

# Between a Rock and a Radio Place: The Case of the Irene Ryan Signature Mystery in Mammoth Cave

**Peggy Gripshover and Chris Groves**

*Department of Geography and Geology, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101*

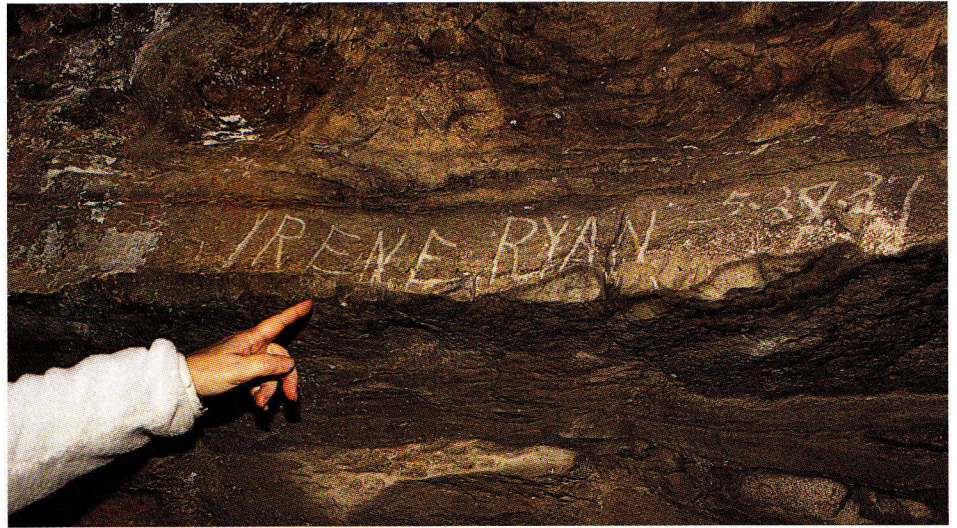
## THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Somewhere back in Mammoth Cave, along the route of the Grand Avenue tour, is a junction of passages where a right turn into Rose' Pass begins winding its way back towards a large shaft complex ending at Hovey's Cathedral Domes. Stopping for a short break, Joe Meiman and Chris Groves rested with a group of about a dozen geology students, as they had done often over the years. After pointing out and explaining to the students about a thin layer of limestone with small fragments of rock called "rip-up clasts" deposited during a storm, possibly a hurricane, some three hundred and fifty million years earlier, Joe turned and looked at a signature on the opposite wall. As in other caves, the many signatures on the walls of Mammoth Cave provide a vast store of information about the cave's explorers and other more-casual visitors. "At this very spot," Joe said quietly, "stood Mammoth Cave's most famous visitor."

Joe Meiman was not referring to Mammoth Cave region legends Stephen Bishop or Floyd Collins. Nor was he thinking of the signature belonging to the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind, who, in 1851, while touring with P. T. Barnum, stopped at Mammoth on her way between Nashville and Louisville. Rather, Meiman was pointing out the signature of "Irene Ryan," with the accompanying date, "May 28, 1937." Most visitors who see the signature, especially those who are Baby Boomers or viewers of late-night reruns on *TV Land*, know that Irene Ryan was the actress who played "Granny" on the classic 1960s television show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

To many generations of students and geologists that came through that part of the cave, Chris and Joe would invariably say that they had concluded that this signature was made by *the* Irene Ryan. Despite their sterling reputations as scientists and scholars, however, and even in their certainty, they qualified this claim by making it clear that this assertion wasn't based on any historical (or other) data. Far be it for either Chris or Joe to let some actual facts get in the way of telling a great story.

And they weren't the only ones to conflate the Irene Ryan signature with "Granny" of *Beverly Hillbillies* fame. The occasional Mammoth Cave guide may have also pointed out the connection between cave wall autograph and the actress. Indeed, a quick Google search including the words



"Irene Ryan" and Mammoth Cave," yields several travel blogs that "document" the signature. One visitor, describing what she saw on the "Wild Cave Tour" in Mammoth Cave wrote that:

*"Irene Ryan (Granny on The Beverly Hillbillies) signed a wall in the caves in 1937—I was exhausted by the time we reached her signature."*  
(<https://asthehorseturns.wordpress.com/tag/mammoth-cave/>)

Another described the pictures of his trip:

*"First Pic—Irene Ryan (Granny Clampett) was here, in 1937 (she would have been 35 at the time—speaking of ages—and her name is scratched in several places inside Mammoth Cave). And that's what granny looked like when she carved her name into the cave walls. Well, she probably wasn't wearing a satin dress, but you get my drift... she was young and un-grannyish."*  
(<http://nhs77.blogspot.com/2008/03/few-mammoth-cave-pics.html>)

