

DARE Newsletter

Vol. 5, Nos. 2/3

Dictionary of American Regional English

Spring/Summer 2002

From *DARE* to Henry David Thoreau

Elizabeth H. Witherell

Almost thirty-one years ago, in fall 1971, I was lucky enough to get a job as what was called a "PA," a Project Assistant, at the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. My husband, Michael, and I were both graduate students at UW–Madison. He was starting his fourth year in Physics and I was in my second year in English; we had been married for a year and a half.

As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, I had worked at the *Middle English Dictionary*, and I loved the unabashed fascination with language demonstrated by longtime staffers. The *MED* word-workers were perched at the top of Angell Hall; they used 3 x 5 slips to record forms and uses of words in a language that lived only in print. They reviewed and commented on one another's research notes with eagle eyes and quick wit, and they were passionate about their task.

I moved to Madison in January 1970, and after working for a year and a half in the Processing

Continued on page 2



Beth Witherell listening to DARE tapes in 1971

Volume IV Is in Press!

We are delighted to announce that the text of Volume IV (P, Q, R, S–Sk) was sent to Harvard University Press this spring! Page proof has been read and corrected, and the book is on schedule for publication in December. For all your good wishes and encouragement along the way, we are grateful. Look for ordering information in the next issue of the *DARE Newsletter*. ♦

Funding Update

David Simon
Director of Development

The little things . . .

In December, a tremendous accomplishment will take place as Volume IV (P–Sk) of *DARE* is published. The work of literally thousands of people (fieldworkers, informants, editors, and many others) will become available to readers across the

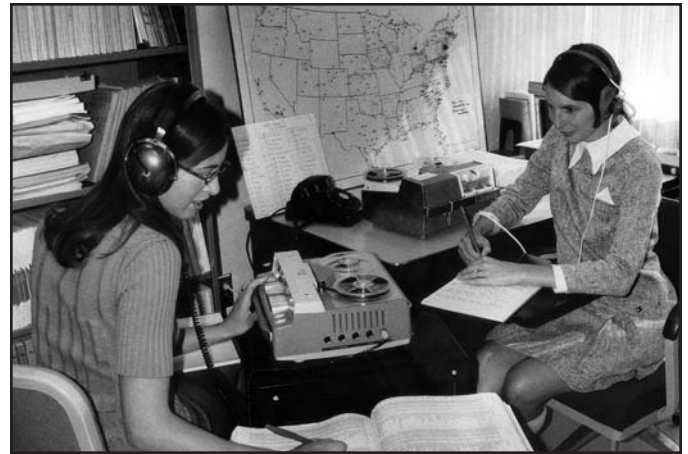
Continued on page 5

Department at the University Library, I was ready for a job that indulged my own excitement about words. I found *DARE*. Its structure was familiar from the *MED*, and again I found people who were intensely devoted to what they were doing. Several of them knew some of my former colleagues at the *MED*, which was comforting in itself to someone who was feeling a bit of graduate student disorientation; that I understood the language was an added bonus.

Fred Cassidy was the heart of the *DARE* group as well as its head. He always greeted me warmly and had a friendly word, although I was certainly well below the salt in the group he had gathered on the sixth floor of Helen C. White Hall. At that time, Barb Hornick held us together administratively and Mary Nelson kept track of our hours and many of the details of our lives. Goldye Mohr was a force: her wry sense of humor was legendary. Jim Hartman came from Kansas for the one summer I worked for the project. Jennifer Ellsworth, another graduate student, was my colleague as a Project Assistant. With her knowledge of linguistics, Jennifer was adept at representing pronunciation and I learned a lot from her.

I spent a delightful year listening to interviews the fieldworkers had recorded; my job was to note words and phrases that were new to me, and to transcribe or extrapolate their definitions. The fieldworkers had sought longtime inhabitants of the places they visited, and two-thirds of the informants were over sixty. This weighting was deliberate, according to the Introduction to Volume I of *DARE*: “Folk language is traditional, and older people remember many things that young ones have never heard of” (p. xiv). I was already hooked on the accents and accounts of older people—as a little girl, I loved to listen to my grandmothers, one from the city and one from the country, gossiping about friends and family members—and probably part of the reason I found the *DARE* job so satisfying was that it tapped into that childhood experience.

