

Highway crosses are work of concrete evangelist from Ky.

Mayes lived up to vow to God

Associated Press

CLEVELAND, Tenn. — Generations of Appalachian Southerners are familiar with the work of the Rev. Henry Harrison Mayes, even if they don't know his name.

Mayes, who was born in 1898 and died in 1986, spent a lifetime creating giant, rugged concrete crosses that stood by roadsides before there were interstates. They proclaimed messages such as "Get Right With God" to passing motorists.

Two of the crosses recently have been standing in the way of area highway expansions.

One was on Dalton Pike in front of Dalton Pike Baptist Church, where utility lines are being moved and grading done in preparation for a widening.

One cross moved

"It was on the right of way and would have been destroyed had not the members of the church moved it," local teacher and historian Debbie Moore said. "It took about three hours."

State Rep. Kevin Brooks, R-Cleveland, asked the Tennessee Department of Transportation to give the church time to move the cross. With a backhoe borrowed from Caldwell Paving, men from the church moved the cross out of danger.

A second Mayes cross did not fare as well. It stood on U.S. 411 in Polk County



Courtesy of The Museum of Appalachia

An undated photo provided by the Museum of Appalachia shows the Rev. Henry Harrison Mayes and Lillie Mayes. He built and erected concrete crosses on roadsides.

and was broken during highway widening.

According to the Museum of Appalachian Culture in Clinton, Tenn., Mayes was a young coal miner in Middlesboro, Ky., when he was crushed in a mine accident. He promised to serve God if he survived, and he kept his word.

"At first he tried being a preacher, but he just didn't have the voice for it," said John Rice Irwin, who collected antiques for the Museum of Appalachia. "He tried singing too, and that didn't work."

Irwin was a young man when he met Mayes, who was old and frail. Irwin's antiques collection includes some crosses that were at Mayes' house when he died.

Mayes tried other media, including a message

painted on the sides of a sow that roamed the mining camp in Middlesboro, Irwin said. He also painted his messages on coal-train cars that would cross the country.

"Yeah, the railroad got on to him about that," Irwin said.

Mixed own concrete

So Mayes turned to the highway crosses. He used metal at first before he found his true medium, concrete. He mixed his own concrete and built his own molds from cast-off coal-mine materials.

Mayes never learned to drive, but a couple of times a year he and friends with a truck would roam the highways, looking for places to put up crosses.

"No, they didn't have a particular place in mind

when they started," Irwin said. "He would just see a good place and get out and put one up."

Like the ones in Bradley and Polk counties, just about all Mayes' crosses went up in rights of way, Irwin said.

"He was always getting in trouble with highway departments," he said.

Around Middlesboro, Mayes was known as a lovable character. Web sites devoted to him describe him as wearing unusual hats and riding around on the bicycle he called his Jeep.

When Mayes died, he was thinking ahead. Among the crosses he left behind at home, some carry detailed instructions on how to erect them on Saturn or the moon.