And yet another:

*Early tourists often left their names on passage walls or ceilings. This practice (= vandalism) continued well after the area became a park. Methods of leaving a signature included making scratches on the rock and using candle smoke on ceilings to leave a series of stains. The oldest known dated signature in Mammoth Cave is a 1798 scratch*

*signature in Ganter Avenue. The oldest dated signature I've seen is 1811.*

*Shown above is Irene Ryan's scratch signature, made during her tour of Mammoth Cave on 28 May 1937. She was an American actress best known for having a lead role in the old television series "The Beverly Hillbillies".*

(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/jsgeol/38096454856>)

For twenty-some years, Chris and Joe dreamed that one day they would track down the truth and either verify—or, heaven forbid—refute the idea that in 1937, the Irene "Granny" Ryan left her autograph in Mammoth Cave. This notion resided in a large mental filing cabinet under the heading, "Things to Do One Day." But a combination of not knowing how to go about doing this type of historical research, and at least some trepidation in the possibility of shattering the legend, allowed time to roll on without one of those days appearing on the horizon.

Finally, one day, in a moment of classic work avoidance, Chris took to the internet, searching for some answers. There were a number of possible leads for information on Irene Ryan: The Paley Center for Media, The Early Television Foundation, The Museum of Television, and others. Surely, somebody would know somebody with connections to fan clubs, libraries or the like who might have a particular interest in *Beverly Hillbillies* lore? Could there be a diary, or someone who remembered Irene fondly reminiscing

about her youthful graffiti indiscretion while on a trip to Mammoth Cave?

The results of this (admittedly exploratory) effort are summed up in an email from Mr. James Comisar, Director of Arizona's Museum of Television:

*"Hey Chris, thanks for writing. Unfortunately, our focused expertise is the conservation of cultural materials, and as such we would not have a clue how to assist you. Irene Ryan's career-long manager has passed, so I fear it may be difficult to glean such information."*

Not long after coming up empty-handed with his online explorations, Chris shared his quest for his "White Whale" with a colleague in the Department of Geography and Geology at Western Kentucky University. That coworker was Margaret "Peggy" Gripshover, a cultural geographer, who, as it turned out, was equally eager to engage in some work avoidance and has a preternatural obsession with solving quirky unsolved mysteries. Unlike Chris and Joe, however, Peggy has a pesky habit of relying on reliable sources for her research. So, now it was Peggy's turn to follow "Granny's" trail and attempt to either prove or disprove the provenance of the Irene Ryan's signature in Mammoth Cave.

### ALL IN ALL IT'S JUST ANOTHER SIGNATURE IN THE WALL

To attempt to solve this mystery, Peggy approached it like a criminal case—as a bit of material culture forensics; a real "whodunit." Is Irene Ryan, the actress, the leading suspect? Could she have visited Mammoth Cave in 1937 and left her autograph, quite literally, set in stone? Many visitors to the cave have repeated this claim on social media, often including a photograph of the famous signature with their posts. Or could it have been made by someone other than the Irene Ryan? To answer this question, Peggy needed to look at some historical records and related circumstantial evidence to determine if Irene "Granny" Ryan should be rightfully included in the pantheon of culture and history of Mammoth Cave or if Chris Groves and Joe Meiman need to revise their "Granny" signature lore.

So, let's call the first witness to the stand—Irene Ryan's name.

### EXHIBIT A: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

To begin our case, we must first examine the most critical piece of evidence—the signature that has been attributed to the Irene "Granny" Ryan. What's in a name? In this instance, nearly the entire case! The "Irene Ryan" name itself that was scratched into the wall along Boone Avenue may itself provide the strongest evidence that the actress was not the one responsible for the 1937 signa-

ture. For our opening argument, we call our first witness to the stand—Irene Ryan, the actress formerly known as Irene Noblitt and Irene Nobleite.

Irene Ryan's father, James M. Noblett, was the descendant of Scots-Irish immigrants. His ancestors migrated from eastern Pennsylvania in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and settled in the hills of western North Carolina. Irene's father's last name had several spelling variations including *Noblet*, *Noblett*, *Noblitt*, and, in the case of Irene's stage name, *Nobleite*. One good example of these alternative spellings is the "Noblitt Grave Yard" in McDowell County, North Carolina, in which persons named both Noblitt and Noblett are buried. A possible explanation as to why James Noblett's family changed the spelling of the name from *Noblett* to *Noblitt*, was that his James' father, Alfred J. Noblett, was a convicted murderer. When Alfred was executed by hanging in December 1855, his son James—Irene's father, was just four months old.

