

# DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

Spring/Summer 2010

## Mean Enough to Push a Widder Woman's Dog in the Well

Roland L. Berns  
*DARE* Editor

The historian Barbara Tuchman once noted that dire events are five or ten times more likely than pleasant ones to find their way into history.<sup>1</sup> A writer may sleep through a quiet time, but not through a disaster. In the same way, long after we have forgotten the many pleasant co-workers who shared a laugh at coffee break and remembered our birthdays, we recall in miserable detail the nasty, spiky, crazy one who set everyone else on edge. So it is not surprising to find that some of the most vivid, heartfelt, and interesting language picked up during the *DARE* fieldwork refers to the least pleasant of people.

Dante, who knew something about unpleasant people, established a hierarchy for them in his *Inferno*. To judge from the color and vigor of their remarks, the *DARE* Informants likewise saved special consideration for some offenders. Six of the Seven Deadly Sins (for some reason, we didn't ask about Envy) are covered by the *DARE* Questionnaire, but by far the most memorable responses are those having to do with Anger.

There may be a practical reason for this. Gluttony is an inward vice, and does not affect the observer. The same is true of Avarice. And Sloth (unless you are a parent or an employer) disturbs no one. Lust is often focused on one object at a time, and so attracts limited attention. Pride does have an outward show, but is primarily self-regarding. Anger alone is so diffuse in its objects,

<sup>1</sup>A *Distant Mirror*, Foreword. She called the principle "Tuchman's Law."

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## Funding Update

Jon E. Sorenson  
Director of Development

I just returned from a brief trip to Ogunquit, Maine, where you can't turn around without running into (and of course eating) a lobster roll. I'd heard of this treat before, but had never had the pleasure of eating one. The **lobster roll** entry in Volume III of *DARE* makes my mouth water with the recent memory. I especially enjoyed the citation from the *New York Times Magazine*: "Pre-lecture chatter was of lobster rolls, continuing-education budget cuts and the goddess Ishtar." That must have been an interesting lecture!

Another first on this trip was buying an "electronic handheld information device" (I won't include a product advertisement here!). Discovering all of the applications available, including a dictionary, was both time-consuming and mind-boggling. With the possibility of *DARE* becoming an online, searchable dictionary, I can imagine traveling through New England or the Southwest and searching for local delicacies with exotic names—great potential as a travel tool and a new "app." One could take a culinary trip with *DARE*, with

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and, being directed violently outward, so impossible to ignore.

Let us start small, with anger directed at the mildest of creatures. In response to the lead-in, "He's mean enough to \_\_\_\_\_," an Indiana Informant responds, "pinch a sensitive plant."<sup>2</sup> From Louisiana, we have "pull up young cotton," and from emphatic Mississippi, "mean enough to pull up young cotton and piss in the hole."

A little further up the chain of being, we have "mean enough to push baby chicks in the creek (or water)," attested by five Informants. This turns strangely ineffective (or shows unconscious pity) with the 17 Informants who say, "mean enough to push (or throw) baby ducks in the water." Finishing up the poultry, we have the wonderfully complex "mean enough to steal a blind chicken's breakfast," which, when you think about it, probably had to come from New York. For muscle, "mean enough to choke his own horse to death" (Minnesota) is very impressive. But the palm for downright meanness goes to Texas for "mean enough to push a widder woman's dog in the well."

Of course, dogs are not the half of it, at least not for those with mothers and grandmothers. As high-value counters in the meanness sweepstakes, Mom and Grandma are at the very top, and those mean enough to mistreat them lurk at the very bottom. "Mean enough to kill his (own) mother (or grandmother)" is just about as mean as it gets (83 Infs), with the colorful "cut (or chop) his (own) mother's (or grandmother's) head off" thrown in here and there for variety. "Mean enough to sell his grandmother to the glue works" (Minnesota) seems to combine business with pleasure. The disturbingly specific "kill his grammaw downstairs" is from California. Somewhat surprisingly, "screw his own mother (or grandmother)" occurs only once in each case.<sup>3</sup>

Those restrained by filial devotion merely "hit," "whip," "kick," "beat," or "throw rocks at" Mom or Grandma, or hit her with a shovel (New York). Slightly better (or worse), the unnatural grandchildren may become litigious. There is "mean enough to sue his momma" (South Carolina), "arrest his own mother (or grandmother)" (8 Infs), "throw his own mother in jail" (Pennsylvania), "give his own mother a ticket" (New Jersey), or, in a twofer, "put

<sup>2</sup>*Mimosa pudica*, which folds its leaves together when touched.

