

DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

Summer 1999



Barbara Myhre Vass, DARE Fieldworker

On the Road for the *Dictionary*: Notes from a Fieldworker's Journal Barbara Myhre Vass

[DARE Ed: This is the second in a continuing series of reminiscences by DARE Fieldworkers—the people who actually collected much of the information on which the Dictionary is based. Armed with questionnaires, a tape recorder, and enthusiasm, they went to preselected communities, found people who had lived there all their lives, and spent many hours with them, asking the nearly seventeen hundred questions in the questionnaire. As you will see, it took ingenuity, persistence, and dedication. Without Fieldworkers like Barbara Vass, DARE would not exist.]

10 February 1969, Belvidere, Illinois
***Paid to Mrs. E.W. 3 nights' lodging @ \$1.50/
night, \$4.50***

In 1969 Belvidere (pop. 13,000), Boone County, Illinois, was the hometown of the reigning

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Funding Update

David Simon
Development Specialist

The *Dictionary of American Regional English* is a national effort in more ways than one. As we all know, it documents and illustrates the English language as spoken by Americans in each of our fifty states. But as I have also discovered, its support reflects a national consensus that this is a very special project that needs to be completed.

I have had the opportunity to talk to *DARE* supporters from across the country. At Harvard University last month, I heard about the importance of the project and how the *Dictionary* is used in coursework on that historic campus. In April I met with people in New York who have great respect for the historic preservation aspect of the effort and want to see *DARE* reach the letter Z. In Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, I have heard similar enthusiasm and respect for the *Dictionary* and its dedicated staff.

Most importantly, I have heard from many readers of this *Newsletter* (from Virginia, Kansas, Washington, Texas, and Illinois, to name just a few states) who have made a gift in support of *DARE*. Large contributions and small contributions—they all make a difference and are very important to us. Many people have told me that looking through *DARE* reminds them of the language they grew up with, bringing back special memories of their hometowns, friends, and families. It means a great deal to people to see “their” language in the *Dictionary*. **Thank you for your support.**

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On the Road

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Miss America. It was also recovering from a tornado two years earlier and adjusting to the influx of strangers come to fill 5,000 jobs at the new Chrysler plant.

In Belvidere, I was adjusting to my first day as a fieldworker for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. I was 23 and had just finished an M.A. specializing in English linguistics at Madison. I was familiar with the *Dictionary* from my phonetics course: our major class project had been to transcribe "The Story of Arthur the Rat" from a *DARE* tape and then analyze the speaker's syllabic nuclei.

I logged fifty hours on that report. It was cumbersome to operate the tape recorder and transcribe at the same time, so I put the recorder on a card table next to the bed and propped myself and my clipboard up with pillows. From this phonetics command post, I pushed "Play" and "Rewind" with my toes as I listened, transcribed, rewound, and listened again. My "Arthur" reader, Mr. C.A.B., was born in Apalachicola, Florida, in 1905. I listened to him read the story so many times that I can still recite the opening lines with his inflections.

I graduated in January of 1969 and went to work for the *Dictionary* in February. That spring I commuted from Madison to make tape recordings and complete questionnaires in eleven Illinois towns: Belvidere, West Dundee, Ottawa, Morris, Downers Grove, Zion, Winnetka, South Holland, Bourbonnais, Forrest, and Towanda. A summer road trip took me to Mt. Pulaski, Beardstown, and Quincy in Illinois, then Bakersfield, Fresno, and Folsom in California.

From the first, I kept two palm-size black notebooks: one, a record of expenses, and the other, a collection of impressions. Rereading the journals thirty years later, I realize how much I learned in those six months on the road for the *Dictionary*.

31 March 1969, Morris, Illinois

Lunch \$.33, dinner \$1.56, gas 9.5 gal. \$3.97

My first lesson was how to travel cheaply. By 1969 the *DARE* Word Wagons (camping vans) had been withdrawn because of budget cutbacks. Since I earned a flat fee for each questionnaire and was on my own for transportation and accommodations, the more cheaply I traveled, the more my

take-home pay.

I tried to leave Madison early enough to arrive at my target by lunch. In each town I ordered the same first meal: a toasted cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee. The size of the bill was a rough guide to the cost of living I could expect in the area.

After lunch I searched for a room to rent in a private house. Rooming-house rates ranged from \$1.50 a night in blue-collar Belvidere to \$4.00 in pricey Winnetka. Occasionally I got stuck spending big bucks for a hotel: \$6.00 at the Tivoli across from the train depot in Downers Grove.

