

# DARE Newsletter

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Dictionary of American Regional English

Fall 1999



August Rubrecht in 1968

## Fieldwork and Racial Tension

August W. Rubrecht

[DARE Ed: Doing fieldwork for DARE posed problems of timing, logistics, endurance, and ingenuity. As the following essay in our continuing series of reminiscences illustrates, there were additional challenges for Fieldworkers in the South. Learning to understand community norms for interactions between Black and White people was crucial to finding Informants and getting an interview completed. To do so without offending, yet without accepting an unacceptable system, required care and practice.]

The year I was a DARE Fieldworker, 1967-68, was not an auspicious time to be driving around the South in a van with Wisconsin license plates. For three years activists, many of them from universities in the North, had fanned out to pressure public institutions and register voters in an attempt to assure that all citizens were actually permitted to

*Continued on page 2*

## Funding Update

David Simon

Development Specialist

The date September 24, 1999, was an exciting one for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. On that day, the first DARE Board of Visitors meeting was held in Madison, Wisconsin. Now, you are probably wondering, "What is the DARE Board of Visitors?"

The DARE Board of Visitors is a group of people who are strong supporters of the *Dictionary* and are working to see that the project is completed. In September the Board included the following ten people: Greg Alfus, Harlan Ellison, Morris Goodman, James J. Kilpatrick, Marianne Means, Cynthia Moore, Robert Moore, William Safire, John Shea, and Bruce Walker. Four members were able to attend the first meeting, joining Frederic Cassidy, Joan Hall, and me from DARE, as well as Dean Phillip Certain of the UW-Madison College of Letters and Science.

The meeting began with a discussion of the progress being made on the *Dictionary*, both editorially and in the development area. Fred Cassidy detailed the history of the DARE project and Joan Hall explained the many uses of the *Dictionary*. I was pleased to announce that over 200 new donors have become DARE supporters. We then had a productive discussion about the development effort at DARE.

*Continued on page 4*

## Fieldwork

*Continued from page 1*

enjoy the rights guaranteed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. White Southerners resented these activists and their activities. The Watts riots of 1965 and the bloody civil rights marches of 1966 were followed in the summer of 1967, just before I set out in the Word Wagon, by rioting in more than thirty cities, leaving scores dead and hundreds injured. While these disturbances directly affected only small areas, the images of them on TV had a powerful impact on people all over the country. Citizens of both races turned especially tense and suspicious in the South. That's where I was headed: Arkansas and Louisiana.

As it turned out, my fieldwork was slowed down only a little by the tensions and suspicions of the period. I kept my political profile as low as possible—an easy task because I am not an activist at heart. I have the observer's temperament, so just poking around finding words suited my natural inclinations. Though I realized the political climate needed to be changed, I was happy to leave the job of changing it to others and reluctant to be around while they were doing it.

For the most part I got my wish. The job of finding informants was delayed in Magnolia, Arkansas, by tension over an upcoming NAACP rally. In East and West Feliciana Parishes (Clinton and St. Francisville) in Louisiana I had to wait for election day to pass. Soon, though, I found excellent informants in all three places whose helpfulness and courtesy lived up to the clichés about Southern hospitality. Part of the time while I was working in New Orleans, African-Americans tied black cloths to the radio antennas on their cars so if a riot erupted, any African-American rioters would know to spare the car. It seemed to me they were running some risk of being targeted by rioters with other loyalties, but I kept that opinion to myself. In any case, none of this tension interfered with work on the New Orleans area questionnaires (QR's). On the day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis I was working 470 miles to the south in the small coastal village of Grand Isle, Louisiana. A tourist who had come for the surf fishing predicted we white people would have to isolate ourselves from the race war that was sure to ensue by barricading the bridge to the mainland. Everyone ig-

nored him. Gunfire did erupt once while I was there, but only because a Chicago policeman camping with his family challenged me to a contest shooting his service revolver at a row of tin cans lined up along the side of a dune. (If it makes any difference, I won.) A few weeks later I visited a friend in Memphis and did a QR there, but by that time National Guard tanks no longer patrolled the streets.