In the 1860 Census, five years after Alfred Noblett's death, the James' family's last name appeared as "Noblitt." In 1875, James M. Noblitt enlisted in the U.S. Army and spent more than two decades in military service. He was a veteran of the Spanish American War and spent much of his time in the service stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he achieved the rank of sergeant. In Leavenworth, in 1884, James Noblitt married Irene's mother, Katherine McSharry, an Irish immigrant. Around 1897, the Noblitt family relocated to El Paso where Sgt. James M. Noblitt was stationed at Fort Bliss. He was deployed to the Philippines in 1898 and took part in the Battle of Manila. A year later James Noblitt left the Army and opened a popular saloon near Old Fort Bliss called the "Half-Way House."

On October 17, 1902, Irene Noblitt was born in El Paso to James and Katherine Noblitt. Irene had one sibling, a sister named Anna Noblitt, 17 years her senior. When Irene was three years old, the Noblitt family relocated to the Glen Park neighborhood in San Francisco where Irene's father worked as an immigration inspector and a night watchman. She was 11 years old when her father died suddenly in 1913. He was buried in the San Francisco National Cemetery. The name on his grave marker reads, "James M. Noblitt." Five years later in 1918, Irene made her professional debut

as a member of a traveling "follies" troupe. In August 1918, billed as "Miss Irene Noblitt," she returned to El Paso and appeared in the Redmond Follies' production of "Over the Garden Wall," in which she performed the song, "I'm Old Enough for a Little Lovin'" to much applause. She was, however, probably not quite old enough by today's standards—she was about two months shy of her sixteenth birthday.

Irene Ryan began her professional career using her maiden name, "Irene Noblitt," as her stage name. But around 1920, without explanation, the spelling of her stage name was changed to "Irene Nobleite." Even after she married her vaudeville partner, Tim Ryan, in 1922, she continued to perform as Irene Nobleite. It was not until 1942 that she announced that she preferred to be known as Irene Ryan. Perhaps that was a last-ditch effort to save her failing marriage? Maybe so. Just a few months later she divorced Tim Ryan.

In 1937, when the "Irene Ryan" signature appeared on a wall in Mammoth Cave, Irene was best known to the public as "Irene Nobleite." If the actress had made the inscription, more likely than not, she would have scratched her name into the rock as Irene Nobleite, not Irene Ryan. Although most of Irene's fans knew she was in fact, "Mrs. Tim Ryan," her name consistently appeared in marquee lights and in newspapers as "Irene Nobleite."

Being a seasoned troupier in the pre-Twitter days, Irene was adept at old-fashioned self-promotion. So why, if she was the one who visited Mammoth Cave, would she miss a chance to have her stage name carved in stone? Furthermore, if Irene "Granny" Ryan visited Mammoth Cave in 1937, almost certainly her husband Tim Ryan would have been with her. And, given that he always received top billing for their act, he prob-



Actress Irene Ryan in her younger days and as Granny on the Beverly Hillbillies

ably would have added his name to the wall as well. The married comedy team rarely, if ever, made appearances without the other spouse and if they were travelling, they were on the road together.

Thus, our first piece of evidence that argues against Irene Noblette "Noblette" "Granny" Ryan from consideration as the person behind the Mammoth Cave signature is literally the signature itself. If the actress made the inscription, or, at the very least, stood by while someone else did the carving for her, she would have signed the wall as "Irene Noblette," not "Irene Ryan." And, almost certainly, her husband Tim Ryan's name would have been scratched into the rock as well.

### EXHIBIT B: YOU CAN'T GET HERE FROM THERE

If we assume that the date of Friday, May 28, 1937, was the date upon which the "Irene Ryan" inscription was added to the passageway in Mammoth Cave, is there any evidence that shows Irene "Granny" Ryan visited Mammoth Cave on that date? In this case, it is actually easier to prove that "Granny" was not in Mammoth Cave. During May 1937, Irene Noblette and Tim Ryan performed live radio shows in Chicago on WGN. The shows were broadcast across the country on the Mutual Radio Network. On Tuesday, May 25, 1937, Irene and Tim appeared on the "All Star Varieties" radio show on WGN. On Thursday, the day before the "Irene Ryan" signature appeared on the wall in Mammoth Cave, there was a news release announcing that Tim Ryan and Irene Noblette had just signed a multi-film deal with Educational Pictures. There was no mention of a trip to Kentucky in the article. On Sunday, May 30, 1937, Irene and Tim starred in the "Fun in Swingtime" live radio show in Chicago.

