

DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

Fall 2001

The Story of an Entry—*shuck* v²

George Goebel
Review Editor

From time to time I find myself trying to explain to someone what I do as an Editor of the *Dictionary*. I usually wind up waving my arms and talking in generalities, which may impress my audience, but probably leaves them none the wiser about what I actually *do* all day and, more importantly, why I find it interesting. The last time this happened, it occurred to me—afterwards, of course—that a brief account of the entry *shuck* v², which I had recently written, would have been a far better illustration of what I do. It wasn't at all an average entry (if such a thing even exists), but it *is* an excellent example of the kind of discovery that comes up often enough to make my job exciting, and at the same time it nicely illustrates a number of important points about the words we're looking for and the sources and methods we use to document them.

Several years ago I was reading the book *Hand-Tools—Their Ways and Workings*, by Aldren Watson, a well-known Vermont craftsman, illustrator, and designer. This had nothing to do with my work as an Editor, and I had no expectation of coming across any interesting words. The book is written in straightforward, standard American English, with no attempts at “folksy” talk. I was therefore especially surprised when I came across the word *shuck* being used in a way that was completely new to me:

1982 Watson *Hand Tools* 20 VT, The bench should be completely solid with the floor.

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Funding Update

David Simon
Director of Development

It has been an action-packed year at the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, and in many ways, it is hard to believe that 2001 is coming to a close. I realize that the pages for December are falling off the calendar, but it seems as though the year was just beginning not too long ago.

In January, *DARE* Editors were well into the entries in the letter S, with our Typist and Proofreaders following close behind. Eleven months later, we are putting the finishing touches on Volume IV. In fact, the last entry—*skywriter*—was typed on October 6 at 12:11 p.m.! (As you can see, we like to keep track of special events in the life of the *Dictionary*.) We hope to send Volume IV to Harvard University Press in a matter of weeks, with publication anticipated in December of 2002. That will be a historic occasion, as the fourth of five volumes needed to reach the end of the alphabet appears in bookstores across the country. Our motto “On to Z!” is becoming more and more a reality.

As 2001 draws to an end, I would like to thank each of you for your support of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. You have helped transform the *Dictionary* into a truly national project. *DARE* has donors from Maine to California and from most states in between. (We enjoy the support of folks from Alaska and Hawaii, too.) That seems very fitting, given the subject matter of our project.

Your gifts allow our work to continue and will enable us to publish Volume IV next year. I am aware that many of you are in the wonderful habit

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Coming in Volume IV

<i>pali</i>	A steep slope, precipice. (HI)
<i>pilon</i>	Something extra included with a purchase. (Chiefly TX)
<i>pirogue</i>	Originally a dugout canoe; now any of various small, canoe-like boats. (Chiefly Missip Valley; now esp MS, LA)
<i>plat-eye</i>	A hobgoblin. (SC)
<i>poppet</i>	A doll, esp a homemade one. (Chiefly S Midl)
<i>prod, on the</i>	Irritable, angry, on the offensive—frequently in the phrase <i>go on the prod</i> . (Chiefly West)
<i>progger</i>	One who forages in search of clams, turtles, frogs, etc. (Esp Chesapeake Bay)
<i>puddingstone</i>	Conglomerate; a piece of conglomerate. (Chiefly Nth, esp NEast)
<i>reed bird</i>	A bobolink. (Esp C Atl)
<i>reindeer moss</i>	A lichen of the genus <i>Cladonia</i> . (Esp NEast)
<i>ringman</i>	A marble, esp a small one; a marble game. (Esp S Midl)
<i>rope</i>	Tobacco; a cigar. (Chiefly Nth, N Midl, West)
<i>run</i>	A small stream. (Scattered, but chiefly C Atl, PA, WV, OH)
<i>rutch</i>	To slide about; to wriggle, squirm, fidget. (German settlement areas, esp PaGer area)
<i>safe</i>	A ventilated cabinet or cupboard for storage of foodstuffs. (Scattered, but chiefly Sth, S Midl, TX)
<i>scramble</i>	A potluck dinner. (Chiefly nIL)
<i>serenade</i>	A shivaree. (Chiefly SE, Appalachians, C Atl, nNEng)
<i>shire town</i>	A county seat. (Chiefly NEng)
<i>side by each</i>	Side by side. (Scattered, but less frequent SE)
<i>sky pilot</i>	Jacob's ladder (a plant of the genus <i>Polemonium</i>). (West)

The Story of an Entry

Continued from page 1

. . Test it by shucking it end-to-end and front-to-back.

