

Mrs. Denny's Rose

By Margaret Nelson

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Louisa Boren Denny is credited with bringing and planting the first seeds of the 'Sweetbrier' rose into the Seattle area. This rose is *Rosa rubiginosa*, also known as the 'Eglantine' rose of Shakespeare's England. The name has also been spelled 'Sweetbriar.'

The 'Sweetbrier' rose was introduced to the North American continent from Europe. Its bright orange-red fruits called rose hips contain Vitamin C and E and were considered to have medicinal properties. Rose hip tea could be used as an astringent, carminative or diuretic. Rose hip oil was effective in healing burns and skin irritations. Rose plants also had food value. Their young leaves and petals were used in salads. Children would eat the fresh shoots as a spring treat. The petals could be made into rose conserves and rose "tobacco", a colonial American recipe of equal weights of chopped rose petals and brown sugar mixed together, stirred daily for several weeks and then used as a jam. Rose hips were used in teas, soups, stews and jams where their high vitamin content added to the food's nutrition.

'Sweetbrier' foliage is distinct in smelling refreshingly of green apples when brushed. The single, pink, five-petal and very sweet, fragrant flowers bloom in the springtime. Bees flock to them in droves.

'Sweet-brier' really describes this rose. Resistant to disease and insect pests, it has formidable, downwards pointing, hooked prickles on its stems. This made it a good hedge plant to keep intruders out or livestock in. A species rose, it can be either be grown true from seed or propagated from volunteer runners, as occasionally its more horizontal roots will send up new plants.

Plants would have been hard to keep alive on the long wagon trip to Oregon Territory. Some pioneers were said to successfully transport rose cuttings in potatoes on shorter trips. The rose hips which Louisa brought would have been dry, orange-red or black (after being outside all winter) fruity capsules, sized between a kidney bean and a grape, need no water and been very portable. Seven or eight could be tied into the corner of a piece of

cloth and kept with the other crop and flower seeds the Dennys brought with them.

Why did Mrs. Denny bring these rose hips with her? Louisa's mother, Susan Boren, was a widow in Cherry Grove (now called Cedar), Illinois when she married widower John Denny. In 1851, the extended Boren and Denny families decided to travel together by wagon train along the Oregon Trail to the Portland area. Some of the men walked on from there to Puget Sound; the rest of the party, traveling by ship, joined them later at Alki, now West Seattle.

According to *Four Wagons West* by Roberta Frye Watt, in April, 1851, a few days before leaving Illinois forever, Louisa visited her close friend Parmelia Dunlap. Realizing that they might never meet again, Louisa was distressed about leaving her friend. As a good-bye present, Parmelia picked 'Sweetbrier' hips from the Dunlap garden for Louisa to take with her to plant at her new home in the Pacific Northwest. The roses which grew from them would remind her of her former home and friends in Illinois.



Photo: 'Sweetbrier' blossom at Evergreen-Waschelli Cemetery, Seattle, Denny gravesite. Photo by Allen Nelson.

In 1853, more than a year after reaching Alki, Louisa married her step-brother David T. Denny and they moved to their own 320 acre farm, located in the area of what is now the Seattle Center. There, Louisa planted her rose hips, growing roses very different from the three native rose species: *Rosa nutkana* ('Nootka Rose'), *Rosa pisocarpa* ('Swamp Rose') and *Rosa gymnocarpa* ('Wood Rose' or 'Bristly Rose') that were here. None of those have the fragrant green-apple smelling foliage and distinctive sweet smell of the 'Sweetbrier' flowers. Because her rose produced runners, Louisa was able to be generous in sharing these juvenile plants with other settlers. She also had more to plant herself, and the older settlers called her the "Sweetbrier Bride". Louisa's original 'Sweetbrier' plant continued to grow at the site of their first cabin, at the western end of Denny Way, Seattle, until it was ripped out in the 1930s to erect a commercial building.

The Dennys moved house many times throughout their marriage, and each time Louisa was said to have moved roses with her. Because she transplanted the roses around their properties, descendants of the original 'Sweetbrier' could have grown around the original location of the "Denny Cabin" (now moved to Federal Way, Washington) when that building was used as a real estate office at the corner of Queen Anne and Republican Streets in Seattle.

You can still see descendants of Mrs. Denny's original rose blooming in the Woodland Park Rose Garden (WPRG) and on the Denny gravesite in the Evergreen-Waschelli Cemetery, Seattle. You might speculate that the 'Sweetbrier' roses in the Point Defiance Rose Garden, Tacoma, Washington might be other descendants of that original rose, placed there to remember and honor the Dennys. In 2015, direct descendants of Mrs. Denny's 'Sweetbrier' were planted at Federal Way's historic Denny Cabin on the grounds of the Wetlands of West Hylebos Park and at Powell's Wood Garden. Another has been planted at the Soos Creek Botanical Garden, Auburn.

When the Seattle Opera House time capsule was opened in 2002, included was a box with some seeds, branches and leaves collected in 1928 from Mrs. Denny's rose and now preserved in the collection of the Museum of History and Industry, Seattle. There is an unsigned note on the bottom of the box which reads as follows, "My usual morning walk is from the hill above us down Third Avenue to the office but today I made a detour to where Denny Way drops over the bluff to tidewater. There young David T. Denny built a



Museum of History and Industry, (MOHAI) Seattle, WA cup from set of dishes made to commemorate the Dennys' 50th wedding anniversary. Allen Nelson photo, used with MOHAI permission. .

small log cabin on his new donation land claim.

