

God's ad man . . . Kentuckian erected a multitude of 'Get Right With God' signs

MIDDLESBORO, Ky. — If you've ever passed a large white concrete cross on a highway, bearing the inscription "Get Right With God," chances are it was made and placed there by Henry Harrison Mayes.

If you've wondered who's responsible for the corrugated metal signs in the shapes of hearts and crosses that say "Jesus Is Coming Soon," "Jesus Saves" and "Prepare To Meet God," Mayes erected most of those, too.

Even airports were not ignored by God's self-appointed advertising agent, who says that he managed to place large letters, visible from the air, within one mile of nearly 50 airport runways around the Southeast, warning those who might look out



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the airplane windows to "Prepare To Meet God."

From a two-page picture in Life magazine, to National Geographic, Newsweek and Grit, pictures of and stories about Mayes and his crosses and signs have, over the years, been a recurring symbol of religious fervor in Appalachia.

Now 85 and wearing his second pacemaker, Mayes struggles to recall when and how it all began.

"I guess I was 14 or 15 when I started organizing Sunday schools and having prayer meetings, and writing small signs on old rough brogan paper like they used to have tacked on telephone poles. Then I got to painting them on rocks, then on bigger things."

His signs, warning passers-by to repent, are now scattered across 44 states.

Mayes figures that he and his wife of 66 years, Lillie, have spent at least \$75,000 of their own money making and delivering signs across the country, although he says that business people and churches around Mid-

dlesboro have been kind enough to help out when called upon.

A good many years back he built a 140-foot-tall lighted cross that stands on a mountaintop overlooking Middlesboro.

"I finally got to where I couldn't pay the electric bill on it," he said, "but the lights still come on every night. I don't know who's paying the bill."

Most of Mayes' crosses and signs were made and placed during what little spare time he could find in the 43 years that he worked as a coal miner in Bell County.

"For several years after I got to putting signs on the highways I didn't know what a bed was," he said. "I'd get my signs ready in the winter and

load them up and take them off in the spring and summer."

Many nights, while on the road in faraway states, he slept on the ground, under the truck, covered with a tarpaulin.

He has been cursed, run off and threatened with a gun, but none of it seems to have dampened his spiritual zeal.

"I like to have got robbed four or five times," Mayes said. "I just outwitted them, that's all."

Age and a heart condition, coupled with the effects of a mining accident and what he calls "old-time rheumatism," finally forced him to stop distributing concrete crosses and metal signs across the country in 1975. But his one-man crusade continues.

"You know, the Lord wants us to

use horse sense," he commented. "Now, he puts all the berries out there, but he's not gonna come down here and pick 'em and give 'em to me."

"It's my job to get 'em. See what I mean?"

Unable to travel as he once did, Mayes has turned to what might be called a "bottle ministry," which has its headquarters in a cluttered back room of his modest home on Chester Avenue in Middlesboro.

He buys empty, throw-away bottles that have been washed, places religious messages inside them, seals them with a cork and some glue, and sends them to missionaries and friends around the world, asking

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Kentuckian has a message: 'Jesus Saves'

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them to throw the bottles into streams, lakes and oceans.

"I just sent off 120 bottles to missionaries in the United States yesterday," Mayes said. "I go over here to Pineville sometimes and just throw out a bunch of 'em over there," in the Cumberland River.

"Well, they're headed for New Orleans. And when they get into the Gulf of Mexico, the Gulf Stream ... the tides and hurricanes switches 'em everywhere."

Inside each bottle, where it may be read through the glass, is a piece of paper that says, "Prepare to meet God," printed not only in English, but in several foreign languages as well.

Twenty of Mayes' personal proverbs, dealing with a wide range of moral and political issues, are also contained in the message.

So far he has sent out 56,000 bottles, he says, all over the world. Each bottle is dated, and each carries Mayes' name and address.

Among the many letters he has received in response to his bottle ministry was one from a lumberjack in Washington state who found Mayes' message in a whiskey bottle on the bank of a stream, deep in the woods.

A resident of the island of Guam found one of the bottles on the beach, several years after it had been released.

Yes, he is aware of the laws against littering, Mayes said. But he is about the Lord's work, and he can't stop.

"All in the world I'm trying to do is help people," he said. "That's all."

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Staff Photo by Byron Crawford

Henry Harrison Mayes made this large white concrete cross in his front yard in Middlesboro. He has been making and erecting crosses and other religious signs all over the nation.