

Words and Their Stories: A Final DARE



June Simms

Joan Houston Hall, chief editor of the Dictionary of American Regional English, and linguist Ben Zimmer

Now, the VOA Special English program WORDS AND THEIR STORIES.

Today we talk about words like **honeyfuggle** and **pinkletink**, **puckerbrush** and **swop**. These are words not found in most dictionaries. But you can find them in the Dictionary of American Regional English. Joan Houston Hall is the chief editor.

JOAN HOUSTON HALL: "The Dictionary of American Regional English, familiarly known as DARE by its acronym, is a collection of words and phrases and pronunciations and even bits of grammar and syntax that vary from one part of the country to another."

The fifth and final book in the series was published last week. Work on DARE first began in nineteen sixty-five under Frederic Cassidy, an English professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He and a team of eighty researchers traveled across the United States to document the words used by Americans to describe their daily lives.

Ms. Hall says the final project is based on almost two and a half million responses to more than sixteen hundred questions.

JOAN HOUSTON HALL: "The questionnaire dealt with all sorts of things that have to do with our daily lives -- from time and weather and food and clothing and

farming and plants and animals and religion, health, disease, honesty, dishonesty -- all the parts of our lives that we have words for."

The first book, in nineteen eighty-five, contained the letters A to C. The fifth and final volume starts with **slab** and ends with **zydeco**.

DARE contains almost sixty thousand words and terms. Ms. Hall says these can show where the people who use them are from.

JOAN HOUSTON HALL: "It's amazing to see the tremendous variety of terms used for the same thing."

For example, in some areas, Americans call a carbonated drink a **soda**; in others they call it **pop**. Some cook with a **frying pan**; others call it a **skillet**. And a party where everyone brings food is either a **potluck** or a **pitch-in**.

Linguist Ben Zimmer writes about language for the Boston Globe. He was not the only one excited at Ms. Hall's first public showing of the final DARE volume. It was at a meeting of the American Dialect Society in January.

BEN ZIMMER: "We all gathered together in the conference room and Joan showed off volume five. And there were audible gasps in the room. I mean, it might as well have been accompanied by an angelic chorus. People just wanted to touch it like it was the holy relic or something."

So now, what about **honeyfuggle** and those other words? **Honeyfuggle** means to cheat or trick. The earliest uses found were in the eighteenth hundreds in the South. **Pinkletink** is the name that people in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, have given to a kind of tree frog. **Puckerbrush** is what people in northern New England call a tangled growth of bushes. And a **swop** is a small drink of liquor, at least in Annapolis, Maryland, and Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

Here are a few others. The first person to enter a home on New Year's Day is called a **first-footer** in some places. What do you call dust or lint that collects in pockets and under beds? Some Americans call it **flug**. And finally, **getting the runaround** is not a regional term; it means getting purposely delayed or lied to. But to some, **runaround** is an old term for a swelling or infection in a finger, especially around the nail. Yuck!

WORDS AND THEIR STORIES was written by June Simms. Transcripts, MP3s and podcasts of our programs are at voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Faith Lapidus.