My good luck avoiding riots doesn't mean *DARE* fieldwork never crossed paths with civil rights issues, however. Some entries in my journal make that clear. Bear in mind as you read these excerpts that the polite colloquial adjective for an American of African heritage was *colored* and the approved term in formal written English was *Negro*. Though it could have neutral connotations when used by some people in some circumstances, the word *nigger*, then as now, was mainly derogatory. My bracketed place/date notes tell where and when I wrote the anecdote in my journal, not necessarily where and when the events happened.

The interview in Monticello, Arkansas, made it clear to me how important it was for the NAACP to keep on with its work of trying to change basic attitudes. My informant was Mr. S., a kind old retired grocer turned pawnbroker. I would go in about nine every morning, and usually a regular visitor would be there. Here is what I wrote about that visitor:

[Monticello, AR, Oct. 14] *E. is a constable and a salesman and he collects bad debts on the halves. Besides that, he was the one who organized the local chapter of the KKK, and [he believes] there is no finer opportunity to make a "nigger" toe the line than to catch him with an unpaid note and threaten him with a lawsuit. E. would be in Mr. S.'s office seeing if he could go out and collect some money for him. After they had gotten their business settled and Mr. S. had finished his paperwork, we would begin the QR.*

In fairness to the many white Southerners of good will, I must say this man's attitude lay at one end of the spectrum. As just one example at the other end, take Mr. A., owner of a major business in Lake Providence, Louisiana, where I chose African-American informants. The main one was a longtime employee of the enterprise and friend of Mr. A., who furnished a company conference room for the interview and let us do it on company time. At

times, though, the attitude held by that constable in Monticello, even in its less extreme forms, bred resistance to my job of locating informants.

[St. Francisville, LA, Nov. 3] *In the law office [where I was developing leads] I inadvertently let slip that I had interviewed a Negro in Lake Providence. One of the women there was surprised and a little offended that I would pay any attention to Negro speech. She called it only "slang" and considered it unworthy of notice.*

This reaction was especially troublesome because I was planning to find an African-American informant in Clinton, the next community over. In St. Francisville a gracious couple from the white elite not only agreed to serve as informants, but also helped me make contacts in Clinton. With the help of their introductions and recommendations to Clinton officials, I did find an excellent African-American informant, Mr. P., in rural Clinton. After recovering from a hospital stay, his wife also agreed to be interviewed. We started after the St. Francisville QR was finished. This family was equally gracious and hospitable, and because they lived in the country and had plenty of space, they offered to let me park the Word Wagon in their yard. I appreciated the offer but, fearing that doing so might make things difficult for both them and me, found someplace else to stay.

[Clinton, LA, Nov. 20] *I am staying at a Boy Scout camp here suggested by the lady in the sheriff's office. I came out to see the ranger about it and he said it would be all right for a night or two but he had some Scouts coming in before Thursday (Thanksgiving). He wondered if I couldn't find a place on private land to park. I said yes, I already had permission to stay in the yard of the man helping me with the QR, but that I hated to, partly because I like my privacy and partly because he is a colored man and I didn't want the white folks around here to think I was trying to get too close to the colored folks by being around them all the time. That was yesterday. This morning the ranger said he would show me a place where the Boy Scouts and I wouldn't bother each other, where there was water, and he would even fix it so I could take a hot shower. I'm not smart enough to use psychology; that was plain dumb luck that I said what I did in the way I did.*

After one of my interviews at the P. home, it became clear that my caution had been well advised.