Some landladies had let out rooms for years and were great characters. In Ottawa, Mrs. E.C., a widow for thirteen years, answered my inquiry with an abrupt "\$3.00 a night and I'm not cooking for you." At the end of the week, I left her house stuffed with excellent meals, apple pie, copies of her recipes, and stories of her husband. He asked her to marry him the first night they met and kept on asking every time he saw her. Six months later she said yes.

Though most of the landladies were long-time residents, it appears that none of them were natives, for I never used them as informants. Perhaps their outsider status was the reason they sometimes had a different take on the community than other people I met. In Winnetka, Swedish-born Mrs. H. fed me coffee, rolls, and opinions in the morning. "[Winnetkans] are a stuffy lot," she declared. "They're nice enough among themselves, but not to others." Winnetka was my only shutout; I had to make two trips because I couldn't find enough people to interview the first time. They were just too busy.

In other towns, I was amazed at how generous people were once they understood I was doing research for a dictionary, not selling one. Fieldwork gifted me with a series of lessons about the kindness of strangers.

Discouraged by an unsuccessful search for a room, not knowing where I would sleep that night, I stopped for supper in downtown Morris, Illinois, pop. 10,000, seat of Grundy County. The café owner, Mr. W., took on my cause, calling all over town to find me a room. He had no luck either. As the café filled up, Mr. W. asked to seat another lady at my booth. She was a Chicago social worker, the speaker for a Lutheran Women's Auxiliary meeting that evening. After dinner, she took me along to the

church and had me introduce myself. I wrote in my journal:

I told them who I was & what I was doing, also that I had no place to stay, and Mrs. B.H. took me home with her.

At the café the next day, Mr. W. seated me at a table with three other women, announcing, "This is Barb. She's in town for a few days."

Morris had ice cream parlors, smoke shops, and "Harry's Tap—the Farmer's Paradise." Indian relics and war mementos filled display cases in the courthouse: from World War I, "German toothpaste used by Harry C." Flags flew everywhere the day of Eisenhower's funeral.

28 April 1969, Zion, Illinois

Lunch \$.84, city maps \$.30, phone calls \$1.30

Having found lodging in a town, I searched for informants. Librarians were wonderful sources of leads, as were downtown storeowners and historical society folks (often one and the same). To complete a questionnaire, I needed twelve hours of interview time with no more than three or four natives of the town. A "native" was one who had been born in the immediate area, had not left for long periods, and preferably had parents who were also native. Finding several people who met all the qualifications and had the physical stamina and willingness to be interviewed could be demanding:

Unfortunately can't use Mrs. M.R. She's only lived here since 1895, having spent the first 13 years of her life in Nebraska. She's very hard of hearing which would probably be a problem.

Hours of shouting questions was exhausting.

Most people who could give me hours of time on short notice were retired. Forty to sixty years my senior, they taught me a lot about the importance of attitude. Some folks in their 60's, having retired, seemed ready to die; others in their 70's and 80's were vibrant.

As I interviewed a lively Mr. T.E. in Zion, his wife sat nearby knitting a curious strip of white cloth. She was making bandages, thirty stitches wide and ninety inches long, for a leper colony in Africa. They lasted longer than machine-made bandages, she told me.

Miss I.D., 79, wrote two local newspaper columns and had a show five days a week on the Elgin radio station, though she grudgingly admitted

to an afternoon nap.

A quarter century earlier, Mrs. R.H., 73, and her husband had turned their Quincy farmstead icehouse, then the chicken coop and the wash house, into a country boutique. She was retired but getting panicky, she said, because she had too much to do before she died. Her house was full of boxes of projects.

In addition to answering all my questions ("What do you call soft rolls of dust that collect on the floor under beds or other furniture?"), Mrs. H. let me take a most welcome shower at her house. By this time it was summer, and I was camping my way from interview to interview, from Illinois to California.

On my travels I learned to interview wherever it was convenient for the informant. I asked my questions in living rooms, at kitchen tables, behind a grocery store meat counter, among instruments in a music shop. One night I asked questions sitting in a farmhouse hallway. A blanket was draped across the doorway of a small room off the hall; on the other side of the blanket, my informant sat in the dark candling the eggs for her egg route the next day.

In Folsom, California, I interviewed a teacher, Miss J.C., in the ladies' room of an elementary school during an evening program. Early the next morning, Miss C. took me to meet her parents. When her father was a child, an old man had told him stories of the slave market in Sacramento. At auction, sellers put bags over the slaves' heads so buyers couldn't tell how old they were, as no one would buy a slave with gray hair. Later that day, I sat with the children in Miss C.'s classroom and watched on television as Apollo 11 splashed down.