The recorded interviews were usually in two parts. In one, the fieldworkers engaged the informants in general conversation in order to get a relaxed sample of pronunciation and conversational style as well as vocabulary. In the other, the informant read a set piece, “The Story of Arthur the Rat,” which revealed phonetic variation among speakers across the country. (At the *DARE* Web site, <<http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/dare/Audio>.



Beth Witherell (left) and Jennifer Ellsworth

html>, you can hear nine speakers reading segments of the tale in sequence.) A few fieldworkers also recorded parts of the actual interview, carefully stepping through the approximately 1,600 questions designed to elicit the local names for things or actions or ideas. (I remember that some of these sections could become a bit tedious to listen to.)

Listening to tapes made in California, Illinois, Kentucky, Florida, New York, and Maryland (for some time after my year at *DARE*, I could recite “Arthur the Rat” with a creditable tidewater accent), I discovered that some people were just naturally interesting—they could turn the most boring parts of the questionnaire into fascinating accounts, and they told some terrific stories in the “free speech” period of the recording. From a New York informant, I learned how to play stoopball, what a spaldeen is, and that egg creams contain no eggs and no cream. A park director in Florida revealed dryly that though some people think possums are cute little animals like Pogo, they’re not. “They’re ugly and dirty and mean,” he said. And a Kentucky informant described with curious detachment her participation in Pentecostal services involving handling snakes and drinking poison.

After my year at *DARE* I became a Teaching Assistant in the English Department, and in 1974 I left Madison to join Michael at Princeton, where he had his first job. There I found *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, a project with a structure and an ambiance much like that of *DARE* (and the *MED*, too). The Thoreau Edition was established in 1966 with the goal of producing new, accurate, and complete texts of Thoreau’s journal, correspondence, and the writings he published and prepared for publication—texts that reflect his intentions for those works. Our publisher, Princeton University Press, has made available fourteen volumes so far;

we have sixteen to go (our Web site, <<http://libws66.lib.niu.edu/thoreau/>>, gives details).

The Thoreau Edition, like *DARE*, received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and, like *DARE*, accomplished a lot with limited financial resources because of the dedication of a small group of scholars. Once again I'd had the good fortune to find an attractive spot in a new place, and this one held out the possibility of a dissertation topic, too. In September 1974 I began working at the Edition for ten hours a week, at \$2.50 an hour. Gradually my commitment to the Thoreau Edition and its to me grew stronger, and by 1977 I was almost full-time and working on a dissertation on Thoreau's poetry, which I completed for UW in 1979. Mert Sealts was my dissertation advisor—a scholarly editor himself (of Emerson and Melville), he taught me to respect precision and integrity and to set high standards for my own work.

In March 1980 I became the Editor-in-Chief of the Thoreau Edition, and I ran it at Princeton, in Firestone Library, for three years. In 1983 I moved it to the University of California, Santa Barbara, where Michael had gotten tenure in the Physics Department. For sixteen years at UCSB I had the strong support of the University Librarian and members of the administration through some difficult fiscal times; in 1999 I packed the project again and moved it to Northern Illinois University. Again I trailed Michael's opportunity—he had accepted an appointment as the Director of Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Illinois. (For the non-physicists reading this, Fermilab's mission is to do research investigating the fundamental nature of matter and energy; this research is done largely through experiments at the Tevatron, which is currently the world's most powerful proton accelerator.) NIU welcomed the Edition with strong and consistent support. Again we're located in the Library, my favorite place on a campus, and I work with a dedicated staff that in three years has seen two volumes into print (*Journal 6: 1853*, ed. William Rossi and Heather Kirk Thomas [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], and *Journal 8: 1854*, ed. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis [PUP, 2003]), and two more to the Press (*Excursions*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, and *Journal 7: 1853–1854*, ed. Nancy Craig Simmons and Ron Thomas).

Through the years I have maintained personal connections with *DARE* in a variety of ways. I've visited the *DARE* offices on occasional trips to

Volume IV *DARE* Quiz

To whet your appetite for Volume IV (P–Sk), which should be in bookstores before the holidays, here are a few tantalizing tidbits. Match them with the appropriate definitions on the right, send a copy by August 30 to Joan H. Hall, 6125 Helen C. White Hall, 600 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53706, and vie for a free copy of Volume IV. If you're the first with all the correct answers (or the highest number of them), we'll send the book to you. The winner's name and the correct answers will appear in the next issue of the *DARE* Newsletter.

