

Largest saguaro is found destroyed

By Steve Yozwiak
The Arizona Republic

It was a champion from a race of champions.

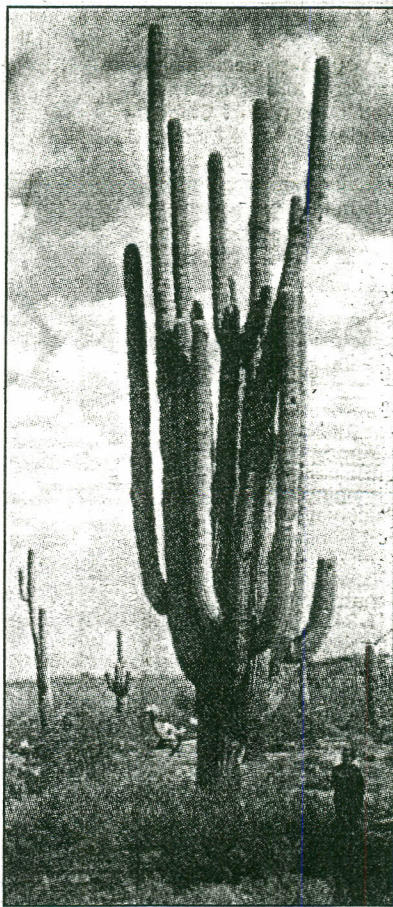
It was the biggest of the big.

The world's largest saguaro cactus — mother of Arizona's state flower, signature plant of the Sonoran Desert and icon of the Southwest — is dead.

In the shadow of the Vulture Mine, near the town of Wickenburg, nearly 200-year-old *Cereus giganteus* fell over, possibly the victim of a lightning strike or strong wind. No one knows for sure. The champion died alone.

It was found shattered in late February by the Minnesota couple who put it on the map two years ago.

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The national champion saguaro, nearly 200 years old, once stood proudly near Wickenburg.



Rob Schumacher/The Arizona Republic

Ken Morrow stands over the remains of what was once the world's largest saguaro. The 200-year-old cactus was knocked down by either lightning or high winds during a recent storm.

Storm likely toppled saguaro

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"We felt so bad. We had company, and we took them out to show them, and it was dead," said Winifred Lindmeier, whose husband, John, a retired nursery manager, documented the saguaro for the National Register of Big Trees.

"When we drove out to look for it, we couldn't find it. It mystified us quite a bit. I spotted another one that I thought was it. But John walked over to where he thought it was and found it.

"We were really sorry to see it gone," she said.

At nearly 50 feet tall, it wasn't the tallest saguaro. That distinction goes to a 58-foot-tall behemoth discovered in 1988 in the Maricopa Mountains, 11 miles east of Gila Bend, according to the *Guinness Book of Records*.

And it likely wasn't the oldest. Because saguaros do not grow annual rings like most trees, it's impossible to tell for sure. But a saguaro called "Old Granddaddy," believed to be nearly 300 years old — certainly one of the oldest — died five years ago in the Saguaro National Park, east of Tucson.

The Vulture Mine saguaro was a champion because of its combination of height, its huge trunk (7 feet around) and crown spread (14 feet across its arms), said Ken Morrow, a spokesman for the Arizona chapter



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of the tree registry.

"We're looking for a new champion," said Morrow, whose organization keeps track of the largest species of each tree in the nation. From Emory oak to alligator juniper to velvet mesquite, Arizona has 48 of the nation's champions.

Saguaros are found in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona, northern Mexico and a small slice of California near Yuma. There could be a larger saguaro in Mexico, but none has been documented.

At Saguaro National Park, where tens of thousands of saguaros cover the hills across more than 130 square miles east and west of Tucson, officials still have not found a specimen to replace Old Granddaddy, which was only 44 feet tall, but sported an amazing 44 arms.

"It wasn't unusually tall, but it

was unusually beautiful," said Tom Danton, the park's chief of interpretation.

Granddaddy died of a bacterial infection common to old saguaros. In its time, hollowed boots in the ribs of the Granddaddy were home to thousands of small birds and mammals, seeking shade from the broiling summer sun and warmth from the desert's winter chills.

"Now, it's a magnificent skeleton," Danton said. "Many of its arms have fallen, but its still there," still a perch from which Harris hawks can spy their next meal.

Like the Granddaddy, the Vulture Mine saguaro was full of holes, first carved by Gila woodpeckers and gilded flickers, followed by elf owls, mice and wood rats.

Because the champion saguaro was scattered in several directions, Morrow speculated it may have been hit by lightning. But Danton said it was more likely toppled by a strong wind.

"They're such an unstable plant (despite their longevity)," Danton said. "They're so top-heavy, they can fall over very easily."

Morrow is hunting for a new king; a new pharaoh to rule over the desert surrounding Phoenix.

Perhaps it's the one in the Guinness book. Perhaps it's one Morrow heard about recently, one in the Salt River Canyon, near the Blue Point Bridge, east of the Valley.