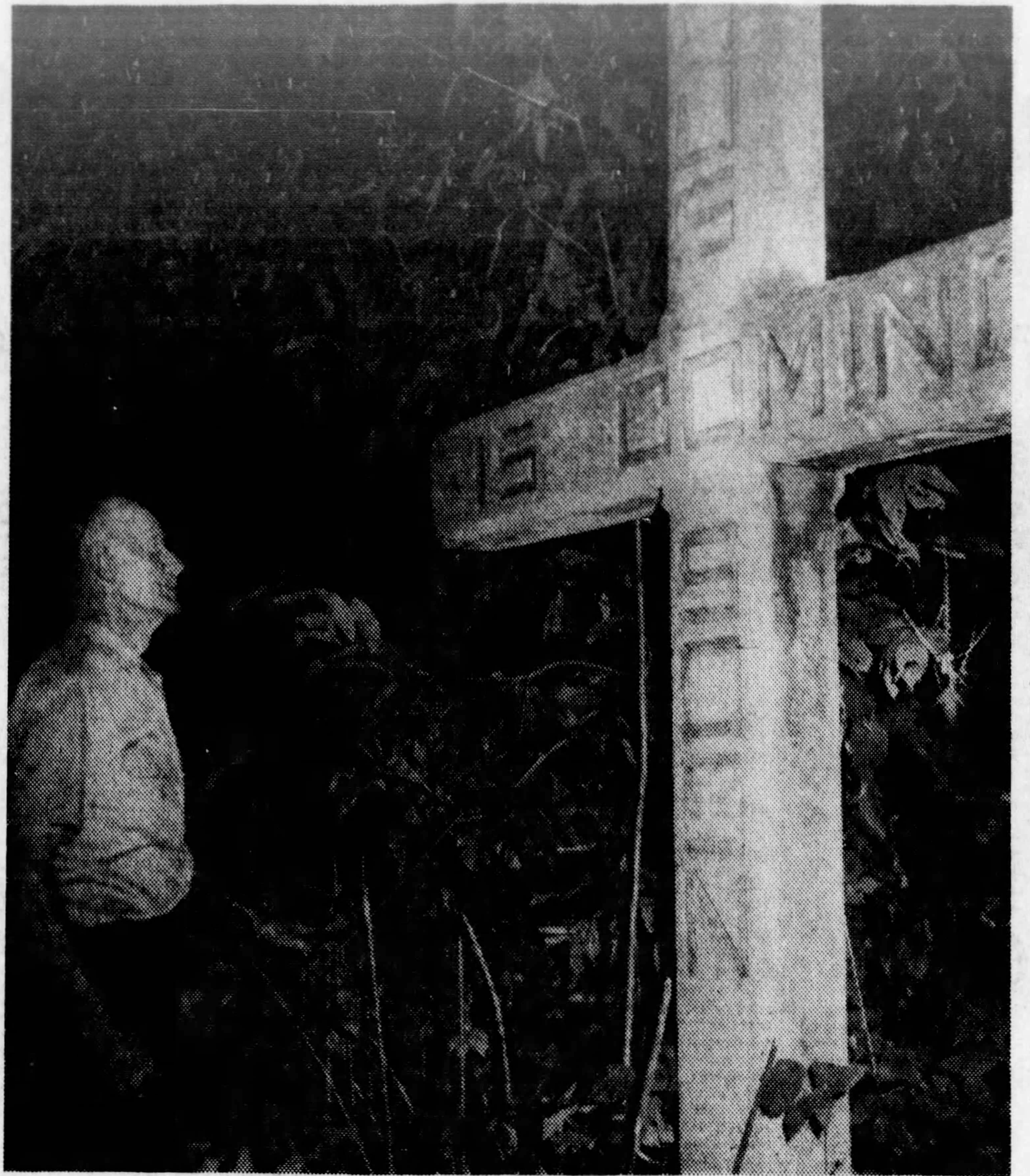


H. Harrison Mayes, 75, of Middlesboro, Ky., stands alongside the specially rigged bicycle he rides in hometown parades to spread his religious messages. At right is one of the concrete crosses he made and has distributed throughout the world.



A Kentuckian's world crusade

By KEN MINK

A RETIRED Kentucky coal miner who has been erecting wooden, metal and concrete crosses on roadsides all across America for the past 55 years has vowed to keep up his religious spadework until "people in all lands and planets have been told of the Word of God."

H. Harrison Mayes, a wiry 75-year-old resident of Middlesboro, Ky., says his roadside signs — bearing such phrases as "Get Right With God" and "Jesus Is Coming Soon" — are now located in each state and 32 foreign countries.

But Mayes, who supports himself and his wife on his miner's retirement check and black-lung health benefits, is far from being satisfied; on the contrary, he's just as zealous about his work now as he was when he began his project in 1918.