23 July 1969, Folsom, California

Newspaper and coffee, \$.26

Folsom was the last of my *Dictionary* towns, but not the end of habits and interests I acquired with the work. Local newspapers, old cemeteries, and stories of place became part of my life.

As a fieldworker, I scanned local newspapers for the odd word or phrase that might be of interest for the *Dictionary*. The first paper I picked up on the road, the *Rockford Labor News* (Feb. 7,

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On the Road

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1969), revealed that living "in modern day Swedish style" meant "living as husband and wife but without benefit of clergy or even a civil ceremony." Ever since, my first acquisition in any new town has been the newspaper. Words and phrases, issues and attitudes, local history and culture, what folks eat and do for fun—it's all there. My husband brings the local papers home for me when he travels; they are one of my best presents.

When I started fieldwork, I often scouted for country cemeteries where I could take a walk and clear my head between appointments. Later I collected inscriptions, both amusing and poignant. "Go home my friends and shed no tears/ I must lie here till Christ appears" struck me as humorously grouchy. With my generation at war in Southeast Asia, another marker resonated:

*Died February 24, 1865, 21 years, 13 days
Soldier rest thy warfare o'er
Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking
Dream of battlefields no more
Days of danger nights of waking.*

Finally, I developed an abiding interest in place. "What's the population?" I ask in any new town. The local resident I'm grilling sometimes doesn't know and feels uncomfortable having no answer to give. To relieve the awkwardness, I hurry on: "How do people make a living around here?" That question is more welcome, as everyone can answer in whole or in part. "How did the people get here?" produces answers that are many and varied and unfold gradually over a visit.

A sense of words and time and place—these I kept with me long after I turned in the questionnaires and the tapes. For six months I traveled back and forth across Illinois and across the country, but also across time and across our culture. I left downtown Madison, where I had taped my apartment windows against the pepper gas sprayed on protesters. And I traveled to places where people told their grandparents' stories of homesteading, of having little to eat but turnips that first hard winter.

In the generational and racial and political polarizations of 1969, people argued stridently about who were the "real" Americans. Looking back now, however, I believe that among the phone calls and phonetic transcriptions, the hours on the

road, the shipping back of questionnaires by Greyhound bus, among all the details of collecting for the *Dictionary*, I absorbed the understanding that all of us are the "real" Americans, that everyone's place and everyone's story are part of all of our places, all of our stories.

Barbara Vass lives in the Town of Somers (pop. 8,500), Kenosha County, Wisconsin, near the historic Chicago-to-Green Bay trail. When not teaching writing at Gateway Technical College, she can be found on Washington Island working on a century-old house across the road from the cemetery.



Funding Update

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The *Dictionary* currently has a one-to-one matching grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which doubles the value of each contribution to *DARE*. Over two hundred new contributors have supported *DARE* in recent months. If you would like to join our list of contributors, it is very simple to do. To make a cash gift to *DARE*, checks should be made out to *DARE/UW Foundation* and mailed to *DARE*, 6131 Helen C. White Hall, 600 North Park St., Madison, WI 53706, Attn: David Simon. The form that you can use to charge a contribution to *DARE* is below. Thank you in advance for your support of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

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Coming in Volume IV

In the last few issues, we have simply listed some of the entries that will be found in Volume IV. This time we want to test your regional exposure. How many headwords can you match with their definitions? (Answers are at the bottom of page 6.)

1. *pancake* ___ a. Of bacon: rancid
2. *pedro* ___ b. To damage, esp by misuse
3. *peeny* ___ c. A flash flood
4. *piccolo* ___ d. Menhaden
5. *pintado* ___ e. Stay! Used to make a cow stand still
6. *pip* ___ f. Alarming, dreadful, spooky
7. *pogy* ___ g. To trifle, fuss
8. *pokerish* ___ h. A hustle
9. *quiddle* ___ i. A card game
10. *rigid* ___ j. Of a grain of rice: to sprout
11. *rimrack* ___ k. Stupid, apathetic, or confused by liquor
12. *ruddle* ___ l. Severely cold; frigid
13. *rumdum* ___ m. An attic
14. *runout* ___ n. A bread roll with a crisp crust
15. *rustle* ___ o. To move briskly
16. *rusty* ___ p. A deception, trick
17. *sandy* ___ q. A jukebox
18. *sashiate* ___ r. A heelsplitter (freshwater mussel)
19. *saw* ___ s. A Spanish mackerel
20. *semmel* ___ t. A game with a bat and wooden peg

Notes and Quotes

Much of our correspondence takes place via e-mail these days. We'd like to share a sample of e-mail messages from people across the country and around the world. And we'd enjoy hearing from you, too—by e-mail, "snail mail," or whatever way you'd like to say hello.

