

DARE *Newsletter*

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Words, Words, Words

Greg Alfus

As I amble toward fifty-eight years, it's now a bit of a stretch to recall when my love/obsession with words began. Yes, I have the usual background: read a lot, books in the house, mom an English teacher, loved the library, walked an eighth of a mile to neighbors who had a set of real encyclopedias, etc., etc. But my real, focused love of and interest in words happened later, after high school craziness, detentions, hormonal frenzies and such were behind me. I think I was on (and in) my third university, the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, when words and history and semantics and a whole bunch of linguistic stuff captured my imagination.

Several instructors are to blame for starting me down this road. Mary Croft, Leon Lewis, Imogene DeSmet, and Kurt Fanstill all played a major part, from different perspectives. But at the core was the “mellifluous” moment. As I sat one afternoon in Prof. DeSmet’s office, she carefully explained

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From the Chief Editor’s Desk

Joan Houston Hall

Last summer I mentioned that *DARE* staff members were breathing a sigh of relief, having just submitted major grant proposals to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. Today I can follow up with some good news: NSF was able to award *DARE* a two-year grant that provides approximately 80% of what we had requested.

By the end of March we expect to have heard from NEH, and we certainly hope for similarly good news. Our typical NEH grant is made up of equal amounts of outright funds and matching funds. What that means is that in order to receive the latter, we need to receive private gifts totaling that amount. And that, of course, is where you come in!

As you can see from the list of contributors on page 5, *DARE* has many supporters and friends. Some, like the “Bascom Hill Contributors,” are able to give substantial gifts that provide the foundation of our non-federal support. Others, like Greg Alfus, have started with donations of the year’s spare change and then committed to giving annually. We are grateful for every one of your gifts, and each one moves us closer to the goal of claim-

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Words, Words, Words

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several (now-forgotten) lines in a Middle English poem, reading short segments to exhibit the “mellifluous quality” of the poet’s writing. I stared at her, rolling the sounds of “mellifluous” through my head. Her voice, that word, in that moment, held me. I believe I even asked her to say it again, so I could savor it through her strong and articulate pronunciation. That word had value, texture, depth—and somehow, I believe, it hooked me. I’ve never forgotten that moment.

So that’s my adult beginning, or at least will suffice as such. A host of undergrad and grad courses in language history, Old English, Middle English, rhetoric, and linguistics and many non-class forays into dictionaries and lexicography broadened and deepened my interests. These were, of course, combined with books, books, and more books, as well as endless notes on scraps of paper when I heard or saw something that piqued my interest (*hackneyed? disgruntled, and thus grunted?*). I had become a word junkie. I read dictionaries. In fact, my incessant meanderings into the land of “I wonder where that came from. . . .” led me to purchasing my first “real” dictionary, *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, in 1973 from a small,

“I am currently reading the first D.A.R.E. volume and enjoying it immensely. It occurred to me that perhaps you could help me on a phrase used in my ancestor’s letter in the mid 1800’s. He asked his son, ‘How are you doin at “whippin the cat?”’ We think it has to do with the profession of traveling shoemaker. Can you shed any light on it?”

Nancy Lee
Upper Lisle, New York

[DARE Ed: I’m delighted that you’re enjoying browsing in *DARE!* As for “whipping the cat,” the phrase has been around for about 200 years in this sense and has been used by people in various professions, particularly by tailors. The sense that your ancestor alluded to means to ply one’s trade at private houses (rather than by having customers come to a shop). There is an old but good article on the term in the journal *American Speech* (in 1929).]

“We cherish our ‘connection’ with you and your co-workers!”

C. Richard Beam, Director
Center for Pennsylvania German Studies
Millersville, Pennsylvania

“DARE comes to the rescue frequently. . . . This week it helped out with ‘jollop/gollop,’ ‘chic sale’ (rendered by a correspondent as ‘shiksale’) and ‘chifferobe/chifforobe.’”

Grant Barrett
Co-host, *A Way with Words*
KPBS, San Diego, California

family-run bookstore in my hometown. How I loved to roll into its pages and pull out entries not to be found in a smaller collegiate dictionary. I perturbed some friends and associates who had a more reserved, supposedly “correct” view of the American-oriented dialect, for *Webster’s Third* presented language in all its descriptive breadth rather than only what language purists prescribed as correct discourse. It inspired my arguments for the validity of *ain’t*, among other things. I mean, really—try saying the contraction *amn’t* a few times, and *ain’t* starts sounding good. But I found few converts.

