



The Rochester Cemetery is one of the few remaining original prairie remnants in the state. Some feel it's a rare glimpse of the Iowa that settlers found abundant, a cherished botanical marvel worth protecting. (Only one-tenth of 1 percent of Iowa's original prairies remain). Others see it as a disgrace to those buried there. Differing views have area residents divided.

Hallowed Prairie

*Managing a rural, country cemetery has
an eastern Iowa community divided*

BY SAM HOOPER SAMUELS PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH

It would be hard to find 14 acres of Iowa land that mean as many different things to different people as the Rochester Cemetery. Depending on who you talk to, this township burial site is:

A disgrace, a shamefully neglected tangle of brush growing over ancestral graves, obscuring and sometimes damaging the stones.

A visual wonder, putting on a dazzling annual display of wildflowers that draws a steady stream of visitors. People come from miles around each Mother's Day to marvel at the cemetery's dense carpet of shooting stars, one of the prettiest of prairie plants with its explosive rosette of half a dozen blooms turning their faces downward, their petals thrown back upward like the blazing trail of the heavenly body from which they get their name.

A historic site where visitors can see the graves of some of the earliest settlers in the area, dating back to the 1830s. According to local lore, the mother of the Divine Sarah Bernhardt, the fiery French stage actress of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is buried here.

A rare and precious patch of native Iowa prairie, one of the last and most spectacular living remnants of the vast, variegated prairie that once carpeted the state, of which now less than one-tenth of 1 percent remains.

A family plot, where parents, grandparents and earlier ancestors lie beneath the sod.

A political hot potato, the zone of clashing opinion and controversy.

An ecological time bomb, where invasive plants like garlic mustard, poplar and day lilies encroach on native ones so rapidly that without proper management, they threaten to choke off the native plants forever.

A sanctuary for some of the stateliest white oak trees anywhere in Iowa.

"What makes this beautiful is the swell and the swale of it," says Pete Kollasch, a remote sensing analyst for the Department of Natural Resources who has walked and studied the Rochester Cemetery since the 1970s. "The oaks, the wildflowers."

On a hot July day, as Kollasch leads me through the filigreed metal gates of the cemetery, it looks like no other burial ground I've ever seen. For one thing, as Kollasch points out, it isn't flat. We expect our cemeteries to be level, but the surface of this landscape rolls like the ocean in a storm. It's also untidy. Instead of tombstones laid out in straight rows, with neatly trimmed paths leading mourners easily to their loved ones, these graves are haphazard, scattered, far apart, hard to find and sometimes overgrown with tall grasses. Here and there, a small enclosed family plot hides among the plants, sometimes almost impossible to spot through the thick vegetation that grows up through the fencing.

One thing is certain. This cemetery is wild.

"This is one of the gems," says Kollasch as we happen across a small woody shrub, now a few weeks past blooming but known for its showy white blossoms. "This is New Jersey tea. Any time you see it on a prairie, it's a pretty good indication it's never been plowed." Early farmers who first broke the tough prairie sod were surprised that even on Iowa's relatively treeless landscape, plants like New Jersey tea and its stout roots wrought havoc on their plow blades.

"Settlers called it rupture root."

Although Kollasch has trod the cemetery frequently

and for decades, on this particular day it still surprises him. In many ways, prairie is the opposite of farmland. On a farm field, the plants are all of one kind; on a healthy prairie, a tremendous variety of plants grow side by side. Some biologists use the number 150 as a rule of thumb; the mark of a thriving, diverse prairie is one where you can find at least that many different kinds of plants growing. The Rochester Cemetery is home to at least 350 different plant species.

"This one is fun," Kollasch says, pointing out a cluster of flowers of five petals with a light lavender tinge to them. "This is called wild petunia.

"And that," he says as we pass a grave festooned with bunches of primary-colored artificial blooms, "is *Florus plasticus*."

Which brings us to the problem of the Rochester Cemetery. It is a rare and especially healthy patch of native prairie. But it is also a working cemetery. Any resident of Rochester Township may be buried here free of charge. And while nature enthusiasts revel in the cemetery's wildness, some residents whose forebears are interred here would prefer to see their family plots in a tamer setting.

So who truly has the right to determine the fate of this patch of land? Naturalists, some with Ph.D.s, many from the more urban centers of Iowa City and even farther away? Or a local resident with a lifelong attachment to this place, whose own family makes up about 10 percent of the dead here?

Managing the cemetery is the job of Rochester's four township trustees. The job pays \$10 per year. The trustees make sure the township is provided with ambulance and fire service. They are empowered to step in when neighbors have a fence dispute. And they are charged with mowing the cemetery. This last task turns out to be a highly controversial one.