"Thank you for your prompt and very informative message concerning this strange word [= *sirsee* 'a small, impromptu gift']. I had never heard of it (I grew up in Memphis), and the only person I could find here who had definitely used the word is a woman who grew up in North Dakota. . . May I post your message to the Stumpers list [=an electronic bulletin board for librarians]? . . . I think it would be very useful for the Archives."

Douglas McCown
Atlanta-Fulton Public Library

"I just looked at the *DARE* home page and was very impressed. It will definitely be a link for my History of the English Language classes to use."

Gerry Richman
Suffolk, England

"My household—not all linguists—listened raptly to the *Sunday Weekend Edition* story [about *DARE*, on National Public Radio]. Really good, we thought."

Arnold Zwicky
Stanford University

"Thanks very much for the information. Your 1859 quote, in fact, beats our first by 5 years."

Tania Young
Oxford English Dictionary

"Hello from Croatia. As a foreigner I have just one objection: MAKE AN INTERACTIVE CD! After that you could say 'excellent job!' . . . P.S. Such a beautiful book is too expensive for us."

Ignac Kulier
Zagreb, Croatia

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[DARE Ed: Harvard University Press has assured us that a CD-ROM version will be made available when the last volume has been published.]

"Most grateful for 'sagah' data [=information on sager 'a rustic']. You are a doozy."

Matthew J. Bruccoli
University of South Carolina

"I just wanted to say thank you so much, both for the detail of your reply and the speed with which I got it. The information [on the phrase *forty ways to Sunday*] you were able to give to me was very helpful!"

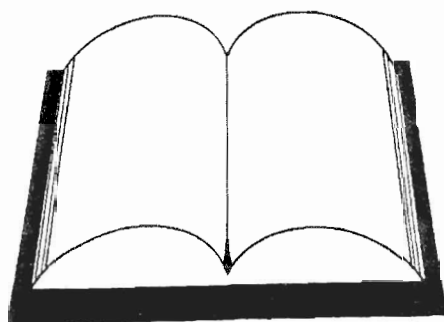
Amy Fisher
Canada

"I'm looking forward to many happy hours with DARE. Glad I found you."

Miki Davis
Fairfax, Virginia

"We are very excited about this remarkable resource for actors and dialect coaches. . . What a marvelous work this is! I'm delighted that it's ongoing, and that I'm so close to the resource."

Karen Ryker, Theatre and Drama Dept.
University of Wisconsin-Madison



Answers to Volume IV Quiz

a. 16; b. 11; c. 14; d. 7; e. 19; f. 8; g. 9; h. 15; i. 2; j. 6; k. 13; l. 10; m. 12; n. 20; o. 18; p. 17; q. 4; r. 1; s. 5; t. 3.

Where Are They Now?

In our continuing effort to keep you in touch with DARE colleagues, we use this space to fill you in on several former staff members. We'd be pleased to hear from you, too. Just drop us a line at the DARE offices.

Coming to DARE with a specialization in South Asian languages and having taught both in China and in Saudi Arabia, editor **Ted Hill** (1983–93, with time out for computer science courses) had a keen eye for structural differences in languages. He took special glee in attacking the problems of grammar and syntax that others of us were less eager to tackle. (Take a look at the entry for *may*, where the complexities of *may can*, *might could*, *might should*—and others—are laid out clearly). In the end, computer science won out, and Ted left regional language for programming language. He spent two years developing software for visualizing DNA structure, then worked on automated newsroom control programs that are currently used by several major national and international television broadcasters. He is now developing e-commerce websites at Berbee Information Networks here in Madison.

As a freshman at the UW-Madison, **Gabriel Sanders** took a German course taught by DARE's Luanne von Schneidemesser. When the class met at her house to watch a video of the fall of the Berlin Wall, he saw a copy of the *Dictionary* and was hooked. He worked for the project as a student assistant from 1991 through 1994. Gabriel spent countless hours checking pronunciations in the DARE Questionnaire. He remembers remarking that his work with the variants of *minnow* was making him hungry for sardines—and then finding a can of them waiting in his mailbox the next day, courtesy of Luanne! Listening to DARE tapes was a favorite task, particularly when, as with South Carolina tapes of Gullah speakers, they were not only interesting but also challenging. From DARE Gabriel went to Heidelberg, Germany, and then to the University of Chicago, where he earned an M.A. in European History. Heeding the call of his hometown, he then moved back to New York City, where he worked with the Leo Baeck Institute before joining the staff of *Vanity Fair* magazine.