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| __1. parrain | A. To spoil, treat too well. |
| __2. peewink | B. A failed firecracker that is broken open and lit. |
| __3. pencil point | C. A runty animal. |
| __4. pin-basket | D. Lopsided, askew, out of line. |
| __5. piroot | E. A gruel thickened with bread. |
| __6. pomper | F. To go quickly. |
| __7. pushency | G. A card game. |
| __8. quisutsch | H. A spring peeper. |
| __9. ragged lady | I. A false loosestrife. |
| __10. relieveo | J. A mischievous little scamp. |
| __11. ribble off | K. An out-of-the-way place. |
| __12. ridgeback | L. A type of pasta. |
| __13. risk | M. A team hiding game. |
| __14. robin's nest | N. To recite by rote. |
| __15. runaround | O. Coho salmon. |
| __16. Sallygodlin | P. A map turtle. |
| __17. Sally Lunn | Q. A swelling on a finger. |
| __18. sancho | R. Urgent necessity. |
| __19. schnickelfritz | S. A cornflower. |
| __20. Scratch-ankle | T. Mumblety-peg. |
| __21. seedbox | U. A thumbprint cookie. |
| __22. sewage inspector | V. A rich yeast bread. |
| __23. sheepshead | W. A godfather. |
| __24. shoo-shoo | X. The youngest child in a family. |
| __25. skilligalee | Y. The common carp. |
| __26. skyhoot | Z. To whirl around. |

Madison. I keep up with one graduate student colleague, David Vander Meulen, who was an Assistant Editor and then a Contributing Editor at *DARE* and is now a distinguished member of the English Department at the University of Virginia. I have all the volumes currently available and when a new volume is published I usually find a couple of people for whom to buy it and I spread the word among family and friends. I was delighted when the *Newsletter* started coming out, and I was pleased to find staunch supporters of *DARE* among the faculty at NIU.

I always find a way to work in *DARE* when I teach, and when the class topic is research methods I include it among the resources I recommend. In the Edition's work on Thoreau we have several times consulted *DARE* staff about puzzling usages in the *Journal*. Fred helped me with an annotation of the passage, "Hind-diabolus on Nagog, 'What do you mean by a dead set?' " This is an entry from after May 26, 1849, in our *Journal 3: 1848–1851*. Fred agreed that "hind-diabolus" and "dead set" were probably "trapping terms that T[horeau] recalled from his conversation with the hunter." An annotation for an August 24, 1852, entry in *Journal 5: 1852–1853* identifying a "ghost horse" as a "walking stick" insect cites *DARE*, though for negative evidence: this term does not appear in *DARE*, so it may be either a coinage by Thoreau or a very local name for the bug.

Until I began to work on this reminiscence, I had thought of my time at *DARE* as both a lot of fun and my first opportunity to make a real contribution to a scholarly study that would be around for a long time. In the course of writing, I realized both that I have a much deeper appreciation of Fred's accomplishment from the perspective of my own work in the last twenty-two years and that Fred's example as the head of a project had a deep influence on me. What I saw at *DARE* taught me some important practical things and exemplified some even more important qualities of heart and mind. I'll mention a couple of practical lessons first. In the early 1970s *DARE* began the monumental project of computerizing the collected data for analysis and for the printer. I was involved as an inexperienced observer only, and some of the early difficulties seemed inexplicable and insurmountable to me. Having seen these problems and their resolution, though, I was more realistic and less prone to panic about costs versus benefits when we started

using computers at the Thoreau Edition to prepare coded copy for the printer.

Working at *DARE*, I realized how important it is that the initial work on any project be accurate. I always looked forward to spending time with the headset on, listening to the tapes, but I was acutely aware of being on the "front line," laying the foundation for what would be in the *Dictionary* by recording unusual lexical items and their definitions. This understanding has made me more attentive to the quality of the work our students do, much of which forms a base for what appears in our volumes.