"He and Louisa Boren celebrated their marriage on January 23, 1853 and it was the first wedlock in King County between white people. The young couple at once moved into their first home in Seattle. There the bride planted sweetbrier seeds and this morning the air was redolent with the fragrances of myriads of tiny blossoms on the mass of luxuriant foliage that has succeeded the parent shrubs. Here are a few of their sprays which we reverently enclose as a floral tribute to the memory of the girl wife who planted their progenitors nearly eighty years ago."

The museum also holds a set of 1903 china made to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Dennys' 1853 wedding. There are two sizes of plates in the set. The larger plates have a drawing of Louisa and David Denny in an Indian canoe, paddling to Olympia to get their marriage license. The smaller plates have a sketch of their first cabin, on the bluff on what is now Denny Way in Seattle, with a view across the Sound to the Olympic Mountains. Both plates have both five-petal roses and rose foliage drawn around the plate borders, continuing the 'Sweetbrier' theme of Mrs. Louisa Boren Denny. There is also a cup with a drawing of a sprig of flowering 'Sweetbrier' on one side and a sketch of Louisa Boren on the other.

When you travel through Seattle neighborhoods in the spring, look for the tell-tale five-petal pink roses with a wonderful, sweet scent and foliage that smells like green apples. If you find these, you may be looking at a direct descendent of Mrs. Denny's rose.

The next part of this story of Mrs. Denny's rose begins and ends in Federal Way, Washington, a town she never visited. The "Denny Cabin", a log building used by David Denny as a real estate office at the southwest corner of Republican Street and Temperance Avenue (now Queen Anne Avenue), Seattle, was completed in May of 1889. It stood at that location, about two blocks west of today's Seattle Center, until 1966 when the International House of Pancakes restaurant chain, which owned the land, decided to build there. The cabin was either to be moved or torn down. Jack Cissna, who developed the Federal Way Shopping Center, wanted to add it to an historic cabin collection there, and found a way to have it moved to Federal Way. When later development threatened the cabin's second location, the Historical Society of Federal Way (HSFW) helped move the cabin to a third location, near Brooklake Community Center and then, in 1992, to its current site at the West Hylebos Wetlands Park. Since then there has been a lot of building and foundation restoration done by members of the HSF, and the cabin now sits between the parking lot and some native plantings at the park.

Learning the story of Louisa Boren Denny and the 'Sweetbrier', it seemed suitable to plant a 'Sweetbrier' rose next to "our" Denny Cabin. Even though it probably was not a residence but a Denny real estate building, Mrs. Denny loved her roses and may have beautified the office too. We began to search for a suitable rose.

Heritage Roses Northwest (HRNW) member Susan Draine found an online reference: <http://www.halcyon.com/tmend/heritageplants.htm> that indicated a possible direct descendent of the rose, started from a cutting ultimately traceable back to the original Denny rose, still grew in the Woodland Park Rose Garden (WPRG) in Seattle. But could a person find the rose? The WPRG map referred to a Denny rose on the northwest edge of the garden. This rose, however, did not appear to be a 'Sweetbrier'; none of the rose's foliage had that green-apple scent. During its time in the WPRG, the Denny rose had been moved to new locations on at least three different occasions and was once even selected to be put into a WPRG plant sale before someone realized it was historically significant, retrieved it and replanted it in the garden. The label had been separated from the plant and mistakenly ended up on a different rose.

At this point, HRNW member Cheryl Clarke joined the hunt. She grows 'Eglantines' in her own garden and happens to work near the WPRG. She went to the area where the Denny rose was supposed to be, bringing with her a branch of one of her own 'Eglantines' to use for comparison. She located the 'Denny Rose' and



Museum of History and Industry, Seattle (MOHAI) information indicates this Denny 50th wedding anniversary dish portrays David and Louisa canoeing to Olympia for their marriage license. Note "Sweetbrier" on border. Photo by Allen Nelson used with MOHAI's permission.

showed it to the gardener who agreed with the identification and replaced the Denny label on the correct rose.

Cheryl received permission to take cuttings to be used at the Denny Cabin, took them home to root and care for them and then passed them on to me. I repotted and cared for them until the HSF was able to finish construction projects at the Denny Cabin site and planting could take place.

In the meantime, my husband and I visited Pt. Defiance Rose Garden in late May and saw large bushes whose foliage notably smelled like apples with single, light pink flowers which had a very sweet scent. Could these be 'Sweetbriers'? Yes! Once you experience a 'Sweetbrier' in bloom, you will be able to identify it. However, the rest of the year, it is rather bland except for the red rose hips of oval shape.

That same week we went to the WPRG and scored again: light pink flowers and apple scented foliage. This was the Denny rose and in appearance matched the large 'Sweetbrier' rose at the Denny graves at Evergreen- Washelli Cemetery, Seattle.

In 2015, Mrs. Denny's rose, through the efforts of the Historical Society of Federal Way members like Diana Noble Gulliford and Bert Ross and the Federal Way Parks Department's Jason Gerwen and staff, was finally planted in Federal Way's first "historical rose bed", just to the east of the Denny Cabin. When it blooms, it will serve to remind us of the many pioneers, like Louis Boren Denny, who carried plant-remembrances of family and friends left behind to their new, far-away homes.

I would like to express my gratitude to Kristin Halunen of the Museum of History and Industry, Seattle (MOHAI) who allowed me to see portions of their Denny collection, showed me documents explaining some of the artifacts and granted permission to use the photos of the artifacts in this article.

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Photo above: Plate in the collection of the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI), part of a set made for the 50th wedding anniversary celebration of the Denny's. Their cabin on the shore of Puget Sound near the end of today's Denny Way, Seattle, Olympic Mountains in the background and 'Sweetbrier' rose are shown on the plate.

Photo by Allen Nelson and used with MOHAI's permission.

Below: Sweetbrier rose growing on Mrs. Denny's gravesite, Washelli Cemetery, Seattle, WA. Allen Nelson photo.