Right now, the cemetery is mowed once or twice a year. According to naturalists, that's not a bad arrangement for maintaining a healthy prairie remnant. Before settlement by farmers, a prairie like this would have been laid low on a pretty similar schedule by bison and prairie fires, important parts of the life cycle of the prairie. The mowing doesn't exactly replicate the action of those historical phenomena, but it's close. Some invasive plants that would have been stopped by fire aren't as well controlled by the occasional mowing, and so the cemetery has more oaks than a pure prairie would, as well as incursions by sumac and other weedy plants. Families that want their plots mowed more frequently may do it themselves. Indeed, walking around the cemetery I come across quite a few neatly trimmed family plots, where people have clearly mowed around the stones

more often, leaving a trim, lawn-like island in a sea of taller grasses. On the whole, though, the once or twice a year mowing keeps most of the cemetery looking like a prairie.

For some citizens, it's not enough. They'd like to see the entire cemetery managed more like, well, a cemetery.

In August 2006, 110 citizens of Rochester and the surrounding area signed a petition and sent it to the Rochester township trustees: "We would like to have our cemetery mowed, not rough mowed once or twice a year." The petition went on to express a strong sentiment that the cemetery "is our cemetery, not a wild flower bed or open prairie for strangers and out-of-towners. There is an area of prairie grass and wild flowers at Herbert Hoover Library for them. We would like the wild flower sign removed so our cemetery can be our cemetery again." The sign in question, posted prominently at the cemetery's main entrance, says, "Do not disturb wild flowers, plants or property."

Botanists believe that there really is no comparison between the prairie at Rochester Cemetery and that of Hoover Library. The library prairie is a small area of reconstructed prairie, and reconstructions generally cannot approach the biological diversity or the deep roots of historic prairies like the cemetery.

After the petition, the 2006 township trustee election became a heated race over the cemetery. Trustee John Zaruba and township clerk Lynne Treimer, who serves as trustee by virtue of her role as clerk, were defending their seats. Running opposite them were Darrell Gritton and Joanne Williams, who led the movement for a more traditional cemetery-like treatment of the land. In most years, the hardest part of a township trustee election is finding people willing to take these onerous posts: suddenly that year, the elections were hotly contested.

It would be easy for a naturalist to simply gloss over the controversy, to paint it in black and white. To say, some folks want this to be a manicured lawn, while others want to preserve a vital wilderness. In truth, it is not that simple.

Williams and Gritton lost that election, an outcome that left the cemetery looking wild. But talk to Williams, and it is hard to picture anyone who feels more deeply about Rochester Cemetery and its well-being.

"I've been going to that cemetery ever since I was a little girl," says Williams. "So I have a lot of memories. When I walk around, and see what they have let it become, it's really sad."

Williams's father was a real-estate broker in the area. Before that, her ancestors began settling in Cedar County in the 1840s. Her parents are buried in Rochester Cemetery. So are their parents. There are about 700 graves in the cemetery. Williams, being an avid genealogist, has identified 70 of her own family members there, going back to her great great grandparents. So who truly has the right to determine the fate of this patch of land? Naturalists, some with Ph.D.s, many from the more urban centers of Iowa City and even farther away? Or a local resident with a lifelong attachment to this place, whose own family



Rochester Cemetery attracts naturalists, biologists and wildflower viewers, including University of Iowa Associate Professor of Biology Diana Horton, *center*, who has lead plant tours and has advocated for and helped manage the cemetery for years. A main draw, according to DNR remote sensing analyst Pete Kollasch (*far right*), is the blankets of shooting star (*above Kollasch*) that appear every spring. Experts say a prairie containing 150 different plant species is rich, healthy and diverse. Rochester Cemetery has 350. Some view the wildflowers as showy harbingers of a given season; others, see them as weeds that have no place in a cemetery.





Residents of Rochester Township are about as divided on how the cemetery should be maintained as the cemetery itself. While some headstones are hidden among the wildflowers and prairie grass, others stand out prominently on well-manicured, lawn-like islands.



makes up about 10 percent of the dead here?

"There was a tour out there not long after my father passed away, and I was visiting his grave," says Williams. "They walked right on it. I was sitting right there. They walked right on it. They laughed, they were extremely disrespectful. They just need to learn it's a cemetery, and there are people who go out there for that reason."

On the day of my visit, there is no shortage of sightseers. Walking along the paths, I see families and other groups of hikers who have come to enjoy the sights.

"I run into people from all over..." Kollasch says. "From Virginia, from Ontario." Perhaps some of them, trying to get a closer look at a prairie flower, stepped on a grave. It's easy enough to do, in that tangle of graves and plants. I may have stepped on one or two myself.