[Clinton, LA, Nov. 24] *This evening something happened that I had hoped wouldn't; a white man, Mr. H., friend of the [Clinton informants], came by, while I was there. I*

*had of course told the sheriff who I was working with, and why, but this man didn't know. He asked me what my business was and I told him about checking with the sheriff, and [my informant] told him that [a civic official known as "Mr. Joe"] and Dr. T. had recommended him to me and vice versa. All Mr. H. said was [addressing my informant] "Well, you better watch that Mr. Joe and Dr. T. don't get you in trouble."*

I can only wonder how much deeper that man's suspicions would have been if he had found out how I had (apparently) violated local convention earlier in the week, after accepting an invitation by Mrs. P.

[Clinton, LA, Nov. 24] *She offered me some supper the other night and I gratefully accepted; the menfolks were late and I had been asking [her] parts of the QR. When she had it ready for me I noticed that there was only one place set. "Aren't you going to eat?" I asked. She explained shyly that she was "ashamed to eat in front of folks"—meaning white folks. I had no desire to change her customs, but [feeling too uncomfortable to eat under those circumstances, I asked B., her granddaughter, to join me and] I did feel a little less odd when B. sat at the table and ate too. I suppose I was violating a local custom—don't know for sure—but it was exceeding strange to me to be treated like a restaurant patron when I was a guest in a home.*

The experience with the Boy Scout camp ranger made me smart enough to use psychology. I saw how one might use attitudes about race to make fieldwork easier rather than harder. I didn't want to. I always tried to avoid manipulating prospective informants and the community members who helped me locate them. However, all have sinned and come short of the glory of their ideals, and my time to do so came some weeks later. The kind of manipulation I practiced—using racial attitudes to push people toward a particular decision—had no particular name in 1968. In 1995, pushed to its extreme during the O.J. Simpson trial, it would be called "playing the race card."

I did it for the first and only time in Franklin, Louisiana. (I did not get around to writing about these events in my journal till much later.) My first informant there did not enjoy the interview and declined to answer questions after the first session. I had trouble finding another with the same amount of education (we tried to keep all informants on one QR at the same social level) who also met the DARE criterion of having learned English as the

*Continued on page 4*

## Fieldwork

*Continued from page 3*

first language. The reason for this latter rule was to ensure that any foreign words we collected represented authentic loanwords. I worked for a week developing leads and following them up, but even after receiving permission from Professor Cassidy to bend the rule from "English first" to "English, mainly," I had found only two people willing to volunteer, and both of them sounded too French to be typical of Franklin's English speakers. Finally I paid a repeat visit to a college-educated resident who had suggested potential informants earlier in the week.

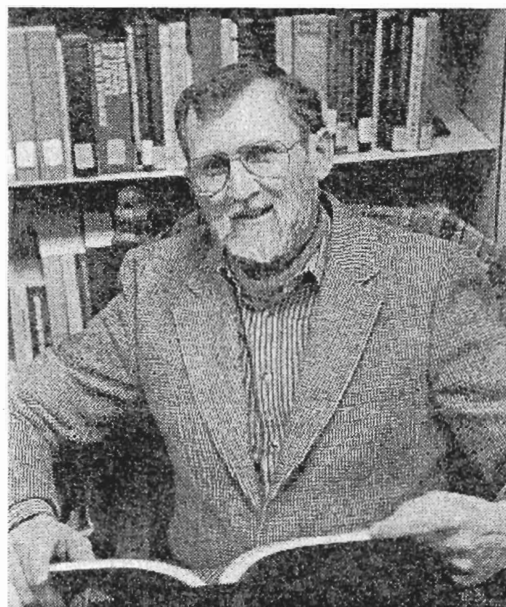
[Memphis, TN, April 19] *She had given me retired schoolteachers and newspaper reporters before. She ran through a long list of names in her mind, checked them all off, and found none suitable. I crossed my fingers, took a deep breath, and pulled the trick I had learned accidentally in Clinton. "It looks like in order to find the type of speech I want," said I with a regretful tone in my voice, "I might have to find a colored person. Maybe somebody's maid. Or somebody that works here in the library. But I started out with a white man, and I'd rather keep the QR consistent all the way through." That did it. She wasn't about to be the cause of me having to settle for a Negro. In five minutes I was talking to Mrs. S.D. on the phone and in another hour we had begun the QR. And so I finished in Franklin not long after.*