Fred's example of patience and enthusiasm has stood me in good stead these many years: my version of his "On to Z!" is the somewhat less gripping "On to *Journal 16: 1860–1861!*" His unwavering confidence that the enterprise he was embarked upon was important and necessary has been an inspiration as I've faced funding crises and uninformed critics. His generous attention to all of the members of the *DARE* staff reminds me that everyone contributes and that encouragement from the top can improve the quality of the contribution: it certainly makes everyone feel more satisfied. But the most important thing I learned from Fred is that if you love what you do, you won't work a day in your life. ♦

Elizabeth Hall Witherell is Adjunct Professor of English at Northern Illinois University and Editor-in-Chief of The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, the definitive edition of Thoreau's works. Sponsored by Northern Illinois University, the National Trust for the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and published by Princeton University Press, the Thoreau Edition will ultimately comprise thirty volumes.



Beth Witherell with Lily, adopted in Saigon in January 2001

Funding Update

Continued from page 1

country. Professor Frederic Cassidy’s charge of “On to Z” is being realized, and I believe he is looking down at us and is very pleased.

Today, though, I am struck by the many little things that have made a crucial difference along the way—acts of kindness that have enabled us to be just a few months away from seeing Volume IV on bookstore shelves across the United States. I have been touched by your devotion to seeing *DARE* completed.

Many of you have met with me in your home, at your office, at a restaurant, or elsewhere, and discussed your relationship with the project. Some of you are interested in words and reference materials and admire the quality of the work being done at *DARE*. Others were friends or colleagues or students of Professor Cassidy’s and want to see his project finished. And, of course, some of you simply love language, and that love has drawn you to the *Dictionary*. In every instance and at every meeting I have learned something about you and the *DARE* effort that has been interesting and useful. I very much appreciate your warmth and your frank opinions. I thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

We have formed a *DARE* Board of Visitors that works with Joan Hall and me on *DARE* development issues. Currently there are 18 talented individuals on the Board. The advice and hard work of each one has been outstanding. It is my strongly held belief that Volume IV of *DARE* would not be so close to completion without the work and support of the Board.

At the end of this column in each *DARE Newsletter*, I put a coupon that you can fill out to make a financial gift to *DARE*. It brings a smile to my face each time one of you uses that coupon and sends a gift to *DARE*. I remember how excited Professor Cassidy was when we began the *DARE Newsletter* and many of you made your first gift to the project. That wonderful tradition continues each time you use the coupon to support the *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

Additionally, I am fortunate to receive wonderful letters and e-mails from individuals across the country who are fans of *DARE*. I have learned about the many different ways the *Dictionary* is used. Of course, *DARE* is a wonderful resource for teachers in the classroom. I have also learned how doctors, lawyers, authors, law enforcement offi-

cials, dialect coaches, journalists, forensic linguists, Hollywood producers, and many others value the *Dictionary* and use it in their work.

I particularly enjoy learning how readers and “language buffs” use *DARE*. Some of you actually read the *Dictionary of American Regional English* from cover to cover. Others keep *DARE* handy as a reference book to be used to research selected terms. It is great to know how many of you are regularly using *DARE*.

I hope that your support of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* will continue. It is easy to become a *DARE* supporter and to honor Professor Cassidy at the same time. Simply make a gift to the Frederic G. Cassidy *DARE* Fund by filling out the coupon at the end of this column. All gifts are tax-deductible and will be matched on a one-to-one basis by the National Endowment for the Humanities. That doubles the value of your gift.

Please give me a call at (608) 263-5607 if you would like to discuss the easiest way to make a gift of stock or a deferred gift. Or, you can send me an e-mail at <david.simon@uwfoundation.wisc.edu>. Thank you in advance for your thoughtfulness. Your actions make a real difference.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Please use this gift to support the Frederic G. Cassidy *DARE* Fund.

My/Our contribution of \$_____ is enclosed.

Please charge my/our gift of \$_____ to my:

MasterCard Visa

Card no. _____ - _____ - _____ - _____

Expiration date _____

Cardholder name (please print): _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Please return this form to Frederic G. Cassidy *DARE* Fund, c/o University of Wisconsin Foundation, 1848 University Avenue, P.O. Box 8860, Madison, WI 53708, Attn: David Simon.