It is roughly 400 road miles from Chicago to Mammoth Cave. In 1937 there were no interstates—auto travel was limited to US Highways and average speeds would have topped out around 40mph. A trip from Chicago to Mammoth Cave would likely have required two travel days—each way. Even if they took a train, it would have involved too much travel time to fit into their documented schedule. It would have been nearly impossible for Irene "Granny" Ryan to perform live on the radio in Chicago on a Tuesday, engage in promotional activities, write and rehearse a show, tour Mammoth Cave on a Friday, and be back to Chicago in time for their Sunday live radio appearance. In short, this also suggests that it is highly unlikely, given her live radio commitments in Chicago and the transportation options of the day, that Irene "Granny" Ryan could have visited Mammoth Cave on May 28, 1937.

### EXHIBIT C: WHODUNIT?

If Irene Noblette "Granny" Ryan was not responsible for the "Irene Ryan" signature in Mammoth Cave, who was? We rounded up the usual suspects—any Kentuckian named Irene Ryan, who may have visited Mammoth Cave in 1937, or someone named Ryan with a connection to the cave. The lack of visitor logs for this time period limited us to a search of US Census records and other archival sources. The profile for a graffiti artist trends on the younger side so we looked for persons named Irene Ryan who would have been in their teens or early twenties in 1937. The records review resulted in four possible suspects. Three of the likely candidates were named Irene Ryan and were born in Kentucky between 1904 and 1923. Alas, two have rock-solid "alibis," as they were married prior to 1937 and their last names would have changed to something other than Ryan. So, they were eliminated from the lineup. The third "Irene Ryan" lived in Melbourne, Kentucky, and although we can't definitively eliminate her, there is no evidence to suggest that she did come to the cave, and she may not need to make a confession to the crime because as little information remains about her life and activities, she may have become a nun as was one of her siblings.

If we eliminate Irene Ryan the actress as a suspect, and can't find an Irene Ryan from Kentucky to link to the cave signature, who then is left? There is one other candidate: John James Ryan, who served as the secretary of the Mammoth Cave Park National Association (MCNPA). John J. Ryan was the son of Irish immigrants and was born in Louisville in 1897. He had a long career as a real estate agent for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. He was named secretary of the MCNPA in 1929 when George E. Zubrod stepped down from that position to assume

the directorship of the organization. John J. Ryan continued to serve as secretary of the MCNPA through 1958. Ryan was, therefore, active in the MCNPA in 1937. Perhaps John J. Ryan had a relative named Irene Ryan who came to see the cave while he served on the MCNPA? Given his prominent position within the Association, he probably would have had liberal access to the cave. Perhaps a member of the extended Ryan family was named Irene? Irene "Granny" Ryan died in 1973 and John J. Ryan passed away in 1976, so we may never know the answer to this mystery. But of all the alternative candidates, John J. Ryan remains a "person of interest" in the case of the "Irene Ryan" signature in Mammoth Cave.

### THE VERDICT

Who wrote the "Irene Ryan" signature in Mammoth Cave? That question may never be definitively answered. But there is one thing we can say with some degree of confidence; Irene Noblett Noblette Ryan of "Beverly Hillbillies" fame did not write "Irene Ryan 5-28-37" in Mammoth Cave. We absolve "Granny" from the 1937 act of cave vandalism. She simply could not have been in Chicago and Mammoth Cave at the same time to both appear on live radio and engrave her name in the cave. And, if by some miracle of time travel, she could have been in Mammoth Cave on May 28, 1937, she probably would have scratched her stage name, "Irene Noblette," not her married name "Irene Ryan," into the wall. Visitors to the cave may try to link the signature to the actress and post their assertions online, but the dots simply do not connect. It may make a great story to say that "Granny" did it, but this is one cave legend that needs to be nipped in the bud, or, you might say, Chrissy and Joe should *clamp it*.

### Eagle Scout Speleologists (continued from page 19)

have fun along the way. In the cave, and out, the World Explorers Program combines high adventure with a real-world application. While all the field trips were fun and educational, they allowed us to develop a network of experts in various fields that will help us all grow in our personal and professional lives.

This incredible experience provided four Eagle Scouts with the opportunity to come together and form a lasting bond. We are honored to have been given the chance to work alongside so many gifted professionals and will be forever thankful.

We are now proud World Explorers.



Learning about 3,000 year-old art in the cave