I have not gone back to any of these communities, but I can't help wondering what legacy the turmoil and tension of the 60s have left them. More than thirty years have gone by. The teenaged girl who sat down with me in her grandmother's house to a supper of black-eyed peas and sweet potatoes is now a middle-aged woman. Maybe she has teenagers of her own. Do they take it as a matter of course that they eat together with whites? All I know is what I read in the papers, but I bet they do.

The papers I am talking about come from my wife's hometown: Brinkley, Arkansas, an hour west of Memphis and two and a half hours north of Monticello. It shares the Mississippi Delta plantation culture with the *DARE* communities I mentioned. We kept two issues of *The Brinkley Argus* from 1971, the year we moved to Eau Claire, Wisconsin. In those papers every face in every photograph—of brides, the Little League baseball team, visiting evangelists, two men holding a large catfish, *everyone*—is white. We still get the *Argus*

mailed to our home, and I reread a couple of recent issues last evening. These days, at least a third of the faces are black, including those of the high school football captain, two members of the Junior High Honor Society, three members of a Cub Scout troop, everyone attending a family reunion, and the high school homecoming queen.

*August Rubrecht teaches courses in language, literature, and writing in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He lives with his wife and their teenaged son in rural Mondovi. Their daughter is a sophomore at Rice University. He has an ancillary career as a storyteller, with the slogan "Serving Wisconsin's need for Ozark narrative since 1971." In that role he does not feel bound to stick close to the facts, but he has taken pains to do so in this article.*



August Rubrecht today

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## Funding Update

*Continued from page 1*

Two gifts to *DARE* were announced at the meeting. John Shea announced a \$50,000 gift to *DARE* from the Franklin Philanthropic Foundation, and one Board member also pledged to contribute \$10,000 to *DARE* each year he is on the Board, starting with the year 2000. That was very encouraging news for the project!

There has recently been other good news concerning the Board of Visitors as well. Two additional people have accepted spots on the Board: Simon Winchester, author of *The Professor and the Madman*, and Jacquelyn Mitchard, syndicated columnist and author of *The Deep End of the Ocean*.



Our next Board of Visitors meeting will be in April of 2000. I have only touched on the highlights of the work being done by the Board members for the *Dictionary*, but I can say that it is truly exciting to have each Board member and the Dean of the College of Letters and Science supporting *DARE* so enthusiastically.

There is, however, considerable work to be done. Every gift to *DARE*, small or large, is very important to the success of our mission. We need you to be a part of our development effort. 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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Please use this gift to support the <i>Dictionary of American Regional English</i> .
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## Notes and Quotes

*In recognition of Frederic Cassidy's sixty years at the UW-Madison, we devote this issue's excerpts to letters from some of his former students.*

"This is a letter of thanks from a former graduate student. . . . You cultivated in me and my husband Stephen a life-long delight in words for which he was and I am profoundly grateful. . . . Thank you, Professor Cassidy, for the meticulous care and devotion you taught us. . . . You will not have remembered us, but be certain that your influence has spread into regions vast and distant. Although most of the praise you receive doubtless comes from your stunning achievement in *DARE*, this letter is in appreciation for your brilliance as a teacher."

Elizabeth R. Curry  
Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania

"Your course in the History of the English Language made a profound impression on me, and I remember it until this day, and have often considered its lessons about language in general. . . . I am now retired and have taken a part-time job . . . where I have a whole new perspective on language. . . . I hear splendid things every day and have often thought of you and *DARE*."