Ask a Fieldworker

If you have a question about what it was like to be “in the field” for DARE, send it in to the office and we’ll pass it along to some of our Fieldworkers.

A Madison reader asks, “What was the funniest or strangest circumstance you ever found yourself in while doing fieldwork?”

August Rubrecht responds:

Hard to say what the very funniest or very strangest circumstance was, so I’ll pick one that’s got some of both qualities. I think it’s strange and my daughter thinks it’s funny.

Soon after I arrived in Grand Isle, Louisiana, I went into the largest bar in town to eavesdrop and look around, and to sip refreshments. (The eavesdropping and the looking around were professional duties, to give me a sense of the people and how they talked. The sipping was strictly voluntary.) There were two pool tables. At one the duffers shot, the experts at the other. I laid my quarter at the duffers’ table to claim the next game, but when my turn came, my opponent wandered off in pursuit of a young woman. I had already put my quarter in the slot and racked the balls. The person standing nearest who appeared to have free time for a game happened to be a young woman. I had no hope of starting up a romantic interlude or anything—I just wanted an opponent for the game of eight ball I had paid for. Still . . . I was unattached, and she seemed so too; who knew what might develop from friendly banter between pool players? I asked her if she would like to play. She said she would. Since I had already racked, she broke, and then we introduced ourselves.

First thing I knew, her boyfriend, whom I had not seen before, descended upon us, took the cue stick away from her, shot her shot, and came over to me and began talking tough. I answered his jibes with mild words and a friendly voice, counting on the principle “A soft answer turneth away wrath.” It didn’t work. He was determined to get some sort of reaction out of me, preferably a fight, and he kept talking tough.

I knew—just about everybody knows—the script he was trying to follow. He was talking tough; I was supposed to talk tough back. We would stand close and glare at each other and raise our voices. After a couple of minutes of this, one of us would shove the other’s shoulder and the other would shove back. The bartender would tell us to take it outside. Followed by a crowd of onlookers, we

would go out back and one of us would beat the other badly. I had been given to understand that, in southern Louisiana, stabbing was a widely accepted substitute for beating.

To tell the truth, I am a coward, and with good reason. Naturally weak and uncoordinated, and untrained in fighting to boot, I knew that in the boyfriend’s script I would play the role of the one who gets beaten. Yet I *am* a guy, after all, and a guy never wants to feel like a wimp or look like one in front of a crowd. So though I was scared of getting beaten, I was just about as scared of groveling. And all too soon it became impossible to pretend any longer that the boyfriend and I were merely conversing; my soft answers were clearly never going to turn away his wrath.

What finally let me know was that he came close to calling me a Yankee. That wasn’t the word he used, but he said “North of the Mason-Dixon line” with a sneer.

It wasn’t much of an insult to me, but I knew it was as far as he was concerned, and I bristled. I leaned forward and glared at him. Matching his tough-talk voice, I asked, “Listen, buddy—are you trying to get tough with me?”

He snarled, “You Goddamn right.”

I took a deep breath and tried to distill into my voice the tones of authority used by my father and by all the preachers and professors and construction crew foremen I had ever known. “Well,” I said, “you’d better forget it.”

And he did. I never heard another peep from him the whole evening. My hands shook, though, and I shot a lousy game of pool.

Thinking back later, I saw that the young woman stood to gain appreciable status if her boyfriend and I had actually carried out the fight, but I have never felt particularly guilty about letting her down. ✧

And Patt VanDyke answers:

As I interviewed contacts in Pasadena, California, I was constantly referred to the “indispensable” _____, a highly regarded resident of established Pasadena society. I telephoned her, and we visited awhile about the project and set a time for a meeting. I went to her home at the appointed time. When she came to the door, it was clear that she had not heard of me and did not remember the telephone call or the appointment. She had probably lost the note card on

which she had recorded my visit, she told me. She made another note, however, that I was there and invited me in, most graciously.

We sat in her living room, and she began telling me the adventures of her life, including the fact that her husband had named a mountain for her in Alaska during the early days of her marriage. At various times in her narrative, she would quickly rise and dart to a lamp or a rug, which she would lift to reveal a note card on which was written the provenance of said lamp or rug and its connection to her life. Her rapid movement and the note card of said lamp or rug provided a jerky segue from whatever story she had been telling (gone forever, it seemed) and a new one which the note card triggered.