As I read on, the word appeared several more times:

Ibid 178, Make a pencil mark on the wall. . . Stand the bookcase against the wall, then shuck it one way or another until it touches the mark.

Ibid 181, Now make a permanent shim 3/4 inch thick and slide it in place. Lift the bookcase with a pry bar to avoid shucking it out of position.

From the context, it seemed that *shuck* meant something like “to slide or shift (something),” but I couldn’t see any way to relate this to any of the senses of *shuck* that I knew. I looked in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, and found that, while it enters two separate verbs with this spelling, none of the senses given for either of them was remotely relevant. I left the matter at that, merely making a mental note to look into it when work on the *Dictionary* had got as far as sh-. A year or two later, when I was reviewing the sh- entries, I did remember this curious use of *shuck*, and I checked to see what we had on it. The answer was that while, like the *OED*, *DARE* had several entries under this spelling, there was nothing like the examples I had seen.

Now I knew I had something that needed further investigation. My first step was to look in the “dead file”—the file of rejected quotation slips—to see if there might be something there that had been passed over by the original Editor as insignificant, but which might make more sense in light of the Watson examples. And I did find something—the following entry from a glossary of Vermont speech:

1959 VT Hist. 27.157 **nwVT**, *Shuck around*.
. . To fit loosely. Rare.

It was obvious why this had been passed over. “Oncers”—words or senses for which we have only a single citation—are always a problem. We don’t reject them automatically, and in fact we enter quite a few; on the other hand, we don’t want to enter individualisms or other words of extremely limited currency, or ephemeral slang words, or mere mistakes of some kind. The problem is that when you have only one citation it is often impossible to tell whether the word belongs to one of these categories, or whether it is really the tip of an iceberg. Looked at alone, the *VT Hist.* quotation

didn't seem very convincing, but taken beside the Watson examples it began to make sense. Things that "fit loosely" also slide or shift around, so it looked as if this might be the intransitive sense corresponding to Watson's transitive use—that is, "to slide" as opposed to "to slide (something), make (something) slide." Also, with two independent sources, both from Vermont, I began to think that this word might be regional.

Now I needed more evidence. I started with a thorough check of the standard, major dictionaries that we check for every word we enter: the second edition of the *OED* (1989), *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1961), Craigie and Hulbert's *Dictionary of American English* (4 vols., 1938–44), Mathews's *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1951), and Wentworth's *American Dialect Dictionary* (1944). There was no sign of my *shuck* anywhere; clearly I was not the only person who had never heard this word.

Next I turned to a relatively new resource, the *Making of America (MoA)* site on the Internet. This project is in the process of making available a searchable library of major popular and semi-popular periodicals and nonfiction books in the areas of education, psychology, American history, sociology, science, and technology, ranging in date from 1800 to 1925, but with special emphasis on the period 1850–1877. It actually consists of two branches, one based at the University of Michigan and the other at Cornell University, though only the Michigan branch was on-line when I was working on *shuck*. (If you want to see them for yourself, the URL's are <www.hti.umich.edu/m/moa> and <library5.library.cornell.edu/moa>.) The potential of this collection for research in the history of American English is obvious; the problem is that it can be very time-consuming to use. This is partly the fault of an interface that was not really designed to facilitate linguistic research, but it is partly just the nature of computer searching. A search program can't discriminate words by meaning, so if you're looking for an unusual meaning of a common word, you have to sort through a lot of irrelevant hits to find what you're looking for—or to find that it's not there.

