

Hidden gem: Copper boomtown is frozen in time

BY TYSON HUGIE



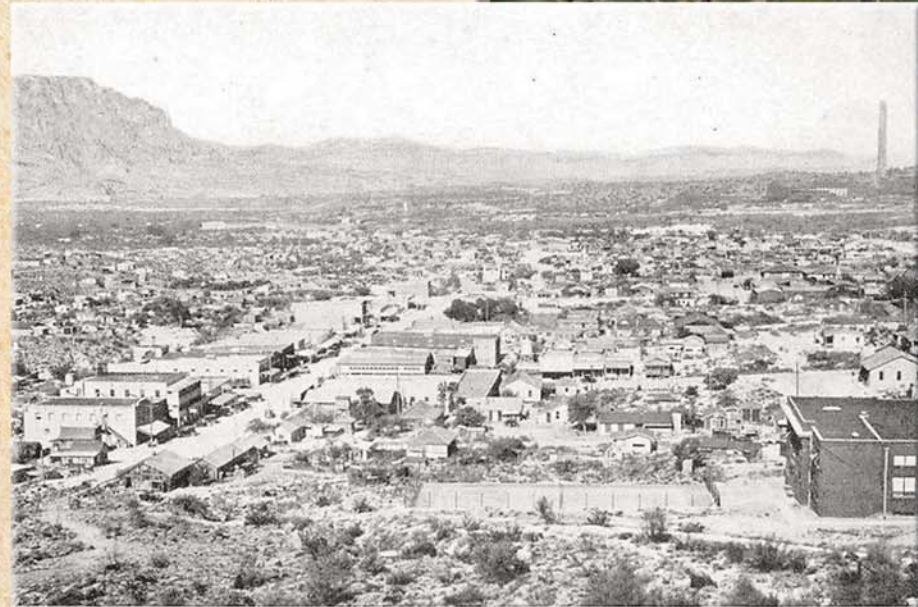
“RATTLESNAKES ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT,” reads a whimsical sign at the Boyce Thompson Arboretum just outside Superior, Arizona. I guess that’s one way to keep hikers on designated pathways.

What better way to start off a new year than with a drive? Each year, I tally up the mileage accrued on my vehicles to get a picture of what my driving habits look like. My sports car saw just 1,334 miles in 2023, and my resolution for 2024 is to use and enjoy it significantly more.

The Southwest region is home to some of the most scenic driving roads in the country. And as much as I love places like our national parks and Monument Valley, the obscure off-the-beaten-path destinations are way more interesting to me. I decided to finally cross one off my list by visiting a 372-acre preserve in the Sonoran Desert near an old copper mining boomtown about 60 miles east of Phoenix.

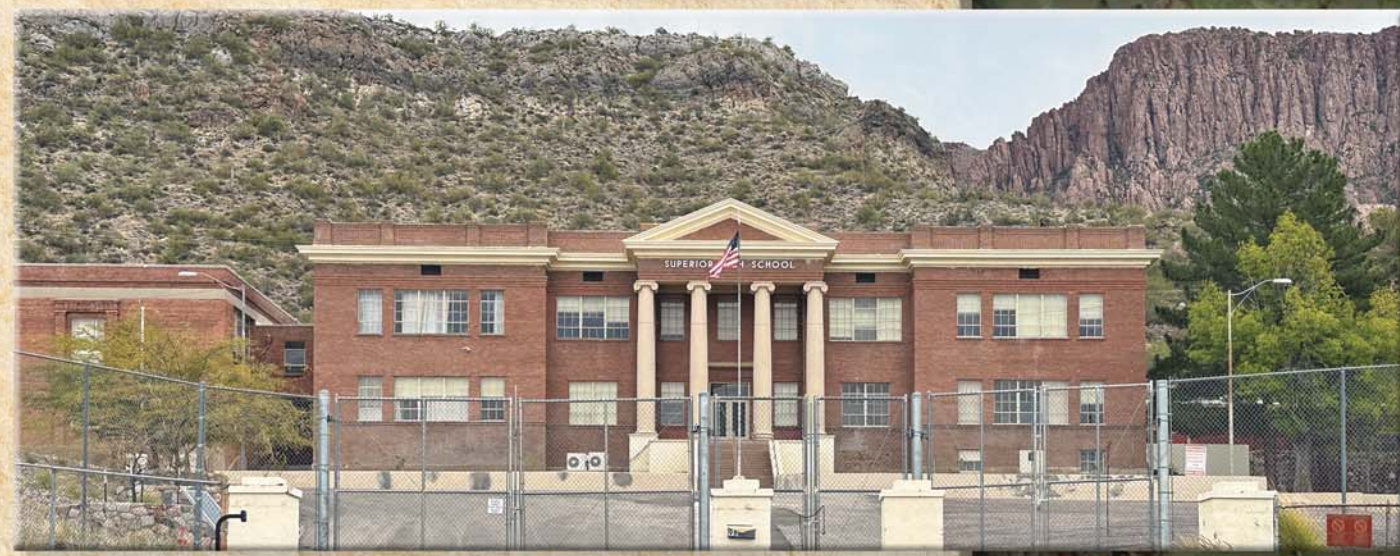
Part of the magic of towns like Superior is that they exist in a sort of time warp. Dating back to 1875, Superior served as an important hub of Arizona commerce and culture during the heyday of the Silver Queen Mine and, later, the Magma Copper Company. When US 60 bypassed downtown in the 1950s, it meant that the commercial district there could remain preserved, and it has remained largely protected from development in subsequent decades. The main mine closed in 1982, further slowing advancement in the area—which of course helped the town retain its vintage charm today.