<sup>3</sup>Remember, though, that the fieldwork was done between 1965 and 1970.

his mother in jail and throw in his sister for company" (Florida).

So what are these people eating that makes them so mean? The *DARE* findings suggest that ferrous poisoning may be a factor, but cause and effect are hard to distinguish here. "Mean enough to chew (or bite or eat) ten-penny (or twenty-penny) nails (or spikes)" (54 Infs) certainly shows a pattern. Some "chew nails and spit rust (or tacks)," but the most ambitious "spit submarines (or battleships)" (both New York). Other contributing causes are suggested by "mean enough to eat glass," "eat shit," "eat shit with a stick," and "eat shit and bark at the moon" (New York again). Biting is a related phenomenon, as in "mean enough to bite a snake," "bite you," "bite your head off," or "bite him own self" [*sic*] in North Carolina. "Mean enough to take your eye out and eat it for a grape" (Illinois) falls outside any category, and "mean enough to wipe his ass with sandpaper" (Pennsylvania) is another one of those cause-and-effect puzzlers. "Mean enough to fart in a pail of water" (New Jersey) will keep you awake at night trying to figure it out.

After dinner it's time for (what else?) a good, rousing fight. Our contenders are not only tough enough to tangle with the customary "bear," "bull," and "buzz saw," but in some cases to meet them armed with only a stick. "Mean enough to fight the devil" (Alabama) seems plenty mean, but according to one Pennsylvania Informant, the *ne plus ultra* is "mean enough to fight Gene—he's the baddest dude in the world."

But let us take a step back for a moment. In each of these descriptions, we have been assuming an unconscious identification with the bad guy: what is he mean enough to do? How does he act? We put ourselves in his place. In one of those reversals that proves that genius is looking at things in a new way, two Informants from Arkansas put the matter in different (and practical) terms: "He's mean enough to need killing."

The foregoing gives us something of a picture of meanies at work (or play, depending on how you think about being mean). But what about when they're just sitting around? "He's mean enough to \_\_\_\_\_" elicits characteristic actions, but the *DARE* question "He's meaner than \_\_\_\_\_" calls for description and comparison. "Meaner than the devil (or Satan) (himself)" and the like, with 307 responses, would reassure the Prince of Darkness that he is still the villain to beat, with Kaiser Bill, Judas Iscariot, Hitler, and "Nero when Rome burned" making only a poor showing be-

hind him. "Meaner than my wife" (New York) gives one pause, though.

"Meaner than itchy underwear" (Texas) and "mean as his hide will hold him" (Georgia) show the uses of poetry in expressing a deep truth, as do "meaner than gar broth" (Indiana and Wisconsin), "meaner than skunk meat" (also Wisconsin), and "meaner than turkey-turd beer" (Maryland). As to the last, there really is such a thing, as Volume V of *DARE* will show.

These instances show a semantic shift from the *mean* of the previous question. Here, *meaner* is also taken to signify "unpleasant" or "nasty" in the sense of disgustingly offensive. Right at the top of that list has to be "meaner than a peck of assholes," followed by "owl's shit" (or "a bucket of sour owl shit," as my father used to say). Shit in general, but especially cat shit, is an index of this kind of meanness (as in "meaner than cat shit and a damn sight nastier" [New Jersey]), though the scientific thinking behind "lower than whale shit" (Pennsylvania) (or, as I once heard it, "lower than the whale turds on the ocean floor") has to be admired.

