



GET RIGHT WITH GOD

Harrison Mayes' Roadside Advertising Campaign for the Lord

by Martha Carver

For many Christians, evangelism — or taking the gospel of Christ to others — is a fundamental component of their religion and essential to salvation. This has led to a widely held evangelical doctrine that “no one ever gets to heaven alone.” While few people readily associate the phrases “religious proselytizing” and “roadside architecture,” roadside religious advertising is relatively common. Like other advertising, religious promotion must use a combination of bold graphics and a straight-forward message to get its point across. As historian Betty MacDowell explains, this type of roadside art and religious teaching was “intended for the perceptive eye and the receptive heart ... to arrest the attention and speak to the spiritual needs of those who may catch only a brief glimpse as they speed by.”¹

Graphics were typically direct, such as an open Bible. However, the most common designs used a cross. Roadside crosses could take many forms, such as a single cross or a stark cluster of three crosses. These could be presented with or without a written message. If they contained written messages, the text was generally Biblical verse or references to a specific verse. Painted-on signs, sometimes in a series reminiscent of the Burma Shave or painted on sheds or barns, were short, simple, pithy and to the point. Frequently, people erected informal signs on their own property, but occasionally a folk artist or minister erected his artwork on the property of others. The people who erected these signs tended to possess an unshakable faith, a boundless will to work, and a vision that no one else saw.

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One of the most prolific itinerant artisans of religious roadside advertising was Henry Harrison Mayes. Born in 1898 in the Appalachian coal country of rural East Tennessee, Mayes lived in Claiborne County until the 1940s. His father originally farmed, but when Henry was about 10, the family moved to the town of Fork Ridge, TN, where his father became a coal miner. Young Mayes completed a fifth-grade education, and by the time he was 13 had begun working in the mines for the Fork Ridge Coal Company. Mayes worked as a coal miner for the next 43 years. In 1946, he moved to nearby Middlesboro, KY, where he lived until his death on March 7, 1986.²

When Mayes was 19, he married Lillie Minton (1903-86).³ Originally he was associated with the conservative Church of God, but at times he could be fiercely independent in dogma and later formally renounced his church membership to pursue a more individualized quest for salvation. Recognizing an unwavering conviction for serving God at an early age, Mayes considered various options. After reading in a church magazine that millions of people never go to church or read a Bible, Mayes pondered how to convey the gospel of Christ to people in a non-traditional format.⁴ Roadside advertising was his answer. At age 86, he recalled, "I tried preaching, I tried running revival meetings, and I tried going all over Florida and different places making music. I never could make a go at nothing until I got into this sign work. That was exactly my calling."⁵

Mayes began his roadside ministry in the 1910s. Reputedly his first sign, which said *SIN NOT*, was written on both sides of the family's free-ranging pig.⁶ Beginning when he was about 15, Mayes wrote messages on logs that he put "all over the place."⁷ He also nailed handwritten cardboard signs on telephone poles. He soon hired a local printer to make more formal placards. He also wrote messages such as *JESUS IS COMING SOON*, *PREPARE TO MEET GOD*, or *JESUS SAVES* on oilcloth banners, in red paint on rocky hillsides and with chalk on railroad cars.

Mayes quickly realized that these media were too ephemeral and inefficient. To reach more souls, he recognized the need to place his work where large numbers of people would see it. As businessmen before and after him, he came to see the roadside as a perfect pulpit for a captive audience that was looking for interesting diversions. His first true roadside sign, and the first that he mass produced, was a reversible wooden slat sign formed from three horizontal slats framed within a rectangle that read *JESUS IS SOON COMING* and *PREPARE TO MEET GOD*.⁸

A life-threatening accident in the coal mine in the late 1920s changed Mayes' life. With doctors not expecting him to live, Mayes prayed for God's grace and healing — promising to dedicate his life fully to God and his ministry should he live. He placed upon himself the mission to "properly advertise the Second Advent and the wages of sin on land, on sea, in the air, and on the major planets."⁹ From this experience, Mayes came to the conclusion that the best method for him to serve God was to place signs throughout the United States admonishing people to repent their sins and accept God, a goal from which he never wavered.¹⁰

As a poor coal miner in the 1940s, Mayes supported his wife and children on an income of \$200 a month. It took money and time not only to buy materials and make the signs, but also to pay the cost of traveling throughout the country to erect them on weekends and vacations. By the time he was 85, Mayes estimated that he and his wife had spent at least \$75,000 of their own money on their evangelical calling. However he also credited friends and businesses with contributions of time, money and materials to his cause.