Of course, this only whetted my appetite further concerning semantics, word histories, dialect variations, further derivations and broadenings and such. That was my problem; I could never stop my informal or more formal pokes at the language. The *Third* somehow led to Samuel Johnson’s dictionary and my fascination with the man as well, at least partially flavored by W. Jackson Bate’s work, *Samuel Johnson*. I loved then and do now the decidedly subjective twist that Johnson lent to selected entries (“*Spinny* . . . I suppose, *small, slender*. A barbarous word.”). Bringing some of his observations and definitions into freshman or sophomore language/writing classes would inevitably provoke some consternation among my students, but that was the fun of it. Sharing words and histories brought them to life for students who hadn’t often given much thought to the life of words.

My marriage in 1977 indirectly introduced other chapters on language. I suppose most people remember those wedding gifts of special significance to the couple, something of some emotional and/or financial value. Well, at this point in my life, I haven’t a clue what some of those gifts were, but besides my original Black & Decker Workmate, I most reveled in *Verbatim*, a gift from my language cohort Keith. This was a small language quarterly out of Connecticut featuring a range of language discussions and related book reviews. I still have some of those publications from the late ’70s, though I’ve no recollection what happened

to things like cheese boards and various pieces of crystal. My dear wife, Carol, understood (or tolerated) my word wanderings, however, and she gave me a copy of *Caught in the Web of Words* by one K.M. Elisabeth Murray. This is an account of James A.H. Murray's endeavors with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and it proved to be, for me, a fascinating and engaging peek into the marvelous mayhem of the first edition of the *OED*.

I had used the *OED* before, but I now gained more respect for its creation, as well as the thousands of intriguing word histories it contained. I, like so many others, spent years peering through a magnifying glass at the two-volume "compact" *OED*, straining my eyes to tearing itchiness. Its bulk provoked student chats in my office as to what "compact" actually implied. Eventually, I decided I needed the real thing, so I went through about four coin-saving cycles (using a large glass cookie jar) and finally, with my wife's permission, purchased the actual *OED*. Valhalla, an epiphany, angelic hosts all rolled into one on the day it arrived! Most interesting was that the delivery fellow for UPS, Jeff, was a former student in my English classes who had been subjected to the very content of the multi-carton beast he brought to my door. He found the occasion memorable, for he could not believe that five cartons held one dictionary ("compact" thus further muddled, or clarified).

My *OED* has been much used over the years, making many trips to the dinner table when any manner of "Why do we say _____?" or "Where did _____ come from?" questions popped up. I regularly ignored the no-reading-at-the-table rule we had, and I still do. I have loved having this around; I might have missed out on *belfry* if not for the *OED*. It is also the main culprit in my accidental and eventually happy juncture with the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. During a

“I was much amused when I saw the picture of Mr. Zwilling modeling his ‘bubbler’ T shirt. Reminded me of my experience with that word. I grew up in Madison, got my library degree at the university’s Library School, and began a job in the Reference Department of the Purdue University Library. On one of my first days at work, I asked where the bubbler was. To my surprise, no one knew what I was talking about. That was my introduction to regional speech. . . . I have the first four [volumes of *DARE*] and look forward to completing my set.”

Mary Resnik
Bethesda, Maryland

little chat in the fall of 1994 with Ron, a returning adult grad student in a linguistics class I was taking, we both admitted a delight in the *OED*'s chronological definition methodology and all the marvelous concoctions it holds. He asked me if I had seen something called *DARE*, which took a similar chronological approach but with a wide range of regional English in America. I drew a blank as I sat with him, but admit that I was entranced by what he shared. Within a couple of days, I located information about the project at UW–Madison and learned that the first two volumes had been published.

Within a few weeks, I tracked down the volumes. Then I had my college library purchase *DARE* as well for staff and students. Reference librarians began to do show and tell with *DARE* in library orientations. I must say it was great fun to simply sit and read through entries, fully enjoying these colorful chunks from other people's lives. In Volume IV, I was elated to find the colorful word *padiddle* (*perdididdle*), the single-headlight car descriptor from my high school years. *DARE* always accompanied me to discussions of diction and word choice with my composition and American literature students. I also directed them to *DARE* via library information scavenger hunts, making sure every student tasted what other parts of America had to offer. Once during this assignment, a student, having read through some of *DARE* and a bit of Lighter's *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, informed me that at different times I could be both a "gazook" and a "real gazookus." I did go back and check this out, and I rather agreed with him (he assured me he meant it in a positive way). I was just pleased he had pursued the idea and enjoyed an unusual taste of English.

My involvement in supporting *DARE* began sometime in late 1997 or 1998. I had sent a small

“Wow, what a thorough and helpful reply. Not that I really expected less from the folks at *DARE*.”

Ann Downer-Hazell
Editor for the Life Sciences and Health
Harvard University Press

“Please pass along to the staff my commendations on the *DARE* newsletter. I don't know whether I enjoy the profiles of current staff, or the accounts of past fieldwork, more—always a day-brightener.”