Typing "shuck*" into the Michigan *MoA* search page (the asterisk tells it to include *shucks*, *shucking*, and so on) gave me a list of 320 hits in 180 books and journal articles. In many cases I would just have decided it was not worth the time to check out this many hits on the off chance of finding

what I wanted, but this time I decided to eliminate the titles that obviously would *not* yield what I wanted—such as "A Southern Corn-Shucking" and *A List of Post Offices in the United States . . . 1851*—and try my luck with what remained. After a tedious bout of downloading page images and reading through them, only to find another reference to corn shucks or shucking oysters, I finally hit pay dirt in an encyclopedic self-help book from 1859, which quotes the advice of "Messrs. Charles R. Huntington & Co., produce commission merchants in New York," first on how to pack green apples for shipment:

1859 *Storke Family Farm* 2.172 NY, Shake the barrel frequently, and when full arrange the apples so that the head will rest upon them smoothly, and in order to secure them from shucking in the barrel.

And, later on, on how to pack dead chickens:

Ibid 3.277, Alternate layers of poultry and straw . . . filling the packages so that the cover will draw down very snugly upon the contents, so as to prevent shifting or shucking on the way.

Here at a stroke I had a confirmation of my guess about the underlying meaning of the *VT Hist.* quotation, and I had pushed back the earliest attestation of the word by an even hundred years. The new examples were not from Vermont, but they were still from the Northeast, so it still looked like a regional term. (For all I know, there may be other, and perhaps even earlier, examples of this *shuck* in the *MoA* collection, especially now that Cornell is on-line and new works have been added to Michigan, but I think I am satisfied with my 1859 quotation. If there's anyone out there, though, with an Internet connection and a certain tolerance for tedium, this is your chance to push back the frontiers of lexicography.)

At the same time I was pursuing this high-tech search for examples of *shuck*, I also tried about the lowest-tech research method there is, which is to stand up, walk across the hall, and ask someone. In this case I asked the nearest available New Englander, who happens to be Cathy Attig, our Production Assistant and Technical Typist. Cathy, it turned out, didn't know this use of *shuck*, but she offered to ask her Uncle Ed. Now, Uncle Ed—I hope he won't mind this familiarity, but I really can't think of him any other way!—is a retired teacher, a local historian, and an affectionate if

somewhat ironic observer of small-town life in northwestern Massachusetts. Over the years I've gotten a number of informative and amusing responses to queries that Cathy has passed along to him, so I was optimistic that something might come of this. Sure enough, a week or so later Cathy passed on an e-mail message from Uncle Ed:

1999 DARE File nwmA, Yes, I can remember using "shuck," though I can't recall hearing it used lately. It's used in reference to unwanted movement from things that don't fit right or aren't secured properly. After a while the leather on your snowshoe bindings stretches, and your feet will shuck; if your hiking boots don't fit right, your feet might shuck around in them; if you don't put enough newspaper in the packing box, the vase will shuck around and break when you're moving. I suppose you could say that when the Starship Enterprise encounters an alien gravitational field, the crew gets shucked around in there. . . I seem to be able to construct the verb-adverb combination: "shuck around," more naturally. I have no idea why.

Note how nicely these examples fit with the other evidence. We have things that fit loosely, though here it is the feet that "shuck (around)" rather than the shoes, as the *VT Hist.* article would apparently have it; we have the loosely packed item that "shucks (around)" just like the green apples and the dead chickens; and finally the example with the crew of the *Enterprise* illustrates *shuck* as a transitive verb.

This seemed like all I was going to find for the moment; now I needed to actually draft an entry. The obvious division was between the transitive and intransitive senses, so I arranged my quotation slips in two piles on my desk—one with the quotations from **1859 Storke**, **1959 VT Hist.**, and most of **1999 DARE File**, and the other with the **1982 Watson** quotations and the *Enterprise* example from **1999 DARE File**—and set about trying to write definitions that would cover them. What I came up with was:

- 1 also with *around*; Of something loose or unsteady: to shift, slide.
- 2 To shift or shake (something that is loose or unsteady); to attempt to do this.

