The Random House dictionary tradition
A conversation between Charles M. Levine and Enid Pearsons

Levine: I find it quite gratifying that K Dictionaries has purchased the digital rights to the Random House Webster’s College Dictionary (RHWCD) and plans to undertake annual updates of the entries. I am sure you must feel the same—sad that Random House decided to close its dictionary editorial department after more than five decades establishing a distinguished lexicographic tradition—yet comforted that the dictionary that we worked on for so many years (and you for many more years) lives on.

I remember rather vividly when I traveled to mainland China in 1997 to attend the launch by Commercial Press of Beijing of the Chinese edition of the College dictionary. I believe they worked on the Chinese translation for more than a decade. I was treated at the launch ceremony like a visiting dignitary, so much so, I was told, that an attending cultural attaché from our own American embassy wondered aloud who I was and why I was considered so important. This little American status dance highlighted for me the general lack of understanding, as I perceived it, of the importance of dictionaries in our own culture. What were words worth, really? Could you get rich compiling and publishing dictionaries? If not, then why bother?

And, by the way, later that same year, Commercial Press informed Random House that then Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, on his first state visit to Washington, D.C., brought a copy of the Chinese edition of the RHWCD as a gift to President Clinton. It seems that dictionaries did and do matter to some people.

I have a copy at hand of At Random [Random House, 1977], the delightful reminiscences of Random House co-founder Bennett Cerf, who soon after World War II “arrived at the office one day and cheerily announced, ‘Let’s do a dictionary!’” [231] Cerf admits that at first he had little idea of what goes into compiling a dictionary—he first thought that two bright editors on staff could manage to create one in their spare time. But he quickly realized he needed an expert, and so hired Clarence Barnhart, “who was considered one of the best lexicographers in the United States, [and] had just finished the Thordike-Barnhart dictionary, and luckily was available.” [231]

When the first Random House college dictionary, called the American College Dictionary, was published in 1947, however, as Cerf notes, Random House was in debt to the banks: “One wonderful thing about dictionaries, though, is that a good one always makes money. Once it’s completed, it’s the publisher’s property, and if it starts selling in quantity, the costs are recovered rather quickly because there is no royalty to pay. The American College Dictionary won great critical acclaim and was a huge success. It was the first brand-new dictionary in a long time. Once again the old Cerf luck prevailed; and we soon got out of that [debt] pickle.” [232]

Pearsons: Yes. Indeed. It was absolutely devastating to think that all those years of careful lexicographic work would be lost. I am thrilled that the dictionary lives on, in capable hands.

And what memories, very personal ones, you bring back! It is no exaggeration to say that getting a job at Random House in the early 1960s, right after acquiring a bachelor’s degree at Queens College (now part of the City University of New York), was a dream come true. Unhappy with prospects of a teaching job I had been offered, I scoured the New York Times employment pages for something else—anything else! To my astonishment, I came upon an ad for a pronunciation editor for a revision of the American College Dictionary (ACD), which turned out to be the first edition of The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition. Since phonetics, taught by Professor Arthur J. Bronstein, had been far and away my favorite class at Queens, I was ecstatic at the possibility of doing something I loved and getting paid for it! The job interview with Larry Udang, then managing editor, was so full of puns and other arch linguistic exchanges that I felt at home immediately. I had found a career. And Arthur Bronstein, my professor, who had worked on the ACD in the 1940s, was on the dictionary’s editorial board as the consultant for pronunciation. I was to be the in-house editor in charge of checking the pronunciations of all the words already in the dictionary and entering pronunciations for the new ones. I couldn’t have been happier.

Early on, I learned a charming bit of dictionary history relevant to my work. The ACD, published in 1947, had been the first commercial dictionary to acknowledge a fact about spoken English that was either little known or understandably ignored by the general public. That is, English is replete
Enid Pearsons graduated from Queens College, City University of New York, in 1961, with a Bachelor of Science in speech, and immediately began her lexicographic career as pronunciation editor for first edition of Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition. Later she went back to school to earn her Master’s degree and do post-Master’s work in linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. She returned to Random House in the late 1970s as Senior Editor in charge of pronunciation and style for their line of dictionaries, and also was in-house editor for specialized dictionaries in fields as diverse as computers, law, medicine, and sign language, and was part of the Random House Mavens’ team, writing word-of-the-day essays on grammar, usage, idioms, and pronunciation to be posted on the Web. Since her pseudoretirement in 2001, she has served as consultant on reference projects for various publishing houses.

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Random House announced the closure of its dictionary department in late 2000.

The following comment was made by Sidney Landau in a posting to the DSNA discussion group on November 4, 2001 and was reprinted in the DSNA Newsletter, 25.2, Fall 2001:

“This is another step in the long decline of editorial power in publishing houses generally. Corporate sponsors of books may become a growing phenomenon—these are preeminently market-driven, after all. Dictionary editors have always been hired hands, but they had at least some variable degree of impact on their product because of the traditional belief, or supposition, that books were intellectual products that really had to be created by someone, and that therefore their creators deserved some consideration.

