

The Hooded Giant

In early 1940 residents in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland were gripped with fear. A tall hooded stranger was roaming the district armed with a rifle and hunting knife. Over the space of a week, this stranger walked from Gympie, down the Mary Valley and, ignoring all obstacles in his path, across the Conondale Ranges to Woodford and on to Narangba before turning around and heading north again. He was reported to be a giant of a man with a great bushy beard wearing a hood over his head. The press of the day were quick to dub this figure of fear the 'Hooded Giant'.



The mysterious stranger was a thirty-nine-year-old Gympie man by the name of Joseph Douglas Gericke who by 1940 had spent many years in and out of the then Goodna Asylum in Brisbane. He was suffering from schizophrenia, and as there was no effective treatment at the time, would often lapse into a delusional state in which he would walk long distances across country, usually in straight lines. He was possessed of both incredible endurance and skills as a bushman, being able to travel quickly through rough and rugged terrain on very little food.

For present day readers raised on images from movies and television the label 'Hooded Giant' likely conjures up visions of a true giant of a man, perhaps close to seven feet tall and powerfully muscled. By the time Gericke was a full grown man

of thirty he stood around 6' 2" (188cm) and weighed 167lbs (76kg). As a point of comparison, the records of the Australian soldiers who enlisted to fight in World War Two show the average height of recruits was around 5' 7" to 5' 8" (170-172cm). Though he would certainly have been regarded as of above average height for the time, standing somewhat taller than his contemporaries, he would not now fit our current ideas of what constitutes a 'giant'.

He had been sent to Goodna for the first time in 1931 following a violent brawl with police at South Brisbane. Over the next few years Gericke was released and readmitted several times but also managed to escape on several occasions leading to frantic manhunts and violent confrontations with the police. In 1935 he managed to escape again but this time evaded recapture, heading south to the New South Wales border. He spent the next few years living rough in the border ranges where locals grew to know him as a strange, reclusive figure who lived on the side of Mount Castle, 10km or so north of Cunningham's Gap. He would roam widely, appearing at isolated houses up to 50km away, asking for a cup of tea and a few supplies, before disappearing back into the scrub. However, he eventually left his mountain retreat and headed north again, to the area he had grown up in around Gympie.

He would stay and work on his uncle's farm near Woondum, sleeping in a shed. He would regularly walk to find work on properties near Kilcoy – a distance of over 100 km. He would cross the Mary River, across country to Imbil and then follow Yabba Creek as it wound up into the high country to the west. Prior to the construction of Borumba Dam the road followed Yabba Creek up into the Yabba

Range before it turned south and followed the old stock route through the area known as 'The Borgen'. The road would eventually lead down towards Jimna and then on to Kilcoy.

In early 1940, Gericke who thirty-nine years old, was working as a farm hand at Dickabram, just north of Gympie. On the morning of 16 March 1940, Gericke disappeared and it was feared he had fallen into the Mary River. But a search of the river and surrounding area found no trace of him. It appears he had begun suffering from delusions again and two days later reappeared near Imbil, around 65 km to the south. Driven by some impulse he had set out across country down the Mary Valley.

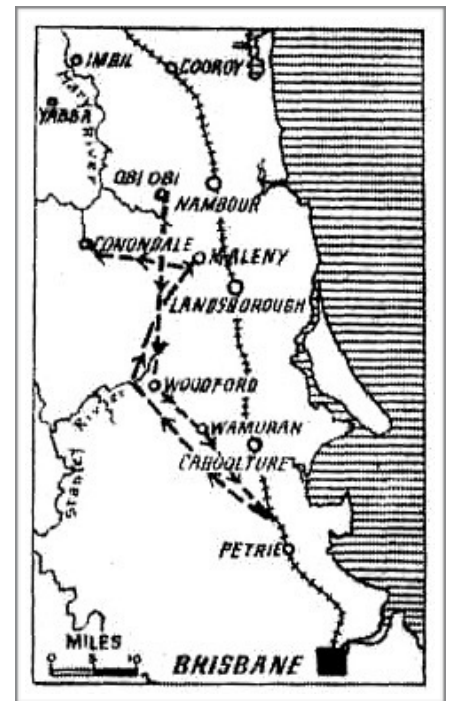
A slow-moving rain system had brought torrential rain to South East Queensland and rivers all across the region had begun to rise. To protect himself in the rain Gericke resorted to an old standby known to generations of farmers, bushmen and labourers; a hessian bag with one corner pushed inside the other and worn over the head like a hood, the bag draped down over the back and shoulders and pinned at the neck with a bit of bent fencing wire.

On the same day a flood warning was issued for the Mary River Gericke was spotted near Kenilworth, walking down the eastern bank of the river. Continuing south he swam across the flooded Obi Obi Creek and the next day passed through the areas crossed by Walli Creek and Chinaman Creek. Somehow Gericke persuaded a local to lend him a horse with which he swam across the flooded Mary River and continued south on foot towards Conondale. He was travelling light, not even carrying any food or supplies with him.

Up until this point, Gericke hadn't been a major cause of concern to those whom he had encountered. While people had probably regarded his crossings of the flooded Obi Obi Creek and Mary River as reckless, he does not appear to have left people with the impression that he was dangerous. Despite carrying a rifle and hunting knife, in a rural area at the time, those items would not necessarily have been a particular cause for alarm. However, all that was about change and he would soon be regarded as a source of terror and anxiety for all those in the area.

