

New museum building will highlight Mayes' monuments

By Fred Brown

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Two years ago, John Rice Irwin set off on a trip to Middlesboro, Ky., that would change not only him, but, also his Museum of Appalachia.

When he returned to Norris and the museum, he had a truck and a trailer full of 12 cement crosses and hearts that are 13 to 15 feet tall and weigh 1,400 pounds each.

These were not just ordinary monuments. Each one represented the lifetime mission of Harrison Mayes, a Middlesboro, Ky., coal miner and sign painter.

The crosses and hearts were the last ones Mayes made, and the only ones that didn't get permanently planted. Across four decades, Mayes erected his hearts and crosses in 44 states.

These 12 were made to go to various

nations, the states he failed to reach and on several planets.

One cross proclaims its promised mission: "Erected on Planet Jupiter 1990s."

Another reads: "Erected This Sign Italy 1990s."

Irwin, historian, creator and curator of the museum, had known Mayes for years and knew of the signs, cement crosses and heart-shaped monuments. Mayes died in 1986.

Two years ago, Irwin learned that the old Mayes property in Middlesboro was about to be sold and that the remaining crosses and hearts, the ones never placed, might be in jeopardy.

Irwin acquired the 12 monuments and then moved them to his museum. That done, he turned his attention as to what to do with them.



Michael Patrick/News-Sentinel staff

An exhibit which opens March 29 at the Museum of Appalachia features the cement hearts and crosses of Harrison Mayes, which he placed throughout the Southeast.

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"They had to be protected," Irwin says.

So he built a three-story brick building, designed by Irwin's longtime friend Jim Russell.

One ground-floor section (actually it is outside, underneath the building) is devoted to Mayes' crosses and hearts.

Over time, Irwin acquired other Mayes memorabilia from Clyde Mayes, Harrison's son, who lives in Middlesboro.

Sunday, March 29, from 1 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., the "People's Building" will officially open to the public. The latest addition to the museum houses not only Mayes' cement monuments, but also many other artifacts related to Mayes' long career of putting up signs around the Southeast.

In addition to the crosses, the building will display Mayes' jacket with 259 crosses stitched to the material, bottled messages in 17

languages and a concrete box which was sealed with a secret message. Mayes instructed that the box was not to be opened until a decade after his death.

The People's Building, which will be included as part of the regular museum admission, will have a great deal of other material for which the museum in Norris has become known, including most of the set from the "Christy" television series.

The building is made of 150-year-old brick taken from a farm owned by Andrew Jackson. The farm was on the Clinch River about three miles north of Clinton.

Clyde Mayes, his wife, Catherine, and other members of Harrison Mayes' family are expected to participate in the official opening.

"Harrison once told me that there was not a man on Earth who had suffered more heartache than he had in carrying out his work. He also said no one had had more happiness than he had doing it," says Irwin of Mayes and his monuments.

"Some think he was some sort of nut, but I don't know why we persecute those who have

a vision and a mission and spend all their time carrying it out. They should be given accolades."

Irwin remembers seeing Mayes' signs "as far back as I can remember. All I knew was that someone in Middlesboro had done it. I recall one between Harrogate and Tazewell on Old Highway 25. It was very prominent and part of the landscape."

Another cross was wired with electric lights and was visible from atop of a mountain near Middlesboro. It continues to operate and light up the night.

"For years, Harrison paid the light bill himself," says Irwin.

In addition to Mayes' crosses, Irwin has acquired many of Mayes' signs. One sign reads: "By God's help I hope to erect or have erected signs on the Moon and 9 planets by 2020."

The planets were Venus, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto and "X."

"X" was for any future planetary discovery.