One of Mayes' most creative funding mechanisms was through the assistance of coal mine officials. The company paid miners by the load and assigned each miner a number against which loads were credited. Mayes asked the company for an extra number that he called his "Sermon Number." When Mayes worked overtime or on holidays, he credited the loads to his Sermon Number. Other miners could



Above: A heart-shaped *JESUS IS COMING SOON* sign in Harlan, KY, on old U.S. 421. **Opposite page:** Mayes spent a lifetime erecting roadside crosses, but returned to his first love, signs, for the last message he erected before his death. Mayes and his youngest son Clyde built the large banner-type sign in 1978 by joining four 4-by-10-foot panels to a wooden frame. The sign is located off State Route 33, about one mile south of New Hope Baptist Church, south of Tazewell, TN. All photos courtesy of the author.



This barn is located on U.S. 70 (Dixie Highway) east of Newport, TN. It contains the message *PREPARE TO MEET GOD* in duplicate attached to the barn. Mayes placed the bottom sign, formed by corrugated metal, in the 1950s and later returned to place the second sign, which is made of wood.

This early 1940s concrete cross was originally located south of Harrogate, TN, on U.S. 25E (Dixie Highway). In 1999, the Mayes family relocated it to U.S. 25E in Harrogate at the Burchett Car Lot across from Lincoln Memorial University.



This early 1940s cross in Smyrna, TN, replaced an earlier wooden cross. In recent years, the city improved this intersection and the sign was relocated off the immediate right-of-way and refurbished.

contribute to his evangelistic work by crediting their loads to the Sermon Number whenever they wished, as well.¹¹

Mayes seemed to have been alert to innovative advertising venues, and typical of many folk artists, he frequently used recycled materials. In 1934, Mayes hung a huge sign in a gorge along the highway south of Harrogate, TN. Using metal roofing from the Fork Ridge Coal powerhouse that the company was tearing down, Mayes cut out 4-foot letters for the reversible sign that read *PREPARE TO MEET GOD* and *JESUS WILL SAVE YOU*.¹² The same year Mayes used an old boiler discarded by the coal company for another U.S. 25E sign nearby. Mayes placed the round boiler next to the roadside and painted messages on its 5-foot ends. One end contained a white heart emblazoned with black letters saying *GIVE GOD YOUR HEART*.¹³

Similarly, Mayes retrieved and recycled an armature discarded by the machine shop. He painted the rectangular metal object white with red hearts atop the large bolts — certainly an attention-getter. Around the hole in the center of the armature, Mayes wrote *Sacred Atomic Energy* (sic) *Inside*. On the other side, he wrote the irresistible *Please Don't Look In This Hole* (with big arrows pointing at the hole). Inside the hole were the words *Trust In the Lord*. Since it was inappropriate for typical roadside display, Mayes hit on the next best thing by placing it in the Greyhound Bus Depot in Middlesboro where it was prominently exhibited in the barbershop.¹⁴ Another of his unique roadside advertising motifs was a concrete bench along Cumberland Avenue in downtown Middlesboro. The 6-foot-long bench featured a recessed panel with the words *GET RIGHT WITH GOD*.¹⁵ Over the years, Mayes also painted his messages on barns. An example from the 1950s, which includes the message *PREPARE TO MEET GOD* in 4-foot metal and wood letters on the gable end, still exists on U.S. 70 near Newport, TN.¹⁶