While living in the border ranges Gericke had been in the habit of approaching isolated houses for a cup of tea and a few supplies. He was usually received with hospitality and would be quickly on his way again. However, this time, when he appeared out of the torrential rain at an isolated house, dishevelled, soaking wet, great bushy beard, a hood over his head and a rifle carried in the crook of his arm, he was met with fear. A woman, home alone with her baby, encountered this terrifying looking character in her doorway and screamed in terror. Gericke, startled, turned and fled back into the rain leaving her to think the worst of his intentions. She contacted the Police and gave them a description of the armed stranger who had come to her door.

After making enquiries the Police heard tales of this strange, tall man with a hood over his head and began to search for him, concerned he might be a danger to the public. In the meantime, Gericke continued his trek down the western side of the Mary River, heading through the area around Beausangs Lane and over the Conondale Ranges near Bellthorpe and Booroobin. The following day he was sighted near Wamuran and then later at Narangba.



At this point, Gericke stopped in his southward journey and disappeared from view for a couple of days before being spotted on the banks of the Stanley River near Woodford. Despite an extensive manhunt involving Police from Landsborough, Woodford, Caboolture and Kilcoy they were unable to locate him. In the meantime, Gericke had headed back north and walked as far east as Bald Knob before turning back towards Maleny, then on through Wootha and Reeceville before making his way back down into the Mary Valley near Elaman Creek.

That afternoon he appeared at the farm of Roy Cooke on Cooke's Road, Conondale and asked for a meal. Roy Cooke and his household would have known that this tall, dishevelled stranger was the mysterious, potentially dangerous, armed man whom entire district were searching for. No doubt it would have been a nerve-wracking experience for Roy Cooke and his family – to have him sitting at the kitchen table quietly eating a meal.

However, despite their fears, Gericke ate and departed without incident, heading north on the eastern side of the Mary Valley between the Mary River and the high ground of the Blackall Range. Roy Cooke immediately went into Conondale and telephoned the police at Landsborough who immediately dispatched two plain clothes Police officers on a motorbike and sidecar.

They arrived at Conondale to find another local, Neil English, reporting that shortly before the 'mystery man' had appeared at Roy Cooke's farm he had spotted him on his own farm, near Harper's Creek. This meant the Police were only an hour or so behind the 'mystery man'.

The Police were assisted by local residents, Mr J. Sleva, the Conondale Postmaster, and Mr Alf Engle, a well-known local bushman who had an excellent knowledge of the surrounding country. Taking Alf Engle's truck, they headed off in the direction in which the 'mystery man' had last been seen heading.

In the meantime, Gericke had continued north to the area of Eastern Mary River Road. It was getting late in the day when he approached local dairy farmer, Fred Claus, and asked for a cup of tea. No doubt he was well aware that this was the man for whom the Police were hunting. Regardless, he gave the stranger a cup of tea which he drank before going on his way.

On leaving Fred Claus' home Gericke followed the low ridge on which the house sat to the east and climbed the tall hill, known locally as 'Yabba Mountain'. The steep climb meant it was dusk by the time Gericke set up camp near the summit and lit a fire.

Meanwhile, the Police and two local men had been unable to pick up Gericke's trail and were about to give up for the day when they spotted smoke rising from his campfire on 'Yabba Mountain'. Driving to the area, all four men headed up the steep slopes just after sunset. It would have been difficult going in the dark, scrambling on their hands and knees, pushing through scrub and working their way around the numerous gullies and rocky outcrops which dot the hillside. By the time they reached the top it was about 9pm.

The two unarmed, plain clothes Police officers reached the top first and came across Gericke's campsite. He was crouched over the fire but when they appeared he leapt up, grabbed his rifle and, levelled at them. Realising that they were in a perilous situation, the older of the two officers decided to pretend that they lost bush walkers. Turning to his companion, he said, "*I think we're on the wrong track.*" He walked towards the fire, saying "*Say, old timer, do you know where this track leads to?*" Gericke said nothing, regarding them with suspicion. Reaching the fire, the Police officer turned his back to Gericke, pretending to warm himself. Gericke's rifle was only a foot or so from the small of his back. Steeling himself he instantly whipped around, grabbed the barrel and threw the gun away. Rather than put up a

fight, Gericke just stood there, appearing somewhat dazed and allowed himself to be taken into custody.

Finding their way down the steep slopes in the dark would have been very difficult, as the Police were no doubt attempting to keep a very close eye on the man who had eluded them for the last few days. However, Gericke made no attempt to escape and they eventually reached the bottom without incident where Alf Engle drove them all to Landsborough Police Station. The next morning Douglas appeared before the local magistrate "*charged with being mentally sick*" and was sent back to Goodna Asylum

From Dickabram to his arrest on 'Yabba Mountain', Gericke had walked around 200km in seven days, averaging around 25 km to 30 km a day regardless of the terrain and possibly up to 50 km on the last day.

Within a couple of months Gericke would again escape from Goodna Asylum and head off on his longest overland trek, walking over 2,200km across country. This would take him from Brisbane, to near Ivanhoe in central New South Wales, and as far as Olary, South Australia. It was there that he shot and injured a man who was assisting the police in an attempted to recapture him. After an epic ten day, 300km across country pursuit involving the South Australian Mounted Police and several indigenous trackers, through some of the roughest country of the New South Wales and South Australian border, he was shot dead, 80km north of Wentworth, after an armed confrontation with police and station hands.

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