What, if anything, does this add up to? I have to say that I chose this subject because I thought it would be fun to look at. I enjoyed compiling this record, and I cannot escape the notion that most of the Informants quoted here enjoyed giving their responses. Their language shows them having fun. So what's going on? Maybe when we can get a little distance from the people who make us crazy, it isn't just exasperation but a kind of head-shaking admiration we feel. And maybe the way to account for that is to admit that sometimes they do what we'd like to. ♦

*Roland L. Berns has worked as a Science Editor and General Editor for DARE since 1990. His article on DARE's natural science entries, "A Scientific Portrait," appeared in the Winter 2003 issue of this Newsletter and can be accessed at <www.dare.wisc.edu>.*

“Martha [Barnette] and I both use it [=DARE] often and we joke when our calls are a little too much about American dialects that we're doing 'DARE on the air.' ”

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

## Funding Update

*Continued from page 1*

delicious results. (Cautionary note: A red-headed woodpecker is sometimes referred to as a "lobster" in North Carolina. Don't order a lobster roll there!)

Whether you open *DARE* on your library table or with some mobile device in the future, this monumental resource could not exist without your support. The eagerly anticipated publication of Volume V is not far away (fall of 2011), and the resources necessary to get there are still vitally needed and appreciated.

For more information about various types of giving opportunities, please call me at (608) 262-7211 or e-mail me at <jon.sorenson@uwfoundation.wisc.edu>. If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation by check or credit card, please use the coupon below. You can also make a gift online at <www.dare.wisc.edu> (follow the "Donate to the dictionary" link). We are extremely thankful for your interest, support, and generosity. ♦

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## At the Newberry Library



Photo credit: George E. Hall

Last April, at the request of Bob Karrow, Chief Editor Joan Houston Hall gave a talk about DARE at the Caxton Club, Chicago's venerable bibliophilic organization. As a thank-you, Karrow provided Hall with a personal tour of the vaults at the Newberry Library, where he is Curator of Special Collections and Curator of Maps.

“I’ve very much enjoyed the latest two issues of the *DARE* newsletter—the most recent [=Spring/Summer 2008] for all the ‘how I use *DARE*’ testimonials (fun!), and the previous [=Winter 2008] because you closed your column with a delightful expression I haven’t heard since my late Mom (Grand Rapids, Michigan) used it when I was a kid. What do you know about the origins of ‘My sufficiency is suffonsified?’ I had always assumed it was something Mom made up, but now I’m wondering if this is another colorful example of regional English. Would love to hear what you know about the expression’s origins. Being a diehard ‘word wonk,’ I have a shelf full of reference books on word and phrase origins, but have not found this one in any of them. [*DARE* Ed: Look for it at **suffancified** in Volume V!]”

Thanks for all you do. I own all four volumes (so far) of *DARE*, and am eagerly awaiting the publication of Vol. V. In the meantime, the newsletters are a wonderful way of keeping in touch with those of us who follow your work with avid interest.”

Kathy Westra  
Director, Advocacy Communications  
The Wilderness Society  
Washington, D.C.

“Great to hear from *DARE* on Larry Meiller’s [Wisconsin Public Radio] program this week. . . . Best regards. Fight the good fight. You folks are true National Cultural Heroes.”

Dr. Charles C. Fuller  
Colfax, Wisconsin



## DARE in Germany and England

On June 10, Senior Editor Luanne von Schneidemesser gave a lecture on “The Dictionary of American Regional English: Its Creation, Content, Changes, and Present Status” at RWTH Aachen University in Germany, at the invitation of Prof. Ludwig Deringer.

The following week, she attended the Fifth International Conference on Historical Lexicography and Lexicology at St. Anne’s College, University of Oxford, celebrating ten years of the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. OED Associate Editor Peter Gilliver alerted Luanne to the fact that her hotel was very close to James Murray’s house, which she would pass on the way to the conference. The Scriptorium is no longer there, and the house at 78 Banbury Road is privately owned, but in front of the house is the “pillar box” that was placed there in the 1880s due to the volume of mail sent by Murray and his colleagues. Peter pointed out that most such post boxes bear the initials of the king or queen reigning at the time of the placement, but this one must have been hastily erected, since there are no initials. ♦



“We certainly enjoyed your educational presentation to our group. . . . When helping you carry the *DARE* volumes to your car, I found that they are literally a hefty undertaking!”