Beverly McGraw  
Williamsburg, Virginia

"The recent *On Wisconsin* article about you. . . prompts this note. My memories of classes I took from you in Beowulf and Old English are so vivid that I find it hard to believe that those occurred more than forty years ago. In fact, I have recently retired from a career at Mercer University. . . . My wife, who is University Librarian at Mercer, would want me to give you a special word of thanks from her for the work you have done throughout the years. She and I both look forward to volumes IV and V."

Kenneth Hammond  
Macon, Georgia

## Kudos for Cassidy

The second weekend of October was filled with honors and festivities for Frederic Cassidy, *DARE*'s Chief Editor. On the evening of October 8, the Wisconsin Humanities Council sponsored a reception at which Fred was presented the Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Humanities Scholarship. As well as honoring him for his success with *DARE*, the award recognized his service to Wisconsin through his radio call-in program about words, which was extremely popular across the state in the 1950s.

The following day, the *DARE* staff and the Department of English joined forces to host a party celebrating Fred's 120 semesters on the UW-Madison campus. About eighty friends and neighbors joined in remembering the events of sixty years and paying tribute to Fred's remarkable career.

The third milestone of the weekend was the celebration on October 10 of Fred's ninety-second birthday. Always one to look to the future, Fred plans to mark his centenary and the completion of Volume V of *DARE* in 2007!

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## Coming in Volume IV

Curious about what's coming in P, Q, R, and S? Here's a glimpse.

<i>palouser</i>	A makeshift lantern. (Chiefly NW)
<i>pinkwink</i>	A spring peeper. (Cape Cod, MA)
<i>potsy</i>	Hopscotch. (Chiefly NYC)
<i>quickwater</i>	White water. (Chiefly Nth, esp ME)
<i>riveter</i>	A woodpecker. (Southern Appalachians)
<i>rue back</i>	To back out of an agreement. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl)
<i>runaround</i>	An infection around a fingernail. (Chiefly Sth, S Midl, SW)
<i>schlepp</i>	To haul, lug (something); to drag oneself around. (Chiefly NYC, but becoming more widely known)
<i>shinnery</i>	An area covered with scrubby trees, esp oak. (Chiefly TX)

## 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 former staff members. Please let us know what *you're* doing.

In the summer of 1969 **William Middleton** "lugged a clunky old machine all over southern Illinois" doing interviews and making tape recordings for *DARE*. He remembers with fondness the meals at wonderful Midwestern family tables, the free concerts on banjo and piano, the tours of collections of various eccentric objects, and even a few free cocktails. Since 1973 he has lived in Louisiana, where he has taught at the University of New Orleans and developed its Learning Resource Center. Now contemplating retirement, Bill and his wife, Anne, are considering remodeling their house (in Bill's family since 1892) into a bed-and-breakfast. Take note, all you travelers!

**Kathy Dauck** was the glue that held the *DARE* office together from 1973 through 1977. She skillfully handled budgetary, personnel, and organizational tasks at a time when the staff was expanding to wrap up the computerization of the data and to begin the editing process. On leaving *DARE*, she moved up one floor in Helen White Hall, and used her financial skills in the budget work of the English Department. Before long, she was in charge of the whole English office, where she continues to be the person we all depend on for information, advice, and a good-humored view of life.



George H. Goebel,  
Review Editor

## Staff Member Profile

In this feature, David Simon chats with George Goebel, *DARE*'s Review Editor.

**Q:** How did you first become interested in regional English?

**A:** I have always been interested in language, but I came to this particular aspect of it quite by accident. In 1983 I was a graduate student in the Classics Department here at the UW, finishing up a dissertation on early Greek rhetorical theory and its influence on various writers of the fifth century BC. I had also done some work in linguistics, but mostly in Indo-European historical linguistics, and the only class I had ever taken on dialectology was on the ancient Greek dialects. I was also looking, without any success, for an academic job. I did know a little about the *DARE* project, and in fact I often walked past its offices on my way to the office of the English professor I was working for as a project assistant. When someone mentioned that the project was looking for two more editors, I applied and was offered one of the positions. Like most lexicographers, I learned by doing. This is a slow and sometimes frustrating method, but from the beginning I found not only the material I had to work with, but the practice of lexicography itself, fascinating.

