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Lifestyles

"The diversity of species is astronomical."

Striking a balance between social and natural heritage

by Michele Fairfield

The mystery of the past is present at Red Cloud Prairie Cemetery in Cramahe Township. Tall prairie grasses wave in the wind around headstones of early settlers—a fertile place for the imagination and for grassland plants, many provincially rare. Historically significant, the prairie cemetery presents social and natural heritage preserved in a fine balance.

Area residents and tourists to the area can learn about its cultural and natural importance this week if they stop by on the Rural Ramble. Although there are three or four other prairie cemeteries in

Ontario, Red Cloud is the only one managed as such.

Red Cloud is a small piece of prairie grassland that once covered a large part of southern Ontario and the northern United States. For its diversity of species, manager Ed Heuvel considers it among the top three grasslands in the Rice Lakes Plains of Northumberland. The entire plain was once prairie and savannah woodland but very few areas escaped the plough as pioneers moved in and cultivated the land for crops.

The importance of Red Cloud Prairie was recognized in 1993 by expert botanists. Supporting its restoration to a tall grass prairie, the Red Cloud Cemetery Board approved its management as a prairie cemetery. Pine trees planted in 1969 had grown up and were shading out the prairie plants. They were thinned in 1996 and now, with more sunlight the prairie species are thriving.

"It was amazing to see the development of this site," says Heuvel. First were the small sedges, a sign of grassland, then came blue stem and Indian grass.

Prairie grasses such as big blue stem, little blue stem and Indian grass and beautiful flowers like butterfly weed, low bindweed and blazing star now fill the cemetery. There is colour from May through September.

"The diversity of species is astronomical," comments Heuvel proudly. He says care has been taken to use the genetics of local Rice Lake Plains stock in the restoration.

"People might think this is a riotous place, a weed patch," he says with a smile. "It's actually very well cared for and watched carefully."

As part of its management, areas of the grassland are burned every three or so years in order to promote the native species and rid the area of other species of plants drifting in from outside the cemetery. Spraying for poison ivy is the only chemical means of control used. Cutting of non-native shrubs and trees is part of the management plan as well.

The prairie grassland is not just watched by Heuvel and the volunteers who work with him. The University of Waterloo, for example, is studying three ten-foot-square plots of land within the cemetery. They are identifying and charting native vegetation, the percentage of cover, creating general species lists, among other projects. Heuvel notes the academic interest highlights the science that informs and supports their restoration efforts.

Support to start the rehabilitation project was provided by Wildlife Habitat Canada and the Shell Environment Fund. Heuvel also notes the efforts of the Willow Beach Naturalists from the Port Hope-Cobourg area that volunteer in the management of the site.



Red Cloud Prairie Cemetery, a culturally and naturally significant site dating to the 1850s will be featured on the Rural Ramble August 23 and 24. Manager of the prairie grassland Ed Heuvel keeps an eye on the provincially rare grasses and flowers at the cemetery located in Cramahe Township.

Michele Fairfield photo

prone to drought and crop practices what they were, the Red Cloud area was hit hard by the drought of the 1930s. Many left. The last burial was in 1940. In the intervening years, however, Red Cloud was a thriving community. It boasted saw mills, grist mills, a shingle mill, a sash mill as well as farms and a school. Today only a mill and the cemetery remain. Many local pioneer families were buried there, providing an interesting memorial and a source of local historical information. Early family names dot the cemetery such as Brittnell, Ferguson, Walker, Samis, Johnston, Puffer, Tweed and Bull, originally Quakers from New York State who moved to Prince Edward County. Gravestones show the changing styles from the lamb and dove to the tree of life to the carved lettering seen at the turn of the century. Red Cloud Prairie Cemetery is owned by the Township of Cramahe and managed by the Red Cloud Cemetery Board. Their aim is to protect the prairie and maintain the peace of the burial ground. Inclusion on the Rural Ramble for the first time is a great opportunity for people to learn about a prairie cemetery. Please see "Red Cloud" page 13.

Red Cloud Cemetery a stop on the Rural Ramble

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says Ed Heuvel. It has been featured on TVO - Studio 2 and has been getting interest from naturalists, cemetery groups and horticultural groups with an ecological interest in collecting seeds for the planting of rare species, he notes.

He also sees the possibility of studying the insect and other animal population on the grassland to see how the restoration is affecting them. "The prairie as an ecosystem in this area was diverse in the 1850s," Heuvel points out. "Many animals have gone like the badger. It's difficult to say what remains." Excited about the Ramble, he says it's another chance to increase Red Cloud's "local presence so people will know about the site in a positive way."

Information about the cemetery and about prairie grasslands will be available on the tour. Paths exist in the cemetery for the convenience of visitors to cemetery, and to protect the grasses.

"It's a fine balance managing a prairie grassland and a cemetery together. We have tried to be extremely sensitive to the families and curators involved."

Managing the site as prairie grassland and as a cemetery involves cooperation and education among the township, the cemetery board, and the Ministry of Natural Resources. Heuvel comments that he has learned a lot about native species and about the history of the area over the last decade.

"It's a fine balance

managing a prairie grassland and a cemetery together," he remarks. "We have tried to be extremely sensitive to the families and curators involved. It seems to be working."

Red Cloud Cemetery dates back to about 1850, when the area was first settled. With the prairie sandy and