

## LIFE AND DEATH ON THE PRAIRIE

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*Abstract:* Rochester Cemetery is one of Iowa's most biologically diverse prairie remnants and one of the most unusual prairies in America. As an active burial ground, it is a conservation conundrum, with no preservation status. It is maintained by the good will of the community, some of whose members would like to mow it down. This thirteen-and-a-half-acre savanna, between Iowa City and Davenport, is home to fifteen giant white oaks that were growing when the first European settlers arrived and 400 more species of plants. Of these, 336 are native to the region. It is the last resting place of the local pioneers and their descendants, down to the present. Graves are scattered among the wildflowers, across hills geologists consider sand dunes. These are held in place by the deep roots of the plants and their people. To botanists, Rochester Cemetery is a pilgrimage site, and it is a source of pride to many residents. Others in this rural community call it a weed lot and a shame, believing regular mowing would show more respect for the dead. To the landscape photographer and historian Stephen Longmire, it is a place where the history of the rural Midwest is written on the ground—a long exposure, lasting almost two centuries. Using photographs and stories from his forthcoming book, *Life and Death on the Prairie* (Center for American Places/University of Chicago Press, 2011), he will show this patch of native Iowa to be a living time capsule of its uses since European settlement.