Elizabeth Blake,
Proofreader

Staff Member Profile

In this feature column, David Simon chats with Elizabeth Blake, one of *DARE*'s two Proofreaders.

Q: How did you first hear about the *Dictionary of American Regional English*?

A: In 1960, Stanley Wiersma, my freshman English teacher and mentor at Calvin College, described an impressive project designed to record English as it was spoken in various regions of the United States. He was talking about the beginnings of *DARE*, but at that time it did not even have a name. In 1988, while being interviewed for the position of proofreader for the *Dictionary*, I learned that Professor Cassidy had been Mr. Wiersma's dissertation mentor and, thereby, identified the *Dictionary of American Regional English* as the product of the dialect project that had excited him so long ago. In part, I will confess, I was drawn to work for my mentor's mentor.

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

A: There are two important aspects of my job at *DARE*, which make up what I "like best": the people I work with and the quality of the work that we strive for as a staff. My colleagues intrigue me through the variety of their personalities and gifts, many of which are drawn upon in the production of this dictionary. Each day I anticipate the stimulation of their intellect and wit. The quality of work that we as a staff strive for is one of the highest possible degree of accuracy in the content and form of the *Dictionary*. Spending energy and time on a well-made product is inspiring and worthwhile to me.

Q: Why do you like being a proofreader?

A: Both Beth Gardner, *DARE*'s senior proofreader, and I sometimes joke about our role here as "detectives of the misplaced comma." (As you might guess, we enjoy reading detective novels.) Seriously, I do find constant satisfaction in the work of searching for and correcting errors or inconsistencies of punctuation, spelling, order, and house style in the text that we patrol. When I emerge from a period of calm concentration, often I feel that the work has been a form of meditation.

At *DARE*, however, being a "proofreader" entails tasks beyond proofreading the *Dictionary* text for accuracy and format—although that is, of course, our highest priority. One of my additional responsibilities is maintaining *ProCite3* databases of citations to both scholarly and popular sources that review, use, or refer to *DARE*, from which we make select bibliographies to append to, for example, grant applications and reports. I also help compile and proofread the *Index* of regional, social, and usage labels found in *DARE*. My favorite additional task, for it resembles a game of solitaire, is checking groups of entries before they are typed, for correctness and completeness of cross-references, alphabetical order of entries, and the presence of parts of speech. Texts of grants, reports, and dictionary quotations also need to be proofed for form and content. Occasionally I even have the fun of helping to plan a reception. This is just the right amount of variety to keep me fresh for proofreading.

Q: What is your favorite or the most unusual entry that you have proofread in *DARE*?

A: This question, which is frequently posed in various ways at parties by people whom I've just met, always causes me a bit of embarrassment: the fact is that in the act of proofreading, certain details of form so obsess me that I mostly pay attention to the content as it relates to what I'm checking. Therefore, I may recall with some excitement or frustration a particular proofreading problem I came across in the text more readily than I would be able to name and define entries that I have just proofread. Having said that, however, I also wish to reassure you that each day I am amused by and sometimes discuss with colleagues new words or facts related to the entries that either I or they are working on.

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DARE Newsletter

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Staff Member Profile

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

A: I'm devoted to David L., my fascinating partner of twenty-one years, to our two gracefully aging cats, to our lovely little home on the edge of the woods, and to the wildlife visitors to our yard.

In addition, since I was eleven years old, physical fitness has been my daily concern. For the last twenty-five years I've combined yoga and jogging in my weekly regimen, and five years ago I added strength and flexibility training. Also, as an observer only, I am an avid tennis fan, watching most of the Grand Slam tournaments as well as many of the Challenger circuit matches.

I confess to a passion for older cars, each of which I've maintained for daily use. In 1987, after finally retiring my first one, a 1968 Thunderbird (a lioness of a car), for the next twelve years I enjoyed the hulk of my dreams, a 1977 Checker Marathon, and now I'm supporting two elegant Jaguars, 1986 and 1987 XJ6 sedans, one for winter and the other for summer use. That I consider my car to be an extension of what I wear hints at a related preoccupation: my wardrobe.

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