

Jack Kirkland/News-Sentinel staff

John Rice Irwin stands in the door of the log church where regular services are held at the Museum of Appalachia. The church, built in 1840, once sold for \$35 and a cowboy hat.

Museum acquires 'gospel' signs

Harrison Mayes was a poor preacher but a prime signmaker

By **BILL MAPLES**
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There are two things at John Rice Irwin's Museum of Appalachia near Norris that he doesn't talk about much.

One is a collection of artifacts left to the museum by the family of Harrison Mayes of Middlesboro, Ky., who spread his religious beliefs all over the United States through signs — not omens, but real, solid, wood, tin, aluminum and concrete signs.

The other is a log church built in 1840 in North Carolina, later sold for \$35 and a cowboy hat, and still later hauled over the mountains to rest on the grounds of the museum.

Irwin has not publicized the work of Mayes because it is voluminous, and most of it is not yet ready for display. Mayes' beliefs, however, are visible far and wide on signs along roadways across the country:

"Get Right With God."
"Prepare to Meet God."
"Jesus Is Coming Soon."

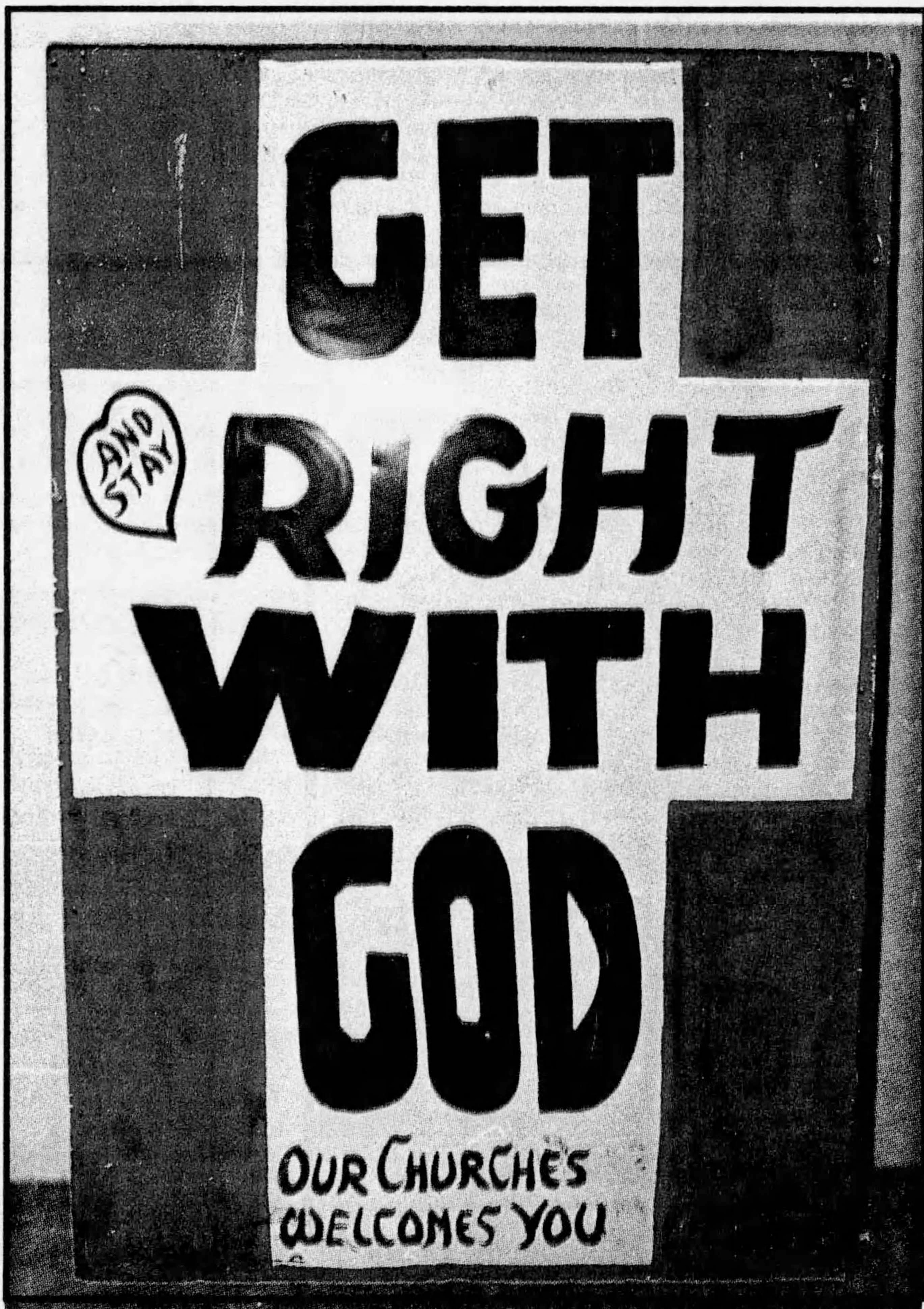
The story goes back 71 years, to the day when Mayes survived a mine accident. Irwin says Mayes told the Lord if he survived the accident, he would serve him. His son, Clyde Mayes, says: "He said the Lord told him then to do this work."