There was one more thing I needed for this entry, and that was to find out, if I could, the origin of this word. Nonstandard or regional words in this country often turn out to have been brought here by immigrants from the British Isles, many of whom were of course dialect speakers, so a good place to start is usually with the two massive collections of British dialect material, Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (6 vols., 1898–1905) and the more recent *Scottish National Dictionary* (10 vols., 1931–76). This time it was the *EDD* that came through with what I wanted. The first two senses under *shuck* v.¹ correspond closely to the two senses I had set up, though in the opposite order. The first is defined simply "to shake," and the examples quoted, such as the injunction "Do'an't shuck de teable so," show that the transitive sense is meant. The regions of the citations given outline a broad swath of western and southern England from Worcester to Kent. The second, less well attested, sense is defined "to slip; to move about; to move from a certain position; to wriggle," and one of the examples describes someone as "shucking about in his chair."

Clearly, then, the immediate source of my word was the dialect of western and southern England. The *EDD* makes no suggestions about the earlier history of the word; this would be an interesting question to look into sometime, but *DARE's* policy is to trace words only to their immediate sources. (It is interesting that the earliest evidence the *EDD* cites for *shuck* is from 1853—only six years earlier than the earliest U.S. evidence. Obviously these dates have little to do with how old the word really is; rather, they illustrate the fact that dialect words—and especially dialect words relating to humble activities—rarely appear in print, and hence leave little or no trace for the historian of the language.)

Now that I knew the immediate source of this word, I added an etymological note referring to the two senses in the *EDD*, paper-clipped all the slips into a bundle, and filed them away with the other sh- entries. I was finished for the time being, but the entry you see when Volume IV appears in 2002 will almost certainly be somewhat different from the entry I drafted. This entry still has several stages of review to go through. Joan will review it, as she does all entries, before it goes to Cathy for typing and coding. After galley proof has been made and proofread I will read it once more, in the process we call "critical reading." At both of these reviews any new material that may have accumu-

lated will also be considered, and appropriate changes made. Even after that, if important new material is found before the volume is sent to the Press, the entry may be revised to reflect it.

In the case of *shuck*, I happen to know that there are two new quotations waiting to be considered—both e-mail responses to a query posted on our web site. For many years we have published a list of words we wanted more information about in each issue of the *Newsletter of the American Dialect Society (NADS)*. Recently we have been posting the same list of “NADS queries” on our web site as well, and thus bringing it before a much wider audience. (Visit our web site at <polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/dare/dare.html> to see the last few lists and a selection of queries from earlier lists.) We get a lot of responses that aren’t really relevant to what we’re looking for, but the number of truly valuable responses makes it well worth the effort of sorting them out. So when I was drawing up the list of queries for the next issue of *NADS*, I put in an item on *shuck*:

shuck—“to shift or slide about; to jog or rock (something that is or might be loose or unsteady).” What little evidence we have suggests that this verb, which goes back to English dialect, may be quite common in New England.

Dozens of people e-mailed us helpfully to say that where *they* lived people shucked corn, or oysters, or shucked off their clothes—which we already knew—but there were also two responses that rang the bell. I quote both of them here, because they are good examples of the kind of valuable contribution that anyone may be in a position to make:

2000 NADS Letters NEng, The word—as indicated on your web page—meaning “to shift about” or to slide about, especially in an enclosed space—is one I have heard all my life. My mother was born in Hyde Park, MA in 1878 and she used it. I recall her using it to describe a loose page in a three-ring notebook. When I came to Vermont I heard my mother-in-law use it also. She was brought up in southern Vermont and also had lived in northern Maine.

Ibid **MA**, I have heard my Mom say the boat shucked or the car shucked. Usually with mechanical things. I think it referred

to a lack of steadiness like ‘off kilter.’ She was from Mass.

