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# DSNA

NEWSLETTER

## Audrey R. Duckert 1927 - 2007

Audrey Duckert, who might be called a founding member of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, died September 6, 2007, in Hadley, Massachusetts, at the age of 80. She came to the end of her life in the part of the country she had come to love, and where she lived for the last 50 years or so of her life.

Audrey was born in the small community of Cottage Grove, Wisconsin. She was the middle child of five siblings: two boys and three girls. Her parents were Harold and Mabel (Hoveland) Duckert. After high school, she attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison. It was there that she in effect fell into her profession, dialect study. In the summer of 1947, she took a course in the history of the English language from Fred Cassidy. She started doing field work with him (the Wisconsin English Language Survey) in the late 1940s and that led straight into Audrey's lifelong involvement with *DARE*. A profile of Audrey that was published in the *DARE Newsletter* in the fall of 2002 included Audrey's description of how *DARE* got its name (this description was reprinted in the obituary that appears in the Fall 2007 issue of the *DARE Newsletter*):

"It was July of 1965, and we had just received a generous grant from the U.S. Office of Education to enable us to start the fieldwork. The QR [questionnaire] was ready for use; it had been tested in a pilot survey in 50 communities in Wisconsin. Fred and I were having a celebratory cup of coffee in the morning sun on the lakeside terrace of the Memorial Union, and he said we really needed to give the dictionary a working title. So we fell into step the way



Photo courtesy of University of Massachusetts – Amherst

we had in formulating the questions for the QR. Harold Wentworth's *American Dialect Dictionary* had been published in 1944, and we wanted to avoid confusion with it, so what we needed was a brief, unambiguous but open-minded title that would be easy to remember and cite. "Dictionary of American Dialect" (DAD) seemed possible, but we were aware of how often the word dialect was misunderstood to mean language that was different in ways that were comic or bizarre.

"After another cup of coffee, we worked out the premise that the language we were collecting might reflect the age of the speakers who used it, but that it should also be the

everyday language of the region in which it was used. One of us used the word *region*, apparently, because at that point we put the word *regional* into our trial titles. Then *Dictionary of American Regional English* emerged, and one of us said, 'And the acronym is perfect.' Then we smiled and said in unison 'DARE,' and hooked little fingers, because that is what people are supposed to do when they say the same thing at the same time."

All the while Audrey worked an adjunct editor on *DARE*, she held significant day jobs, including a three-year stint as an editor at Merriam-Webster in Springfield, MA (working especially on dialect entries for the *Third International*) followed by 40 years in the English department of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, where she taught lexicography and the history of the English language. She started at UMass as an instructor in 1959, after completing her PhD in linguistics from Radcliffe College. She retired

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from UMass in 1999, with the rank of full professor. It should also be noted that she was the first woman to be admitted to UMass Phi Beta Kappa.

Audrey was also a contributor to the Second Supplement of the *OED*, and continued to provide input for *OED* entries after that as well.

A letter exchange with Charles Schultz, creator of the "Peanuts" comic strip, was an important memory for Audrey. She had worked on the term 'security blanket' for the *OED* and seen a connection between Linus's blanket and this expression. She kept Schultz's reply to her, written on Snoopy letter-head. The letter was dated December 3, 1986, and it said, "Linus is thrilled to have his name and reference to his 'security blanket' in such a prestigious publication. Many thanks for your efforts and for taking the time to write and share this information with me. I appreciate your consideration very much. Kind regards, Charles M. Schulz."

Audrey always had a love of what she called "green and growing things" and a strong interest in local history. From the time that she first "adopted" the Western Massachusetts region where she lived, she took an active part in local organizations such as the Swift River Valley Historical Society. She recorded voices and memories of many of the people of this valley who were displaced when the area was flooded in the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir in 1939.

Edward and Marion Gates have known Audrey for many years — Ed had met her when they were both employed by Merriam-Webster in the 1950s —

and they became good friends when Ed and Marion retired to Ware in the Quabbin region in the 1990s. Audrey had a great respect for Ed and his work and once made a gift of \$1,000 to the DSNA, in tribute to him. The following is a brief remembrance of her, written by Ed:

"I met Audrey when we were both editors at the Merriam Company back in the 1950s and renewed acquaintance when she came to our 1971 ISU lexicography conference. She joined the Dictionary Society, and I corresponded with her over the years.... When we moved to Ware, we began visiting her when we had errands up that way and always enjoyed our visits. She had done field work for the *Dictionary of American Regional English* in the Quabbin area, and we were members of the Swift River Valley Historical Society, so we had common interests there, besides our common interest in dictionaries. She had a phenomenal memory for the names and birth dates of the people she had met. She used to send us newspaper clippings (e.g. about lighthouses) that she thought would interest us. We will miss our chats."

Audrey was a warm, delightful, and memorable person, who played a significant role in the history of American dialect studies.

She is survived by one brother, Miles of Sun Prairie, WI, and both sisters: Lorraine Imhoff of Wonona, WI and Mary Duckert of Portland, OR.

*Note: see also the profile of Audrey Duckert in the DSNA Newsletter Fall 2006.*

— Victoria Neufeldt



Audrey as a Radcliffe graduate student, in a photo taken in 1957.



The five Duckert siblings, in the early 1940s. Audrey is in the middle (note the saddle oxfords!).