Harrison Mayes was a man of his word. At first he tried preaching, but it was soon decided he was not a very good preacher. Then he tried singing. That, too, was dropped. Then he hit on the message he could give about God's goodness with signs.

His first medium was, to say the least, different. For months, a sow wandered the streets of the village with Mayes' first sign on her side. The message: "Sin Not."

He turned to cardboard and wooden signs but found they would not endure the elements. So he switched to concrete signs. He poured the concrete in cross-shaped molds and chiseled the letters out himself.

"He got very little help with this work," Irwin says. "He wouldn't take contributions unless you just forced them on him. He worked 16 hours a day



This is one of Harrison Mayes' signs, which have found their way to every state in the U.S. and many foreign countries.

in the mine so he could do this work."

Mayes vowed to keep up his religious spadework until "people in all lands and planets have been told of the word of God."

Irwin has a concrete cross at the museum which says "Prepare to Meet God." On the side of an arm is the inscription: "Erect this sign in China.

1990s."

Mayes may have changed its destiny later. On the front is scratched "Moon."

The distribution of the 1,400-pound signs was laborious. Mayes said he would load four crosses on a truck and drive across the country, enlisting volunteer help to put them up.

In later years, Mayes switched to

aluminum signs. His messages on signs went to missionaries around the world. The language department at the University of Tennessee translated phrases into foreign languages. Sometimes the messages were put into bottles and dropped into the ocean.

He had his opinions. One wooden plaque he painted says: "With Respect. If ladys knowed the effect that there half-nude body had on men they would either dress decent or take off all there clothes."

Irwin says Mayes was ahead of his time. On April 4, 1957, Mayes made a concrete plaque with this wording: "My religion, Catholic, Protestant, Jew. My Politics: Democrat, Republican. Languages: I recommend one for all nations. Races: I recommend all in one, yellow, white, black."

Clyde Mayes says his father did not believe in getting hung up in denominations.

Harrison Mayes died in March 1986. His wife, Lillie, died about 15 months ago. Their religious messages had found their way to each state in the U.S. and 32 foreign countries.

As for the log church, it was built in Madison County, N.C. After it was no longer used as a meetinghouse, Thomas Tweed of Woodfin, N.C., bought it from a farmer for the cash and the cowboy hat. Irwin, in turn, purchased the church from Tweed's widow in 1976.

He doesn't publicize the church because it is being used regularly by a local congregation, the Gospel Way Baptist Church. The church was holding its services in a garage, and Irwin asked them to come on over and use the log building.

"I just don't feel it is right for me to promote church services in connection with an institution which some might interpret as commercial," he says. However, he says visitors to the museum of many denominations attend the services on Sundays, and the congregation encourages people to come in and sit with them during the worship. The benches are split logs. The lectern is a 24-inch stump. Irwin says he plans to buy a stove for the building when cold weather comes.

"It takes me back to the old days," he says. "You can walk out in the meadow and hear 'Amazing Grace' swelling up from the church. There is some old-time preaching, too. Calls to mind the preacher who said, 'I'm goin' to keep on preaching today till I do some good.'"