Gail Holmes  
University of Wisconsin–Madison Retirement  
Association

“I always enjoy the newsletter. It evokes a response of some sort from me each time! The current [=Winter 2009] newsletter caused me to raise my eyebrows to think the word ‘chock’ was considered a quaint regionalism!”

Jane Maher  
Middleton, Wisconsin



## Where Are They Now?

*Carrie Estill was a DARE Editor from 1981 to 1983, joining the staff shortly before completing her dissertation at UW–Madison, where she earned a Ph.D. in linguistics with a minor in South Asian studies. Beth Gardner recently caught up with Carrie (who now lives just outside Paris, France) via e-mail.*

**Q:** What originally brought you to *DARE*?

**A:** A job opening! I also had offers from Singapore National University and Ball State in Muncie, Indiana. I chose *DARE* because I wanted to stay in Madison at the time.

**Q:** What do you remember most vividly about working at *DARE*, and what were some of your favorite editorial assignments?

**A:** I started at cap-. When I got to car-, there were a lot of Spanish-influenced expressions and vocabulary. I lived in rural California from the time I was eight until seventeen; I enjoyed these expressions. I also enjoyed working on the entries for **bush scythe**, **bush hog**, etc. These were clearly regional. My parents were both Southerners, so I brought something unique to the *Dictionary*.

**Q:** When did you move to Europe?

**A:** I lived as a child in Europe from age two to age eight. I moved back for good at the age of thirty-six. I have worked in Switzerland (five years), France (thirteen years), Germany (three years), and Austria (one year).

**Q:** Tell us about your career as a technical writer and project manager.

**A:** I have worked for both small and large companies. I currently work for SAP (a business software company), both planning chunks of documentation and actually writing it. I also suggest user interface strings and localization options.

I serve as the Delegate of Personnel (protecting the workers' rights) and am active in a union, the CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail). I have also served on the Health and Safety Committee.

**Q:** Do you ever use *DARE* in your work?

**A:** My experience at *DARE* makes me sensitive to regional differences and national differences (British vs. American). It also allows me to guess where people are from—a good gambit at cocktail parties.

**Q:** I understand you are active in the France Chapter of the Wisconsin Alumni Association. Is this a large group? What sorts of events and activities does the group sponsor?

**A:** I have been the treasurer since the group began in 2002. We have 1,400 on our mailing list. I have probably seen about 200 alumni at the various events. We have four main events per year: a speaker in the fall (usually our scholarship recipient); a holiday dinner in the winter (this year, a joint dinner honoring the fiftieth anniversary of the Peace Corps); another speaker in the spring; and a picnic in summer. We also do a Crazylegs run, a small Founders' Day dinner, and various get-togethers with visiting UW professors.

**Q:** What do you like to do in your leisure time?

**A:** I play bridge, do yoga, swim, go to opera and classical music concerts, travel, and take care of my husband, Ken, and my dog, Patch. I like to travel. I will be going to India, Bali, and Viet Nam this December. I never had children, but enjoy the children of others. ♦

## Erratum

In the "Coming in Volume V" column in the last issue of the *DARE Newsletter* (Winter 2010), the term *yellowhammer* should be defined as "flicker" rather than "goldfinch." ("Goldfinch" is the correct definition of the preceding term, *yellowbird*.) Thanks to David Quady of Berkeley, California, for spotting this! ♦

## Coming in Volume V . . . in Photos

Nature photography is an engrossing hobby for *DARE*'s Technical Typist, Cathy Attig. As Cathy inputs *Dictionary* text, she enjoys discovering variant names for the plants she has captured with her camera; we enjoy featuring her photos in these pages. ♦



*Asclepias tuberosa*—see **butterfly weed 1** in *Volume I* and watch for **swallowwort 2**, **tuber root**, **white root 2**, and **witchweed** in *Volume V*.

*Trillium grandiflorum*—one of the many species included in the *Volume V* “collector entry” **trillium**; for this species in particular, see **trinity lily** and **white lily**.



**DARE Newsletter**

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