Both of these contributors give examples or typical contexts, they tell us who used the word, and they tell us where those people lived.

For the most part these particular contributions offer welcome confirmation of what earlier evidence suggested about meaning and regionality, but they also suggest some possible refinements. The example of the car or boat “shucking” makes me think that we need to work the idea of shaking or rattling into the definition of my first sense. It is also interesting that both contributors seem to attribute the word to their parents’ generation; they don’t claim to use it themselves. Taken with Uncle Ed’s comment that he couldn’t recall hearing *shuck* used lately, this suggests that we might be justified in labeling this word *somewhat old-fash*. 📖

This account was written nearly a year ago. Only the last “critical reading” now remains to be done before this entry is

Where Are They Now?

We try to keep up with former DARE staffers, whose jobs and travels often take them around the globe as well as across the country. We caught up with Joe and Jayne Marek in Franklin, Indiana.

As one of *DARE*’s early Proofreaders, **Joe Marek** had a large role in imposing order on the procedures we used. Always one to be aware of time-and-motion theory, Joe found better and more efficient ways to do things. Not surprisingly, those interests led him to the field of computer science, and he is currently a manager at Re:Member Data Services, a firm that writes and supports software for credit unions. His longtime interest in rare books has expanded to include a new interest in digital libraries.

While working on her Ph.D. here at UW–Madison, **Jayne Marek** helped out at *DARE* with various quote-taking projects. After getting her degree, she taught in the English Department at Pacific Lutheran University before moving to Franklin College in Indiana. There, she teaches literature, writing, and film studies courses, and recently her one-act play about Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf was produced. A Fulbright grant took Jayne and Joe to Hungary in 1996, where she taught at the University of Debrecen. They both recommend taking time out to do that kind of horizon-broadening exploration. 📖

Funding Update

Continued from page 1

of contributing to *DARE* at the end of the year. I hope you will do so again this year—it will make a huge difference in our development effort.

I also know that some of you with strong connections to *DARE* have not made a gift recently, or perhaps at all. It would be great if you could join *DARE*'s list of contributors for 2001 at this time. All gifts, small and large, are very important to us and will be matched on a one-to-one basis by a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Each gift moves us one step closer to Professor Frederic G. Cassidy's dream of reaching the letter Z.

You can make a gift to *DARE* by filling out the form at the bottom of this page. Checks should be made out to *DARE*/UW Foundation and mailed to the address on the coupon.

If you are interested in making a gift of stock or a deferred gift, please call me at (608) 263-5607 so we can discuss the easiest way to do that. Or, you can send me an e-mail at <david.simon@uwfoundation.wisc.edu>. A gift of stock can be made quickly and easily, and it may have tax advantages for you.

Thank you very much for your interest in *DARE*. Have a happy and healthy New Year. On to Z! 📖

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Karen Krause, Office Manager

Staff Member Profile

In this continuing series, David Simon interviews Karen Krause, DARE's Office Manager.

Q: What are your responsibilities at the *Dictionary of American Regional English*?

A: I run the *DARE* office on a daily basis, but my main responsibilities are for the financial aspects of the *Dictionary*. Some of this work involves keeping track of finances through the monthly Accounting Ledgers, setting up accounts to match our NEH grants, keeping track of the foundation and private gifts at the UW Foundation, preparing the budgets for grant proposals, and monitoring all the University rules and regulations pertaining to spending. I also make sure that everyone is properly assigned an account for payroll and fringe benefits.

Right now I work 50% time, but when Professor Cassidy was alive, I worked full time for *DARE*, typing his voluminous correspondence and scholarly papers, and also handling his e-mail.

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

A: I very much enjoy the people I work with at *DARE*. They are a group of diverse personalities, but all are interested in ideas and books. Conversation can be very animated. *DARE* folks are a very talented group, including musicians, great cooks, authors, nature lovers, artists, humorists, and many cat lovers. I'm always impressed by the scholarly dedication and attention to detail that both the Editors and Production staff put into the *Dictionary* every day.

