

INTRODUCTION TO UNDERSTANDING “IOWA FLORA” AND ITS ORIGINS: READING THE PRAIRIE THROUGH POETRY

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Abstract: We have been addressing prairie education in our classes and in articles that we have published such as "Reading the Landscape: Prairie education through American Literature and History" *Teaching North American Environmental Literature*. New York: Modern Language Association, 2008. For this presentation we focus on the reading of Edward Hirsch's "Iowa Flora," a poem that was part of a larger work celebrating Iowa's 150 years as a state. The Iowa Sesquicentennial Committee, The Des Moines Symphony Orchestra, and Grinnell College commissioned Jon Chenette to compose this musical celebration, *Broken Ground*. We provide a close reading of "Iowa Flora" to explore the actual plants mentioned in the poem and some the metaphorical ramifications that this poem has in the context of the entire work of *Broken Ground* in an interdisciplinary college course on sustainability. We also address the reading process and how a plant ecologist reads the references and poetic ambiguities to teach plant identification and history, discuss plant competition, and foster ecological literacy about the prairies of Iowa. As Robert Sayre states in the introduction to *Recovering the Prairie*, "To understand the metaphor, we need the fact" (6).