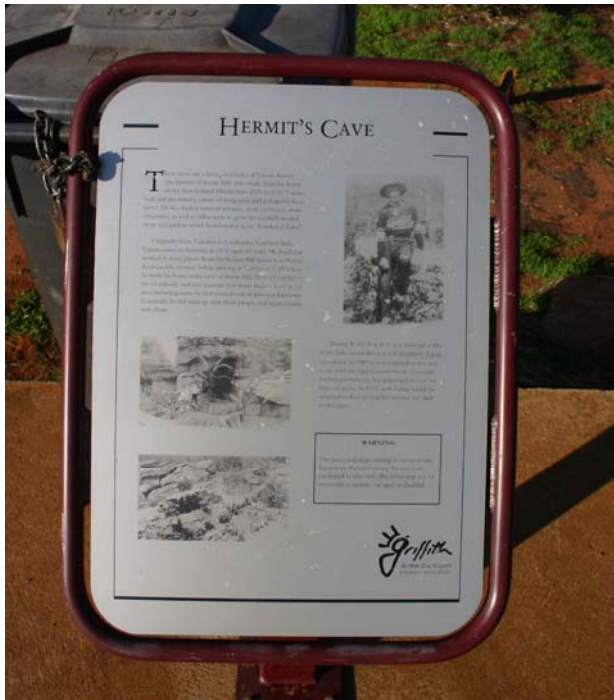


# THE CURIOUS 'CAVES' OF GRIFFITH

– Kent Henderson

Signage at The Hermit's Cave



In late May I found myself in south western New South Wales on business, based in the town of Griffith, for over a week. Out of interest, I phoned Andy Spate, who assured me that that was no accessible karst on the Western Plains of New South Wales. He was, as usual, correct – but as we know (or should know) that does not necessarily mean a lack of caves. And so it was...

Upon alighting in Griffith, I became aware of *The Hermit's Cave* located close to the town. Not unnaturally, I was intrigued... Thus I motored to the north and found the site, in a volcanic cliff face overlooking the town. The cave, or rather a group of shallow caves, are more your 'typical' rock shelters. They are set amongst boulders, largely in volcanic conglomerate, and basalt.



Ricetti's stone walls in front of a rock shelter

The story associated with the cave is rather interesting. It concerns Valerio Ricetti, known locally as the 'Scenic Hill Hermit'. Ricetti arrived at Port Pirie, South Australia in October 1914, aged sixteen years, from Italy. In 1915 he went to Broken Hill and obtained work at the South British mine. In 1918 after a disastrous love affair Ricetti left Broken Hill and returned to South Australia, working mostly in the horticulture districts of Clare, Beni, Barossa and Renmark.

He then went to work at a forest plantation. The owner was a widower with two teenage daughters. After twelve months at Ricetti went to Adelaide with a wallet 'bursting at the seams full of money'. He visited a brothel where his wallet went missing and Ricetti serving five days in jail. Leaving Adelaide he arrived at Morgan on the Murray, where he found work on the paddle steamer called *The Maryanne*. After fifteen months on the steamer it was sold, so he went on to work on another steamer called *The Tumba*. After five months he left *The Tumba*, stating that he had met some dreadful people and was taken down, now broke he worked two years on dairy farms around Swan Hill. He had said that he had 'the best time of my life' on *The Maryanne*.

From Swan Hill he then went to Shepparton to work on the fruit harvest where he shared quarters with six other pickers. Once harvest was finished, four of his mates enticed him to go to Melbourne where he was assured a job awaited him.



A 'cave' entrance – note the graffiti

After a week in Melbourne with no job, his mates deserted him and his money being conned. Desperate he wanted to get on a train out to the country. While looking for a pawn shop to hock his one cashable item, a fine full length leather overcoat, a dubious character noticed his plights and after some conversation he told Ricetti he knows all the pawn shops and to give him the coat and wait, and he would be back in a jiffy with plenty of money.