"I want to spread the Word of God throughout the world and the universe," he says. "I know there's life out there (on other planets) and they need to be saved, too."

MAYES NAMED each of his five sons after continents and persuaded his sons to name his 18 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren after planets (Venus, Mercury, Pluto, etc. — with one even called "Planet X" for "any new planet they might discover").

"The way we figure it," said Mayes, "is that each of the children is responsible for putting up signs on the planets they are named after. I think interplanetary space travel will be pretty common by the year 2020, so I'm just planning ahead."

Mayes says millions of people have seen some of the several thousand signs he has put up.

"I started out putting up cardboard and wooden signs," he explained. "But I found those would not last but a few years. So, I switched to concrete signs. I poured the concrete and chiseled the letters out myself."

The concrete crosses weigh about 1,400 pounds each and the chiseling work on each involved many hours of hard work. Loading the heavy crosses was another

formidable chore. "I always rented a truck, in which I could haul only four crosses, and drove it across the country to put up the signs," he said. "I usually had someone volunteer to help me put up the crosses."

IN the past couple of years, Mayes has switched from making concrete crosses to aluminum crosses. "I want these crosses to be seen by people long after I'm gone," he explained. "But I figure the aluminum crosses will last an awfully long time. I'm now working on 200 crosses I plan to put up next year."

Mayes's front yard and backyard at his home are filled with concrete and metal crosses.

He has several "special" concrete crosses lined up in his backyard "ticketed" for erection in such places as Russia, China and Australia "by the early 1990s."

Mayes started his work while serving in a coal mine near Fork Ridge, Tenn., barely 20 years old. "I was saved from an accident by the Lord and I figured I would devote the rest of my life to warning others to follow His word," he said.

Mayes receives practically no financial or physical support from anyone — other than his wife — in his cross-warning project. He belongs to no particular church ("I'm a good Catholic-Jew-Protestant; I follow the best parts of each") and is affiliated with no organizations.

HIS INDEPENDENCE is demonstrated in a special sport coat he wears in parades in his hometown. The jacket is emblazoned with 259 crosses "representing the 259 known churches," he says.

Mayes has rigged a special bicycle for such parades, with the vehicle bearing a big sign reading "Get Right With God. This bike is dedicated to outer space. I hope to ride it on the moon and many of the planets erecting sacred signs." I don't know if I'll be able to make it

"Time is getting caught up with me and personally to any other planet, but I'm sure some of my great-grandchildren will," he said.

Mayes admits that many people regard his project "as a little kooky," but says he has many preachers who commend his work. "I have preachers in and out of here (his home) all the time," he said.

Mayes's home is religious symbolism personified. He built the eight-room frame house himself, shaping it like a cross and putting in the same amount of windows as Jesus had disciples, same number of doors as the Ten Commandments, etc.

One room of the home serves as his "office," where he thinks up new religious slogans and displays his "good-versus-evil" collection.

He has a large glass double-shelf case in which he has placed items he considers good and bad. "One row contains all the bad things about the world—drugs such as heroin, alcoholic drinks, pornography and so forth. The other row contains the examples of good things about the world, such as the Bible and so forth."

IN ADDITION TO his cross project, Mayes makes signs that he sends to missionaries around the world and he annually ships hundreds of message-laden whisky bottles to postmasters in 12 seacoast cities for dumping in the ocean.

"I put a Biblical message in 14 languages on a piece of paper bearing a red cross and work it into the bottle and put in a cork," he explained. "Then I ship the bottles to the postmasters with a request they just dump the bottles into the ocean so they can float to countries around the world."

Mayes reports he has heard from people all over the world who have found his bottled Bible phrases. The University of Tennessee's language department

translated the phrases into the foreign languages for him.

"I find the bottles in alleys, people bring them in to me, and I pay children five cents each to collect 'em for me," he explained.

"When I go out to put up my signs I sometimes run into opposition from people because they don't know what I'm doing," he explained. "I try to pick out-of-the-way places for my signs most of the time—but I put a few up alongside interstate highways and near airports. The signs near airports read 'Prepare to Meet God.' They have shaken a few people up."

"Some state highway departments have written me and told me to come take my signs down, but I ignore 'em. Such letters usually don't mean much anyway because they're handed down from one official to another . . . sort of passing the buck. I got one from Illinois a few years ago warning me to come and get my sign or they would tear it down. I got a similar letter several years later from officials in the same state saying the same thing. Those people don't mean to be bad . . . they just don't understand."

MAYES put one king-size "sign" on a mountaintop near his home so those who fly over the area could see it. The "sermon" features letters 36 feet high and is made of 300 tons of rock. The message reads "V—in God."

Spending every available penny on his religious projects has left Mayes little money for himself and his wife for personal comforts.

"I figure I have spent over \$100,000 of my own money on OUR work—mine and God's—but it has been worth it. I'm just 126 pounds of mud, waiting to rejoin God in Heaven."

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