

A Prairie Cemetery Encounter: Anthropocentrism vs. Biocentrism

I study insects and plants all over Wisconsin. It seems to me that I've lived in my car over these first few weeks of my field research season. Today, July 26, my pace has momentarily slowed, but there's work that might be done in Green County, a short trip from Madison, if I could just force myself to again drive the car.

Then, over breakfast coffee, I chanced to pick up "The Prairie Promoter" where I am house-sitting. There was a reference to Green's Prairie Cemetery in York Township. I've pursued prairie in southern Wisconsin for 19 years and am very fond of York Twp., but had never heard of this, "last prairie cemetery in Green County ... resting place of some of York's earliest settlers." So, I hopped into my car and drove with increasing pleasure to find this one-acre fenced cemetery on Postville Road.

I was thrilled to explore this tiny patch of old Wisconsin and was off by the back fence when I became aware of a pickup truck idling on the roadside by my open, unlocked car. A stupid prank of theft of my priceless data in my pack off my back seat would be terrible, so I ambled back over to the entrance. An older couple stood reading the very attractive sign I'd read earlier, a sign that explains the significance of the cemetery's prairie vegetation and that management is essentially limited to annual burns for the benefit of the prairie plants.

My mood was high. I said hello and asked if they had visited this old prairie cemetery before. They had not, but had heard of Civil War veterans' graves here.

"You've come at a poor time to read the gravestones as the prairie vegetation is now so thick; visiting after the site has been burned would make your task easier," I offered.

"They shouldn't burn here. It's bad for these fragile old gravestones," said the man and he walked away, closed-faced. "There is a lot of space between the graves here," he said to his wife.

"Perhaps you could be buried here yourself, in time," I said.

"No, I'll be buried on the other side of the state."

"They should mow in here so people can find the gravestones," said the woman.

"Actually, the prairie vegetation is what I find most exciting about this place," I said. "This is pretty much how Green County looked when white folks first settled here."

You'd think a graveyard would easily be the site of common ground, given that's where we all end up. I tried to find common ground here in historical appreciation. I left to her imagination that we shared the common warm fuzzy view of white settlement of Wisconsin and the New World. In truth, it's been said of me that I'd trade away humanity for the resurrection of the mammalian fauna humans eradicated from the New World and the elimination of the scores of alien plant and animal species we've introduced here. Though I was perfectly civil, my high mood had faded as my mind leapt to uncharitable thoughts.

"You stupid old cow! It's people like you and your farmer husband here, concerned with people very long dead, who would destroy even now this living remnant of our past, when you have already destroyed essentially all other prairies in the state!" So I thought.

We said nothing more. They returned twenty minutes later to their idling truck and drove away.

As I drove back to Madison, the sharp disparity I'd seen between this anthropocentric couple and my own biocentric values blurred a bit. They use gasoline freely to pursue their interest in old human remains around the state. I use gas freely, when I am actually using my vehicle, to pursue my interest in native plants and animals around the state. People travel to manage this cemetery's prairie vegetation, annually with fire as the sign says, but someone has pulled sweet-clover here, someone has cut sumac and lilac here. I have dear friends who drive thousands of miles each year just to manage wild land. Perhaps I have more in common with these cemetery visitors than I thought, at first.

We both share an interest in history sufficient to motivate our costly travel. They are interested in human history, whereas I am mostly interested in natural history, of which human history is a vanishingly small subset. But might my perspective be thought small and rudimentary by someone else? When I knew birds, I thought I knew a lot about nature. Then I broke into plants, a much larger group. Then I moved on to insects. What's next? A decade hence, might my present perspective seem small to me? Can I tolerate even myself, as I grow?

Perhaps what drove us apart, there in the cemetery, was their evident disapproval that a cemetery might be managed in some manner other than in the conventional way. What a shock it must have been to them to see this wildly new idea manifest before them -- honoring the dead pioneers by preserving a scrap of the world as the pioneers saw it.

This reminds me of an idea I had 15 years ago. Why not buy land, restore it to prairie, and use that as a cemetery? It would be protected from development more thoroughly. People would pay to be interred there so you could recoup your purchase and management costs, in theory. And graves would be unmarked. In this way, each grave would be the entire site. Each visiting family of bereaved would have the entire site to visit, not just a few square feet. We'd have natural burials only, with the expressed intent to contribute, bodily, to the bluestem and the meadowlarks, rather than poison them. Oh well, too many ideas, too little time.