist Ginny Bormann (who will be profiled in a future issue of this *Newsletter*) has been hired to take Barb’s place, a change that reflects the increasing importance of grant administration, budget planning, and account analysis in *DARE*’s day-to-day operations. We wish Barb the best and welcome Ginny to our ranks! ♦



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