One of the results of the computer revolution, I think, has been further to marginalize authorship, and to make “content” even more thoroughly a vehicle for sales. Most commercial publishers have really been discontinuing editorially-oriented initiatives for a long time, and I fear the trend can only get worse. The high up-front cost of dictionaries makes them peculiarly vulnerable. Lost in all this is the human hurt to lexicographers who have devoted years and years to producing good dictionaries. At times like this one remembers what an uncertain and bitter business lexicography can be.”

sorted—by computer, of course—into a single alphabetical order. Then off to the compositor they went, little by little, A through Z.

My ledger, in which I was to syllabify, stress, inflect, and pronounce the entries—because it contained the new headwords, which we called “main entries”—was called the Main Ledger. So I put a large sign up over my desk reading LEGERDEMAIN. Larry Urdang, passing by, casually asked if that meant I would never do any work on the ‘ledger’ until ‘tomorrow’. I knew just enough French to reinforce my sense that I had found the right job.

Levine: Indeed, I believe that we all felt we had found the right home at Random House compiling and publishing dictionaries! May this great dictionary tradition live on. Like many of us, you left and then returned to Random House for a second time.

Pearsons: Yes, I returned to Random House in 1979, having taken some time after the first RHDEL was published in 1966 to start a family and to go to graduate school. Oddly, after all that, I went back to what was essentially the same job I had left. Happily, it soon became much broader in scope and grew to include stylistic minutiae and even defining.

The lexicographic staff for the second unabridged was considerably smaller than the one I had left in 1966. We all knew, however, that we were responsible for revising and enhancing a large, unabridged dictionary and that a smaller college dictionary was to follow. And this time, more thorough computerization, not only of dictionary production and composition, but of the actual editing process, was a tantalizing promise—so close, but not yet in reach. At last and at least, we editors had desktop computers. But they were merely used for word processing to produce neatly typed equivalents of an earlier generation’s hand-printed entries. Everything was stored on floppy disks. (Remember floppy disks?)

Stuart Flexner, our editor-in-chief, was determined to extend Larry Urdang’s vision of dictionary computerization, and a small committee was formed to see if we could find a suitable vendor with appropriate editorial software for our purposes. We traveled, searching—to Baltimore, Chicago, Toronto, and more. We went to conferences sponsored by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), whose programmers at the University of Waterloo in Canada had been encouraged by the OED to share what they had learned and developed about computerized editing.

Their foray into SGML as an appropriate language for lexicography would eventually benefit us all, and the simpler XML is now a reference-book standard.

But back then, nothing was quite ready for our needs. We were visited and courted by a slew of companies with a range of software programs and specialized computers, some companies very promising, others not even literate—linguistically or technically. One company had a keyboard so large and complicated it could have accommodated Chinese ideograms. Another listed “Miriam Webster” as a hoped-for client. I remember all too vividly seeing one dedicated editing computer that would have driven us mad. To delete a single letter, an editor had to go through the following exchange:

Editor: Hit the Delete key.
Computer (on screen): “What do you want to delete—character, word, sentence, paragraph, page, document?”
Editor: Select “character”
Computer: “Are you sure?”
Editor: “%$@#!*&^^”

In the end, our staff programmer, Paul Hayslett, created and customized an editorial system for us. It came to life too late for the second unabridged, alas, but in time for its college offspring and for later revisions of the unabridged. Paul somehow knew what we needed editorially before we did! “Genius” does not begin to describe him. He and his coding prowess eventually joined with Steve Perkins to create PubMan at Dataformat.com (now a part of IDM), and they have been producing beautiful reference works ever since.

But it was not just the fun of plunging into the world of computers that made my second tour at Random House memorable. First, there was the staff—bright, generous colleagues and wonderful friends. Then, there was an underlying philosophy that focused in many ways on the needs of dictionary users. Notably, one facet of this concern was editorial receptivity to the new words that spring suddenly into the general lexicon. Mind you, we understood the wisdom exhibited in more traditional dictionaries. Their editors waited, sometimes for a decade or more, until a word became well established in written citational evidence before formally entering it into their reference works, thereby acknowledging that it was genuinely part of the English language.

We believed, however, that aside from those nonce words that seem to disappear almost as soon as they arrive, new words are exactly the ones people need to look up! We wanted to make sure that we supplied
or n., pl. ras.

1. (often cap.) a monster of classical myth, commonly represented with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail. quimera

2. any horrible or grotesque imaginary creature. quimera

3. a fancy or dream. quimera fantasía

4. an organism composed of two or more genetically distinct tissues. quimera

[1350–1400; ME < L chimaera < Gk chímaira < OE gimmer, E gimmer one year (i.e., one winter) old, L hiems winter (see HIEMAL)]

also n. a loose sleeveless upper robe, as of a bishop.

vestes corais murça

[1325–75; ME chemer, chymere<br>
chimera, of uncert. orig.]

also adj. imaginary. quimérico, quimérica

imaginário, imaginária

highly unrealistic. quimérico, quimérica irreal fantástico, fantástica

[1630–40] — adv. quiméricamente

n. MANTEL.

abóbada sobre a lareira

[1605–15]