

The Tombstone Rose

-- Jeri Jennings --

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R. banksiae banksiae - Tombstone, Arizona

They call Tombstone, Arizona "The Town Too Tough To Die." It was born of a silver boom, and is remembered for one of the Old West's most famous gunfights. Tough though it may have been, Tombstone today has dwindled from its bawdy past to a gaudy, tasteless present owing too little to history, and too much to cheap tourism.

The detour to Tombstone from Interstate 10 is a long one, across miles of a desert that is desolate, but never dramatic - and through most of the year there is little reason to make the trip. **The exception is April.**

If April finds you in Southern Arizona, take the time to make a very special pilgrimage. Tombstone, strictly by chance, is the location of "**The World's Largest Rose**," and in April, "The Tombstone Rose" is a sight not to be missed.

"The Rose Tree Inn" on the corner of Fourth and Toughnut Streets, sags a little under the weight of its 120 years. There are no neon lights here, and the visitor enters through a homely, squeaking screen door. Much of what you'll see here came to Tombstone in 1880, with A.C. and Alice Robertson, whose daughter, Ethel Macia, bought the Inn in 1930. The Macia family still owns "The Rose Tree," which is no longer an Inn, but a small, charming museum.



Step into the patio. If you've arrived at the right time, the fragrance will wrap about you like a cloud of violets. Even in the desert heat, it is cool and dark beneath the 8,000 square feet of rose. In the center of the patio, the massive trunk of the rose is red-brown, gnarled, oddly lovely, and still vigorous after more than 100 years. Around and overhead, the rose has grown so densely that for all its fragrance, little bloom can be seen. Walk into the sun, and climb a wooden ramp for an overview of the sea of white roses, then walk back into the shade, letting the fragrant white blooms brush your face.

The "Rose Tree Inn" was one of the first adobes in Tombstone, built to serve as the offices and boarding house of the Vizina Mining Company. Mary and Henry Gee came here in 1885, newly wed, and fresh from Scotland. Henry was a mining engineer, who followed the lure of silver -- but young Mary must have found it difficult to adjust to the heat and desolation that was Tombstone.

When the Gees built their own home, Mary's family sent her a box of garden plants from Scotland - among them several rooted cuttings of the "Old White Rose" from her home - *R. banksiae banksiae*. One cutting was given to Amelia Adamson, her close friend and former landlady, and together, the two friends planted the little white rose in the patio, behind the boarding house. Surprisingly, the delicate rose not only survived, but flourished.

When the Vizina Mine shut down, the boarding house became a popular hotel. Years passed, the rose grew, and people began to take notice of the size and vigor of a plant so out of place, and so lovely. In the 1930's, it was hailed as "The World's Largest Rose" by the enterprising Robert Ripley, and it holds that title still, in the Guinness Book Of World Records.

Today, The Rose Tree Museum is one of the few places where the real Tombstone peeks through the obscuring curtain of glitz. Visit the rose in any April - you won't be disappointed.



The rose tree's massive trunk