Q: Why do you feel the work of the *Dictionary* is important?

A: The breadth and scope of this unique dictionary of regional speech show the richness and variety of American English, and it gives us a portrait of ourselves through language. It is a huge project, and something of this scale will probably never be done again.

Q: Tell me about a memorable day at *DARE*.

A: A number of summers ago, I broke my ankle and needed surgery. Afterward, I was at home for a couple of weeks. Back at the office it was discovered that some changes needed to be made to the budget of our NEH grant application, and I needed to make them. So Joan Hall brought the budget and the typewriter over to my apartment and up two flights of stairs. I worked on the changes and typed up a new copy, and then another staff member came and picked up the budget and the typewriter. A real team effort!

Q: What aspect of working on the *DARE* project has been the most surprising to you?

A: I've had a number of different positions at the University, but before coming to *DARE* I had not done too much financial work. I've discovered that I really enjoy working with numbers and doing the financial part of my job. My afternoon job in the English Department also involves much financial work.

Q: What are your interests away from *DARE*?

A: I enjoy seeing movies and plays, doing yoga, taking nature walks, deck gardening, and reading (especially mysteries—I hope someday to write a mystery novel myself). I have two Persian cats, whom I adore and who require lots of grooming time. Also, I love to travel and wish I could do more of it. 📖

Notes and Quotes

Once again, we open our mailbag to share some of your letters. We enjoy hearing from you, whether by e-mail, "snail mail," telephone, or face-to-face conversation.

"The problem with the *Dictionary of American Regional English* is that the heavy volumes are hard to put down. Apart from their practical use for novelists, historians and actors, the handsomely bound volumes are great for browsing."

James J. Kilpatrick, syndicated columnist
"The Writer's Art," May 27, 2001

"Thanks for your wonderful work in preserving the spicy flavors of our language."

Carol Frank
E-mail correspondent

"I write popular reference books about language and I cohost a weekly public radio show in San Diego called 'A Way with Words.' . . . Need I say that *DARE* is wonderful? All word mavens are indebted to you for your great work."

Charles Harrington Elster
San Diego, California

"I wanted to ask you to consider putting the letters of the next volumes on the spine of the books. I made my own labels 'A-C,' 'D-H,' and 'I-O' for my personal copies here at home. *DARE* is my ab-

solute favorite reference work. (I'm a reference librarian.)" [*DARE* Ed: That's a good suggestion, Liz. I wish that we (or the Press) had thought of it. Maybe other readers will adopt your solution.]

Liz Cooksey
Savannah, Georgia

"In my work as manuscript editor, I have come upon a common word used in a way I have not seen before . . . : 'The woman sided the table and washed the few breakfast dishes.' This particular author is from Fall River, Massachusetts, so I was wondering if this . . . use of the word 'sided' might be peculiar to New England. . . . I am looking forward to purchasing Vol. 4 as soon as it is published." [*DARE* Ed: We didn't make Dennis wait; we let him know that while this sense of the verb *side* isn't restricted to New England, it is found more often there than elsewhere.]

Dennis Billuni
A1 Editing Service

"We were saddened to hear of Prof. Cassidy's death. He might be pleased to know that we show *DARE* to all our friends who are interested in writing and words, and it's usually impossible to get them to let go of the book!"

Jayne Marek
Franklin, Indiana

DARE Newsletter


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DARE in the News and on the Net

An in-depth article about *DARE* and Fred Cassidy was featured in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* on October 14. Reporter Mark Johnson proved his mettle by delving into the details of this very involved project and producing an accurate and compelling story. It can still be seen on the newspaper's web site at <www.jsonline.com/news/state/oct01/dictionary.asp>.

On October 7, the Voice of America radio program *Kaleidoscope* aired a show on American English dialects that included *DARE*'s Chief Editor Joan Hall and a sampling of our audiotapes. This program, too, is still on the Internet (<www.voanews.com/Kaleidoscope/>), where the transcript may be read and the audiotape downloaded. 



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