Conned again and broke Ricetti finally got out of the city riding in a guard van on a train to Benalla where for the next eighteen months he worked for a fencer, then on to Bright on the Tobacco plantations. He was told there was plenty of work on the dam at Burrinjuck, on arrival he was disappointed to find out the dam had finished years before. Now disillusioned and disgusted with fellow man (I wonder why?) he felt he wanted to be alone and away from people. He decided to follow the Murrumbidgee River in the hope of finding a job on a station where he could work on his own.



The Hermit's 'Chapel' rock shelter

Ricetti followed the Murrumbidgee to where it meets the Lachlan, where he celebrated New Year's Day, 1929. A couple of days later he decided to leave the river and follow the railway that dipped south. On the 14th of January 1929 when on the outskirts of Griffith a rainstorm sent him for cover on the hill where he found temporary shelter for the night. The next morning he moved east along the hill to what was known as 'the cliffs'. Looking down from the hill he could see all the fruit farms. He surveyed the area to find at the foot of the hill was a big dam, and the town rubbish dump where he noticed plenty of rabbits and wild pigeons. On his return to the hill he looked down once more and made his decision – he had found his 'Garden of Eden'. Down at the dump he found a half worn out shovel, a mattock head and an axe head, which he soon fitted with handles from limbs

As time went by interconnecting stone pathways, stone galleries and gardens appeared. He also built other caves that he would retreat to when people came. Ricetti worked undisturbed for a couple of years or more. His garden area grew, all lined with many stone retaining walls which he built. He carried tons of soil by bucket to make his garden. In 1935 Ricetti fell and

broke a leg, and had to be hospitalised. He was attended to by Dr. Burrell, a Government medical officer. Ricetti thought he had to pay the Doctor, but having no money he decided to pay him by looking after the Doctor's garden. A friendship grew between Burrell and the Hermit.

During the hermit's hospitalisation, Councillor J Lenehan stated that the recluse by vast labour had added considerably to the interest of the Griffith outlook and it was up to Council to do something for him. The Council thus watered his gardens.

In late 1937, two local Italians, Mr Bicego and Mr Ceccato, were tipped off that the hermit was an Italian from Broken Hill and that his name was Valerio Ricetti. The name rang a bell. Bicego and Ceccato became curious and spent time searching for him. Finally he was close enough one time to hear his name being called and stopped. The balloon burst when it was realised that they had met years before at the Broken Hill boarding house. Bicego and Ceccato endeavoured to get Ricetti off the hill and on weekends took him around to meet people. In a short time he became acclimatised and would not run and hide. However, the hill/cliff was still his domain. He continued to expand his gardens and hundreds of people visited it on weekends; many would have their photo taken with him in his garden.

In 1940 when Italy entered the war on Germany's side rumours abounded that Ricetti was a spy and had a transmitter. He was eventually interned in Hay Camp. After five months he was classified as being disarranged and was sent to a mental institution in Orange. After six months of treatment he was released and sent back to Griffith. The police met the train and took him to the station where he was interviewed. He gave Ceccato's name as a referee. The police asked Ceccato to call at the station where they told him that the Hermit had to get a job and accommodation away from the hill. Ceccato agreed to take him in. From 1942 to 1952 Ricetti remained at the Ceccato's, until he returned to Italy in 1952 to visit his brother – where he died six months later.

The quite well preserved remnants of Ricetti's walls are still there to this day. Seventy-five years on the local Apex Club 'restored' the site, and the local Council has erected several (very good) interpretative signs, and other signage, thereat. Unfortunately, and not unsurprisingly I suppose, the 'caves' themselves have been subjected to serious graffiti attacks, sadly. I have no doubt it is a popular 'party spot' for the youth of Griffith....

However to be fair, one doubts the Griffith City Council could do much more in terms of management, given uncontrolled access to the site. Indeed, the only way to 'fix the problem' would be to fence the surrounds completely – not likely giving it is a significant local tourist attraction. Still, it is an interesting site, with clearly a fascinating history, and well worth the visit if you ever happen to find yourself in Griffith.

**REFERENCE:** *From Broken Hill to Scenic Hill*, by Peter Ceccato.