Jane Maher
Middleton, Wisconsin

donation, but wanted to do a bit more. The earlier-mentioned change jar once again came into play. I used it each year to focus a substantial (by my parameters) donation to some organization. This time, I emptied the gathered coins of the last year, counted them, and sent the good people at *DARE* whatever amount it came to, along with a picture of the coin pile. It was not exactly an endowment, but considerably more fun, at least for me. I eventually visited the *DARE* offices and met a host of fine people, including Prof. Fred Cassidy, Editor Joan Hall, and David Simon. I was allowed to listen to selections from the tapes made by the fieldworkers, a real treat. It was great fun to share in the real voices of the language, to feel the human emphases, the pulse of a word or phrase as a living thing. That day was special for me, as has been my continued association with and support for *DARE*.

So the years have gone for me, rambling through language and words and books and dictionaries, subjecting my students and family (any captive audience would suffice) to my whims and morphemic caprices. I'm just a guy who loves words and dictionaries, as another might love plants or quilts or old Pontiacs. I love to know the source, the development, the very life and flow and sound of a given word. Take *mellifluous* or *padiddle*, for example. . . . ♦



Greg Alfus recently retired after thirty-one years as an English and writing instructor, program coordinator, and department chair at McHenry County College in Illinois. He now has, and takes, time to read more, thumb through dictionaries, listen to NPR, maintain a 102-year-old house, dabble in photography, and take varied road trips a bit off the normal tourist map. He has served on DARE's Board of Visitors since its inception.

From the Editor's Desk *Continued from page 1*
ing the full amount of a matching offer from NEH. We would hate to have to turn any of it down for lack of private matching gifts! If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation by check or credit card, please use the coupon on the back cover of this *Newsletter*. For information on other giving opportunities (such as donating appreciated securities or real estate or including *DARE* in estate planning), please call Jon E. Sorenson at the UW Foundation, (800) 443-6162 or (608) 262-7211.

I've always been proud to be able to tell granting agencies that *DARE* has a loyal band of individual contributors who love language and want to see us get to Z and beyond. Your support tells them that their dollars are well spent. Thank you for your gifts, for your letters, and for your caring about our success.

(And speaking about getting along toward Z, I'm happy to say that our Editors have begun working on the letter W! Our Review Editors and production team are following closely behind, working on revisions, additions, and corrections to the thousands of entries in S, T, U, and V.) ♦

***DARE* Staff News and Notes**

Science Editor Roland Berns recently published an article entitled "Colloquial Science" in *Wisconsin People & Ideas* (formerly *Wisconsin Academy Review*).

An article by Luanne von Schneidmesser (Senior Editor, Production) discussing the vocabulary of the Midwest appears in *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*, published in February 2007 by Indiana University Press. ♦

***DARE* Board Member Receives Honor**

Writer and commentator (and founding member of *DARE*'s Board of Visitors) William Safire was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom on December 15, 2006. ♦

“I've read the accounts of the adventures of the [*DARE*] fieldworkers in their Word Wagons to my American English dialects class. One student was so enthralled, he was ready to set out armed with a questionnaire and wonderful enthusiasm.”

Stephanie Hysmith
Ohio University

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DARE is grateful for the support of these donors in 2006. Gifts were received by the *Dictionary of American Regional English* Fund, the Frederic G. Cassidy *DARE* Fund, and the Richard Maxwell Fund for the *DARE* Project. Because this is a national project, it is particularly meaningful that gifts were received from supporters in thirty-three states and the District of Columbia (and friends in Canada and Europe as well).

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Volunteer Profile

In this ongoing series, Beth Gardner interviews UW–Madison student Irene Sadowski, who began volunteering at DARE in February of 2007.

Q: What is your field of study?

A: I am a special student getting certified in the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) program of the English Department. I hold a B.A. in English from UW. My studies at the time focused on multicultural American literature. I returned to school years later to study the linguistic side of English and to prepare to teach English abroad.

Q: What are your primary academic interests, and how have they influenced your career path?

A: I am student teaching in an ESL (English as a Second Language) grammar class on campus, which has been fun. I am one of those weirdos who likes grammar, and the lead teacher and students are great. I am volunteering for *DARE* to sample the craft of lexicography. I love etymology; it's been an interest ever since I took Latin in high school to better understand binomial nomenclature.

“Those 18 months I spent in Helen C. White Hall editing printouts of *DARE* fieldworkers' data were among the happiest of my life. Even after 31 years, I still look back fondly on finding data I'd never seen before.”

Michael Henderson
Former *DARE* staffer
Lawrence, Kansas

Academically, I would like to study more about generative approaches to syntax and phonology.