**Q:** What are your responsibilities as Review Editor at *DARE*?

**A:** As Review Editor I read and revise all entries after they have been drafted and before they go to Professor Cassidy and Joan Hall for the final pre-typing review. I try to ensure that both the format and the more intangible aspects of style are as consistent as possible. I also consider the content critically, do additional research as needed, and make or suggest appropriate changes to the entries.

I wear other hats as well: among other things, I draft some entries myself, I answer queries from the proofreaders on questions of format and style, and I periodically evaluate new material that has accumulated for sections that have already been typed to see what additions or corrections are called for.

**Q:** What aspect of your job at the *Dictionary* do you like best?

**A:** What I enjoy most about this job is that I am always learning something new to me, and sometimes discovering things that are new to the rest of the world as well. One entry may send me in search of information on the digestion of cows, another to discover the relative values of colonial currencies. Even individual citations can send me off on the oddest tangents; not long ago, in order to determine whether the expression *rising of* in an early citation meant “more than” or “less than,” I had to find out

the exact value of James Smithson’s bequest for the foundation of the Smithsonian Institution. And I never know when some odd tidbit of apparently useless information will turn out to be just what I need to solve some other problem.

**Q:** What is the most difficult part of your job?

**A:** The hardest part is knowing when to give up. Sometimes you just don’t have enough evidence to solve a problem, but you’re haunted by the feeling that the relevant piece of information must be out there somewhere. It probably is, but at some point you have to admit that you have exhausted the obvious avenues of investigation and go on to the next problem. I’m still not very good at this.

**Q:** What word or words have you particularly enjoyed working on and why?

**A:** Because my perspective on language is strongly historical, it tends to be words with interesting histories that I recall as particularly enjoyable to work on. One that comes to mind from the last volume is the common West Midland use of *mango* to mean “green pepper.” The explanation of this seemingly bizarre transference turns out to embody a fascinating bit of social history. The East Indian mango was first generally known in Western Europe only in the form of pickled green mangoes—of course, this was long before the days of refrigerated air transport! The popularity of this exotic, spicy, and no doubt expensive condiment led to the development of imitations made with a wide variety of rather unlikely-sounding fruits and vegetables—including green peppers—stuffed with spices and pickled. These imitations were also called *mangoes* or *pickled mangoes*, and it was only logical to conclude that if *pickled mangoes* in fact consisted of pickled green peppers, then *mangoes* must be green peppers.

A more recent example that comes to mind is the widespread “folk” pronunciation *piney* for *peony*. I had always vaguely assumed that this was a folk-etymological alteration, like *sparrow-grass* for *asparagus*, but when I actually looked into the matter, the truth turned out to be almost exactly the opposite. *Piney* is the expected descendant of the Middle English form of the word, and similar pronunciations were still in standard use in England at the end of the eighteenth century; the now-standard spelling *peony* and the corresponding pronunciation represent a learned refashioning of

*Continued on page 8*

## DARE Newsletter

### Postal Return Address:

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## Staff Member Profile

*Continued from page 7*

the word on the basis of its etymology. As is often the case, the folk form is actually the historically older form, and the present standard form an innovation.

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

**A:** I play the one-keyed flute, and I get together with friends regularly to play mostly late baroque chamber music. I also do woodworking, mostly using hand tools; I have made a few respectable pieces of furniture, but my most ambitious project was a bass viola da gamba after the late seventeenth-century English maker Barak Norman.

**Q:** Why do you believe that preserving regional English is important?

**A:** I think the justification for any lexicographical project basically comes down to the central position of language in culture, both as a manifestation of it and as a medium for its transmission. You can't really understand any culture without understanding its language, and you can't understand its history without understanding the history of its language.

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