"Do you take tea?" she asked. "Why, yes, I do. That would be lovely," I replied. She set out in her narrative again, unfettered by details of the recent past. "Where are my manners?" she asked in a few minutes' time. "Do you take tea?" I assured her that I would enjoy some tea, indeed. Again and again, the topic of tea surfaced; tea was offered, accepted, and forgotten. At long last, she remembered that she had a cup of tea every afternoon and undertook preparations in the kitchen before returning for our interview. Anguished, I listened to the teakettle whistling shrilly through other adventures. "I believe the water is boiling," I ventured, noting to myself that the whistle had turned to a sullen hiss. "Whatever for?" she asked, walking into the fireplace. "We were having tea," I said. "What a good idea," she said. "I'll just make some." She returned, however, tea-less, and sadly announced that she had no hot water for tea but could take me outside to see her garden.

In her front yard, completely uprooted and lying on its side, was a 30- or 40-foot palm, the result, I supposed, of a bad storm three days before. She began to weep and wring her hands in despair, raising her voice at each repetition of "Help me! O, please! Help me!" In my only good dress, I jumped into the pit left by the uprooting, and she and I together wrestled the palm back into the hole from whence it came. From somewhere, she produced a child's shovel that we used to throw soil back around the roots until the tree was where it had been before the storm and all evidence of its being out of place had vanished forever.

When we straightened from our work, she regarded me innocently. "Thank you for dropping by," she said. "Won't you come in?" ♦

Notes and Quotes

Feel free to get in touch with us either by mail at the address on the back cover or by e-mail at <jdhall@facstaff.wisc.edu>. We enjoy hearing from you.

"Without the *Indexes* [to *DARE*] and *DARE* itself, I couldn't have written the book. I tried hard to find distinctive vocabulary for each part of the country and even each state, and the *Indexes* led me to the words I needed."

Allan Metcalf
Author of *How We Talk*

"The latest newsletter was wonderfully apt for my class [in American dialects], because they had just finished research papers analyzing dialect in films. Thank you so much for such an interesting and enlightening article."

Stephanie Hysmith
Ohio University

"We had a great discussion in the faculty room during lunch about *catty-corner* and its various forms. I took *DARE* Volume I to school with me and the other teachers were amazed. Now my appetite is whetted. When will the next volume be available?"

Jay Davidson
Author of *Teach Your Children Well*

[*DARE* Ed: Well, Jay, you're in luck! As you'll read elsewhere in this issue, Volume IV will be available before the holidays.]

"It's always a pleasure to receive your newsletter. We admire what you are doing and appreciate your persistence. . . . [Receiving] information about *DARE* is always welcomed right up there with talking about the grandchildren!"

Liz and Bob Menefee
Berea, Kentucky

"Thank you very much! That's great; I was getting so frustrated [at not finding out why a winter cap is commonly called a 'chewk' on Michigan's Upper Peninsula]."

Ellen Airgood
Writer

[*DARE* Ed: *Chewk*, along with *chook* and *chuke*, is a variant of Canadian French *tuque*.]

DARE Newsletter

Postal Return Address:

Dictionary of American Regional English

University of Wisconsin–Madison

6125 Helen C. White Hall

600 N. Park St., Madison WI 53706

(608) 263-3810

<http://polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/dare/dare.html>

Nonprofit Org. U.S. Postage PAID Permit No. 658 Madison, WI

DARE Staff Members

EDITORIAL STAFF

Roland L. Berns, Science Editor

Audrey R. Duckert, Adjunct Editor

George H. Goebel, Review Editor

Joan H. Hall, Chief Editor

Sheila Y. Kolstad, Senior Science Editor

Luanne von Schneidemesser, Senior Editor, Production

Leonard Zwilling, General Editor, Bibliographer

PRODUCTION STAFF

Catherine R. Attig, Production Asst., Technical Typist

Elizabeth Blake, Proofreader

Elizabeth R. Gardner, Senior Proofreader

Margaret Pearson Kailhofer, Proofreader

OFFICE MANAGER

Karen J. Krause

DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT

David H. Simon

RESEARCH ASSISTANT

Jill Priluck