My academic background trained me as a writer and as an editor, but I have worked in varied capacities over the years. (This comes as little surprise to other English majors, I imagine.) My professional interests have alternated between, or sometimes combined, communications and horticulture. I've worked as an editor and as a field worker on a cut-flower farm. I've coordinated outreach for the Department of Natural Resources and for a nonprofit organization overseeing community gardens. In the last several years, I managed the plant nursery for a local garden center before returning to school. I still work there—and as a nanny—to pay the bills.

Q: How did you first become acquainted with the *DARE* project?

A: I remember reading about Fred Cassidy and *DARE* in a local newspaper about ten years ago. I was intrigued. I loved reading dictionaries and had just recently been exposed to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I thought *DARE* was an ambitious project in both scope and method. The oral history component was especially compelling. So I followed the project online over the last few years, sort of cheering it along.

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

A: Verifying citations mixes fastidious attention with frequently engaging details, which is a good combination for me. Scanning old newspapers offers incidental entertainment, and thumbing through the old books and interviews captures (and sometimes distracts) my attention. It's been a great place to volunteer. Everyone is approachable and funny.

Q: What is the most unusual or surprising thing you've come across in checking quotations and performing Internet searches for the *Dictionary*?

A: Going through common plant names offers all kinds of seemingly strange folk remedies, even in the short time that I've been involved with the project. One that comes to mind is a recommendation to rub branches of wild allspice on sick cattle to pep them up after a long winter.

Q: What sort of employment or graduate program would you like to pursue after finishing your current course of study?

A: I'm planning to spend a year teaching English in Nanjing, China. I may attempt to teach in Poland after that, but I know there are far fewer jobs there. When I return to the U.S., I want to pursue a master's degree in English linguistics. I

would really like to work for a commercial or academic dictionary publisher. Developing monolingual learner's dictionaries might be an appropriate niche for me.

Q: When you have a bit of time to spare from your studies and your work, what do you enjoy doing?

A: I spend a lot of time going on walks and nature hikes with my dog and my partner. Spring through fall, I putter around the yard quite a bit. I like to employ my young nephews on these gardening projects. We swap plant and bug identifications. I'm an enthusiastic baker, recently obsessed with biscotti. I love playing board games, especially and obviously those that involve language. ♦



Where Are They Now?

We recently received a letter from former student worker **Lisa Nielsen Agnew**, who was prompted to reminisce about her days at DARE after reading back issues of our Newsletter online. Lisa wrote:

I worked for DARE in 1988–89 as a volunteer and then as a paid student worker, . . . doing a variety of support tasks for the Editors. I had a few favorite assignments. I loved listening to the field recordings to get correct pronunciations, and also looking up individual responses in the big logs of Questionnaires.

What was the most exciting time for me at DARE? When I discovered that my great-grandfa-

ther had been one of the original Informants. He lived in Belmont, Wisconsin, and had been interviewed back in the 1960s. Grandpa died in 1983, and our family didn't have any sort of recording of him. It was wonderful for everyone to be able to hear his voice again and hear him tell some stories from his early days in Belmont.

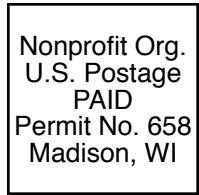
I left DARE after graduating from UW–Madison with a bachelor's degree in political science. I wanted a change of scenery after growing up in Middleton and attending UW–Madison, so I moved to southwest Georgia. I worked for Habitat for Humanity International at their headquarters for five years and then joined Habitat's version of the Peace Corps. I was the first "International Partner" to be placed in Europe, and spent three years helping establish Habitat affiliates in Northern Ireland, Slovenia, and Great Britain. I moved back to Madison after finishing my overseas term and now work at the UW again, doing marketing for UW Extension Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning. Currently our biggest marketing effort is UWin, an initiative to help more Wisconsin adults get their bachelor's degrees.

I still have my volumes of DARE on my bookshelf at home, and am very fortunate to have a couple signed by Dr. Cassidy and several of the other Editors. I had a lot of fun in the time I worked at DARE and think of your work often. It was especially interesting preparation for life in the South and the colorful vernacular. ♦

Hearing from former staffers and volunteers is always a treat! If you'd like to share memories of your time at the Dictionary or let us know what you've been up to since leaving Helen C. White Hall, please contact us by "snail mail" or through our Web site.

“Can one person alter continental language usage? . . . I am . . . from Milwaukee—born and raised, thank you very much—so of course upon reading the latest edition of the newsletter I went by the Historical Society Museum gift shop, bought many 'bubbler' t-shirts, and sent them as Christmas gifts to all my fellow ex-pat Milwaukeeans all over the western half of the US. Expect a culture shift. . . .”

Linda J. Johnson, Ph.D.
Assistant Dean, L&S Research Services
University of Wisconsin–Madison



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