

Burying Our Dead

We remember Jim Zim with a planting and a prayer.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

We were standing in the cold rain listening to a poet who was standing on the very piece of prairie where Jim Zim died exactly one year before—Sept. 28, 1992.

There were 45 of us gathered here to witness the dedication of the James Hall Zimmerman Prairie Restoration near Red Cedar Lake south of Cambridge. There were wise old tribal elders, their damp hair white as the snow that will cover this place in a few short weeks. There were children leaning against their parents, their faces wet and yet shining. The children's faces were bright blooms on this gray day in this gray place where all other prairie flowers were sere and would bloom no more in this winding-down season.

The little knot of humanity below the vast somber skies made you think of the



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wagon train people as they paused in prairies like this one to bury their dead and to mark the place, then to ask for the strength to continue their journey without their beloved companions, a journey to a far-off destination they knew not exactly where, for certain.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, not all that much has changed since then. We still pause to bury our dead and to mark the places where they died and then to ask for the strength to continue our journey, to that destination we still know not where exactly, for certain.

And all the while people are having second thoughts about the journey, and some people are restoring the prairie, and some people are restoring the buffalo, and all people still huddle together under the cold rains and seek warmth from the miraculous presence of each other.

"Remembrance," Dr. Larry Giles began, "James Hall Zimmerman, 1924-1992. Wisconsin Naturalist, Friend of the Earth."

As the poet spoke his words, their power lifted you out of your dampening parka and you felt the sun that was here a year ago and was hiding itself today. Larry Giles spoke these words:

*It was a magic day.
The sky was liquid gold.
We sat on the hillside, in the long grass,
in the spring.*

*A procession of birds
in exquisite detail
flew by, south to north
painting themselves in the sunlight*

*Yellow fluted songbirds
finches/cranes/wrens/sparrows
downy woodpeckers/red-winged
blackbirds
red-tailed hawks*

*It was an epiphany
a flare of light and consciousness
We talked amidst the pasqueflowers
of a new way of looking. Of hearing.
Of doing.*

*The world slips from spring to autumn.
Jim had a bright vision out of the
wetlands he loved.
He tramped out to the meadow
scythe in hand to cut the long grass.*

*It was a day of days
with the sun at high noon
to melt the Indian summer.*

*The scythe was firm in his hand
he swung it, cut the long grass.
He fell sudden with a clap of wind,
turned his face into the earth, the wild
asters.
Shreds of sky began to fall in luminous
tatters.*

*The day.
The long grass.
The sun.
The bird songs.*

*We left Eden when we came to
consciousness:
we return.*

**GO WITH THE GREAT SPIRIT, JIM.
Be part of the living earth.**

Our national treasure, Francis Hole, emeritus professor of soil science and geography at the university, stood in the rain and quoted from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself."

"The press of my foot to the earth," Francis Hole said from memory, "springs a hundred affections. They scorn the best I can do to relate them."

Later, Francis would confide that he thought Walt Whitman made an "extraordinary" statement.

"He doesn't say whether it's all coming from the soil to his foot or from his foot to the soil. Extraordinary!"

The earth, the soil, Francis said, left even the great Walt Whitman without words, and Walt Whitman admitted it. "Finally," Francis concluded, "we all stand there speechless. We sink into the silence. We become a part of the prairie. We become a part of Jim Zim's spirit."

Jim Zim's beloved wife, Libby, partner in their life's work to preserve and restore prairie lands and wetlands, then passed around a bag full of prairie dock seeds.

One by one, each by each, the hands of Jim Zim's colleagues and friends and students and followers reached into the bag and came out, clutching seeds. Libby said to make sure you left enough so everyone could have some.

Then we fanned out onto the sacred, sodden prairie, each of us alone with our thoughts, alone with our seeds. We "planted" them—not broadcasting them, more like placing them in little sheltered spots—with a prayer for them and for Jim Zim and for all of us who are still down here for a time and trying to help, a teeny-tiny little bit, in the Great Work. ■