Mayes lived most of his adult life in Middlesboro, which may be the only city in the world built in a meteor crater, a deep circular depression about 3.7 miles in diameter with ridging slopes ranging as high as 1,900 feet.¹⁷ Mayes used this unique topography to create one of his best-known local landmarks, the Lighted Cross. Erected by 1949, it lies flat against a steep hillside and is visible at night from the town's main street. Formed of lines and bulbs, the "cross" is 120-foot tall and the crossarm section is 60-foot wide with 82 light bulbs. For a time, Mayes paid the electric bill; later, however, local residents donated money to help pay the bill and friends maintained it. After a tornado severely damaged the Lighted Cross in 1988 it was rebuilt.¹⁸

Mayes did not limit himself to the typical roadside signs, but built "air" signs as well. About 1945, he erected a giant sign on a hillside beside his house in Fork Ridge using 300 tons of large creek rocks painted with whitewash. Probably inspired by World War II victory gardens, the sign read *V — IN GOD*. The family planted its garden in and around the letters, which could only be seen from the air.¹⁹ Mayes also erected large metal signs near airport runways, positioned so passengers would see them as their plane took off. The signs

typically read *PREPARE TO MEET GOD*. Airport authorities believed they upset the passengers, however, and usually disposed of them quickly. It is known that Mayes erected 25 to 30 such signs at airports in Little Rock, Memphis, Knoxville, St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Miami, Raleigh-Durham, and West Palm Beach. The Knoxville airport removed at least three of the signs, and the Tennessee State Museum has preserved one airport sign in its collection.²⁰

Mayes brought roadside advertising into the construction of his home. He and his wife, Lillie, moved from Fork Ridge to Middlesboro in 1946 where they built a four-room house in the shape of a cross, which they called the "Air Castle."²¹ An ongoing project, Mayes expanded the house over the years and it eventually came to be called "The House of Many Crosses." The yard and the house, which Mayes built of handmade blocks that each contained a small cross-shaped indentation, featured many elements with Biblical symbolism. Twelve windows in the front section represented the 12 apostles, and 10 windows on the rear section represented the Ten Commandments. Eight outside doors represented the eight people saved in Noah's Ark. The metal roof originally contained the message *GET RIGHT WITH GOD*, although Mayes would later add *JESUS SAVES*. A concrete header above the windows in front read *JESUS SAVES*.

The house contained three chimneys, representing Jesus and the two thieves at the crucifixion. Concrete fence posts represented the seven continents. Eight metal posts and one wood post, called the Judas post, represented the nine planets. The lot had 12 corners, representing Biblical patriarchs and the apostles. Mayes poured a row of 28 concrete hearts and crosses in the back yard, which would be moved to different locations in later years. Mayes's house is substantially altered today. Two large crosses, also extant, flank the roadside; they resemble his standard roadside crosses but read: *THANKS TO GOD FOREVER FOR LANDING ME SAFE THROUGH THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST* and *LOST FOREVER BECAUSE I FORSAKENED* (sic) *THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST SAID REGRET*.²²

Although Mayes erected a wide variety of signs, he would become most famous for his concrete crosses, which he made himself in a workshop at home. By 1949, he said that he had erected more than 2,000 signs (presumably cardboard, wood, or concrete) in 25 states, and that friends or ministers (to whom he shipped signs) had erected them in all 48 states.²³ In an interview at age 86, Mayes said that he had personally erected signs in 44 states and had provided for the distribution of messages in all 50 states and 82 nations.²⁴ Examples of his work are in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution, Museum of Appalachia in Norris, TN, and the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville.

Mayes originally erected wood crosses, but he began experimenting with concrete in the early 1940s. These crosses cost about \$12 each to make. Substantial in size, each was approximately 8-foot tall and weighed about 1,500

pounds.²⁵ Originally 4 inches thick, Mayes later expanded the depth to 6 inches, and later still to 8 inches. At Fork Ridge, the sand and gravel that Mayes scavenged from the railroad tracks contained coal particles; after moving to Middlesboro in 1946, he was able to use sand and gravel free of coal. Most examples are in the shape of a cross, but some signs contain hearts on a post. Each side contained a different inscription, depressed within the cross, and often painted red to symbolize the blood of Jesus. The most common messages that Mayes used on his crosses were *PREPARE TO MEET GOD*, *JESUS IS COMING SOON*, and *GET RIGHT WITH GOD*.