John Zaruba is one of the trustees who won that election, keeping his seat and keeping the cemetery in its current condition. Midway through my tour of the cemetery, he joins Kollasch and me, offering a glimpse into his land stewardship beliefs.

"I've lived in the township since 1950," says Zaruba. "I started farming in 1950. I raise corn and beans. I raised hogs and cattle. We had them on timothy, clover, alfalfa. A five year rotation. We made hay. Then two years corn, one oats, and one pasture."

If you were looking for an actor to play an Iowa farmer for a movie, you couldn't find one who looked the part better than Zaruba. Beneath his worn straw hat, his skin is browned and worn by decades in the fields. On one burly forearm, barely visible against the dark tan, is a tattoo of a horseshoe with a ribbon woven through it. 1945. A good luck charm. His overalls, threadbare but still sturdy, have a small label identifying them as Key Imperials, "The Aristocrat of Overalls."

"I'm in charge of the flag," Zaruba says. "It goes up May to Armistice Day. And I keep the dumpsters dumped out."

"What amazes me is how big these trees are," he says.

The white oaks are indeed a showpiece of the cemetery. A true, wild prairie would historically probably not have had trees this size. Fires tend to keep the oaks in check. But being a 170-year-old cemetery has helped the oaks grow to gargantuan dimensions.

A prairie offers a different view in every season of the year, as the various plants flower and die away in procession. For winter visitors, it is the oaks that afford the most awesome view. The fallen leaves reveal the stunning architecture of these massive trees, with side branches the size of ordinary tree trunks.

For fun, Kollasch paces under the crown of one of the giant oaks to estimate its diameter. Its shadow is about 100 feet across. The dripline, the line between the two farthest points directly underneath the canopy, is 80 feet across. Under the vast shadows of these trees lie whole separate miniature ecosystems, not prairie, but patches of oak savanna in the protection of the trees.

Under the umbrella of this particular tree is also the Danfeldt family plot, a tidy set of graves in the shade.

"We had one oak die," Zaruba says. "The sawmills don't want to mess with it. I got the wood. It lasted me three years."

From his years of working the land, Zaruba knows this area is sandy. The rolling hills of the cemetery are actually sand dunes. Prairie plants have extremely deep, tough roots, which make the dunes stable. Ordinary grass would probably not hold the dunes in place against erosion.

"Honestly," Zaruba says, "if you tried to mow these sand hills, you'd have gullies."

On the whole, in his taciturn way, Zaruba seems satisfied that he remains one of the trustees in charge of this special place. About that election, all he'll say is, "It was two to one. It told us that they want it the way it is."

There are encouraging signs that the two sides of the controversy, so opposed during the election, are finding common ground.

"I think that both sides should compromise," Williams says. Indeed, a group calling themselves the Friends of Rochester Cemetery, mostly consisting of naturalists from outside the township, have started, with permission, to hold garlic pulls to try to keep that most invasive of plants at bay. And during the floods of 2008, when nature threatened everyone in the area, bygones quickly became bygones. Zaruba's daughter's home was lost to the flood, but not before a group of family and neighbors spent two days sandbagging to try to save the property. Zaruba was there, working alongside his former opponent Gritton.

"Gritton worked with me," Zaruba says. "Along with prisoners from the Tipton jail. There were no words."

Zaruba, he will not be interred at Rochester Cemetery.

"My wife didn't want to be buried here," he says. "She didn't want snakes running over her." Instead, the Zarubas have picked out a plot at nearby Pee Dee Cemetery. On our way out of town, I ask Kollasch to take me there.

Pee Dee is a total contrast to the Rochester Cemetery. It is a large, level, perfect rectangle of manicured grass, carved right in the middle of a cornfield. The tall corn stalks form a solid wall around the edges of the cemetery. Inside, the graves are lined up in rows as straight as the corn.

A polished stone already marks the place where Zaruba and his wife will spend their piece of eternity.

ZARUBA

John A. Joyce A.

1927 - 1931 -

Parents of Raymond - Diana - Bruce

It's everyone's choice, where they want to be buried. For me, I can't help thinking that I would like to go someplace like Rochester Cemetery. Maybe Walt Whitman had it right when he said, in his poem "Song of Myself," that the best we could hope for after death was simply to decompose and let the body rejoin the cycle of life, growing back in the form of plants.

"I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles."

It seems old Walt wouldn't even have minded the odd traveler stepping on him now and then. 🐾



Rochester Township trustees, including John Zaruba (left), mow the cemetery twice a year, which allows native prairie plants to thrive and helps knock back invasive species. Some who prefer the more uniform, manicured look of a regular cemetery are welcome to provide their own, more routine upkeep.