Superior High School, built in 1925 and closed in 2000, remains remarkably un-
(cont'd)



BIRD'S EYE VIEW, SUPERIOR, ARIZ.

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disturbed behind a perimeter of chain link fence. “My old high school!” my friend Chris said when I texted him a photo. He may have been part of one of the last graduating classes there. I checked out the old red brick Magma Hotel and some of the retail stores lining the main thoroughfare. Most of those stores, it seemed, were closed for the holiday—thus I was able to park in the street for a photo. There are technically about 2,500 people who call Superior home, but during my visit it felt like a ghost town.

It wasn't until I arrived home hours later that I realized I had recreated a black and white image taken in the 1920s. The mountain's sandstone rock formations in the background are identical, and though a few of the buildings have changed, the location was unmistakably the same. Classic car enthusiasts will be able to identify the vehicles pictured in the vintage photo.

Boyce Thompson Arboretum, just a few miles out of town, turns 100 years in 2024—established on April 1, 1924 by mining magnate and businessman William Boyce Thompson. His 26-room estate, Picket Post Mansion, was partially burned down but still contains 26 rooms and 7,200 square feet of space. It has been closed to the public for some time, but I'd love to walk its halls someday.

Within the botanical garden's boundaries are some of the most diverse plants and wildlife found anywhere in the southwest. Among the highlights are cacti, succulents, hummingbirds, wild coati (Arizona's secretive state mammal, found from here to South America), and more. One of the key residents is a 100-year-old euca-

lyptus tree nicknamed “Mr. Big,” that has a 22-foot circumference. Most people are surprised to learn that the desert can support a lot of green vegetation and all sorts of animals.

I found the botanical garden to be unexpectedly educational and fun. Even for someone who isn't a “plant person,” there was a lot that caught my eye. One was a stone and mortar house built into the cliffside in the early 1900s, which was originally home to a five-person family. The interior maintains consistent temperatures during the desert's extreme seasons. A suspension bridge across Queen Creek also offered a neat architectural attraction along the main trail, which took me about an hour to hike.

I capped off my visit with some chicken flautas from a charming Mexican restaurant called Los Hermanos, before hopping back into my 1992 Acura NSX and blasting back to the modern world.

My car rolled 120,000 miles on the drive home—starting a new year with a new milestone was a satisfying end to the trip. Being a data and numbers-driven person, I maintain a spreadsheet of road trip destinations that I'd like to visit someday. The document contains 277 entries, with 183 still left to hit. Time to refuel the car and see where it takes me next. I encourage you all to do the same. ■

To see Superior in an offbeat, somewhat obscure yet star-studded, equal parts comedy and thriller film, don't miss *U-Turn* (1997), starring Sean Penn, Joaquin Phoenix, Jennifer Lopez, Nick Nolte, Billy Bob Thornton, Powers Boothe, Claire Danes, Jon Voight, Julie Hagerty, Bo Hopkins and more. —Ed.