Overtime and increased wages at the mines to accommodate supply production increases for World War II enabled Mayes to substantially expand his production of concrete crosses, many dating from the 1940s or later.²⁶ In 1949, Mayes told a reporter he had erected 80 concrete signs along the highways in six mountain states and planned to replace some of the wooden crosses in other states as soon as his finances allowed.²⁷ The case of Smyrna, TN, is typical;

at an unknown date, Mayes had erected a wooden cross on U.S. 41/Dixie Highway. As he often did, Mayes also provided a concrete cross to a local congregation, here the Smyrna Church of God. In the early 1940s, the congregation replaced the deteriorated wood cross with the concrete version.²⁸

As a young man, Mayes owned a car and later an old ambulance that he used to haul his concrete crosses, though neither worked well. Mayes also hired a truck and driver, or asked for volunteers, to deliver the signs. During the early years he slept in the truck in a big wood box that doubled as a tool chest, or under the truck; but in later years the drivers and Mayes stayed at motels.²⁹ He usually made two sign trips a year, typically lasting 10 days to two weeks. In 1963, for example, Mayes left in a hired truck with 75 *GET RIGHT WITH GOD* signs that he planned to erect at Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Canyon.³⁰ At the height of the automobile tourism era, Mayes must have hoped to reach an extensive audience by capitalizing on the high volume of visitors at these tourist meccas.

Mayes returned to his first love, roadside signs, for his last installation. He and his youngest son, Clyde, erected a large banner-type sign south of Tazewell, TN, in 1978. Consisting of four 10-foot panels, each 4-feet high and nailed to a wooden frame, the sign reads *GET RIGHT WITH GOD*, lettered in black on a white background. The sign remains just off State Route 33, about one mile south of New Hope Baptist Church.³¹

Like many others, Mayes believed his commitment to God was greater than the laws of man, and he periodically met opposition from authorities. In a 1949 interview, he stated that his two greatest opponents were the American Automobile Association (AAA) and the Commonwealth of Virginia. AAA officials had testified at a senate hearing of “cranks who take a ghoulish glee in spreading” a message of violence and disaster, and cited an example of a man who suffered a car crash trying to read a sign on an underpass that read *PREPARE TO MEET GOD* — a Mayes sign.³² Virginia took a hands-on approach and removed 30 of Mayes’ early wood signs from its roadsides, then sent him a bill for the labor. When Mayes refused to pay, Virginia threatened court action. A compromise, or perhaps more accurately, a stand-off, ensued in which Mayes did not pay the bill and lost his signs but he stopped erecting them in Virginia.

In a 1970s interview, Mayes recounted that he had recently received a letter from the Ohio State Police informing him that since his signs were on state right-of-way they would have to be removed. He asked Ohio to leave the signs as long as possible or until he could get there — never intending to go. Just two days after returning from a trip where he installed a sign near Yellowstone, state officials wrote him that it had been removed due to Lady Bird Johnson’s beautification law.

In an interview during the 1980s, Mayes recalled that over the past 40 years owners had rarely given him permission to place signs on their private property; and when they



This unusual cross is located along the roadside at Mayes’s home in Middlesboro, KY. It reads *LOST FOREVER BECAUSE I FORSAKENED (sic) THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST SAID REGRET*. The reverse reads *THANKS TO GOD FOREVER FOR LANDING ME SAFE THROUGH THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST*.



This cross near Rockwood, TN, on U.S. 27 (Dixie Highway) contains the messages *NOTHING BUT THE BLOOD* and *JESUS CHRIST IS LORD*. Although this cross closely resembles the work of Harrison Mayes (even though the messages are different than Mayes's typical signs), Rockwood resident Donnie Bohanan erected this sign.

denied him access, he erected the signs when they were not looking.³³ Mayes placed the signs in what he called "no man's land," fence-rows where ownership was cloudy and where the state might think the sign was on the farmer's land, or vice versa. He trespassed — knowing he was trespassing — because he felt it was his "religious right" to put the signs "out of the way" where they could be seen by travelers, but would not cause harm to motorists.³⁴

Today, this uneasy relationship continues where some states have outlawed roadside shrines. Other states view them as a silent reminder to drive carefully, or not to drink and drive, and thus serve a positive transportation function. Other states oppose such signs, citing safety as an issue since the markers themselves can pose a life-threatening hazard to motorists. Since many such signs rely on cross-related graphics, religious plurality has also led to opposition. As road-widenings occur around the country and the passage of time has resulted in deterioration, the remaining signs created by Henry Harrison Mayes have become increasingly threatened. Family members are attempting to identify his

signs and relocate the crosses off state rights-of-way and onto private property visible from the roadside. The author has identified extant signs in Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky, but since Mayes erected them around the country, others may still exist.

Like "See Rock City" barns and Burma Shave signs, religious advertisements such as Mayes' crosses are a part of the roadside experience. So on your next roadside excursion, keep an eye out for *GET RIGHT WITH GOD* signs and think of the man who spent his vacations erecting them. ●

¹ Betty MacDowell, "Religion on the Road: Highway Evangelism and Worship Environments for the Traveler in America," *Journal of American Culture* (Winter 1982), 63.

² Eliot Wigginton and Margie Bennett, eds., "Watchman on the Wall," *Foxfire 9* (NY: Doubleday, 1986), 329; Catherine Mayes, *A Coal Miner's Simple Message* (Middlesboro: privately printed, 1999), 24.

³ Wigginton and Bennett, 333; Mayes, 121.

⁴ Dean Cadle, "The Man Behind the Signs," *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Jan. 23, 1949).

⁵ Wigginton and Bennett, 333.

⁶ Fred Brown, "An American Way of the Cross," *Knoxville News Sentinel* (April 1998); Scripps Howard News Service, <www.reporternews.com/religion/cross0411.html>.

⁷ Wigginton and Bennett, 333; Byron Crawford, "God's Ad Man ... Kentuckian Erected A Multitude of 'Get Right With God' Signs," *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Nov. 16, 1983).

⁸ Crawford; Mayes, 26-27, 115; Wigginton and Bennett, 333; Bill Woolsey, "Highway Evangel," *Nashville Tennessean* (July 17, 1949).

⁹ Woolsey.

¹⁰ Mayes, 5-6; Wigginton and Bennett, 329.

¹¹ Cadle; Crawford; Mayes, 15, 30.

¹² Mayes, 24, 83.

¹³ Mayes, 23, 105. It is not known what was written on the other end.

¹⁴ Mayes, 37-38.

¹⁵ Mayes, 39.

¹⁶ Marcel Klar, telephone interview with Martha Carver, July 7, 2000.

¹⁷ Rick Christopher Lasley, "Middlesboro May Be Only City in World Built in Meteor Crater," *Heritage Edition, the (Middlesboro) Daily News* (Sept. 30, 1986).

¹⁸ Mayes, 90-92; Woolsey.

¹⁹ Mayes, 31, 33.

²⁰ Eleanor Dickinson and Barbara Benziger, *Revival!* (NY: Harper and Row, 1974); Mayes, 75-76.

²¹ Woolsey.

²² Cadle; Dickinson and Benziger, 174; Mayes, 101-102; Wigginton and Bennett, 331; Woolsey.

²³ Cadle.

²⁴ Wigginton and Bennett, 333, 342.

²⁵ Mayes, 30.

²⁶ Cadle.

²⁷ Cadle.

²⁸ Aubrey Tune, interview with Martha Carver, April 10, 1994.

²⁹ Cadle; Crawford; Mayes, 22, 43.

³⁰ Mayes, 55.

³¹ Mayes, 34.

³² Cadle; Woolsey.

³³ Dickinson and Benziger, 166-70.

³⁴ Wigginton and Bennett, 337.