

# Getting right with God

## Brush with death resulted in Harrison Mayes' unique calling

**H**MIDDLESBORO, Ky. — Harrison Mayes was God's own messenger.

He was a rolling holy man, rambling the landscape, landing in small illuminating bursts.

Everywhere he traveled, Mayes left behind a trail of large cement crosses

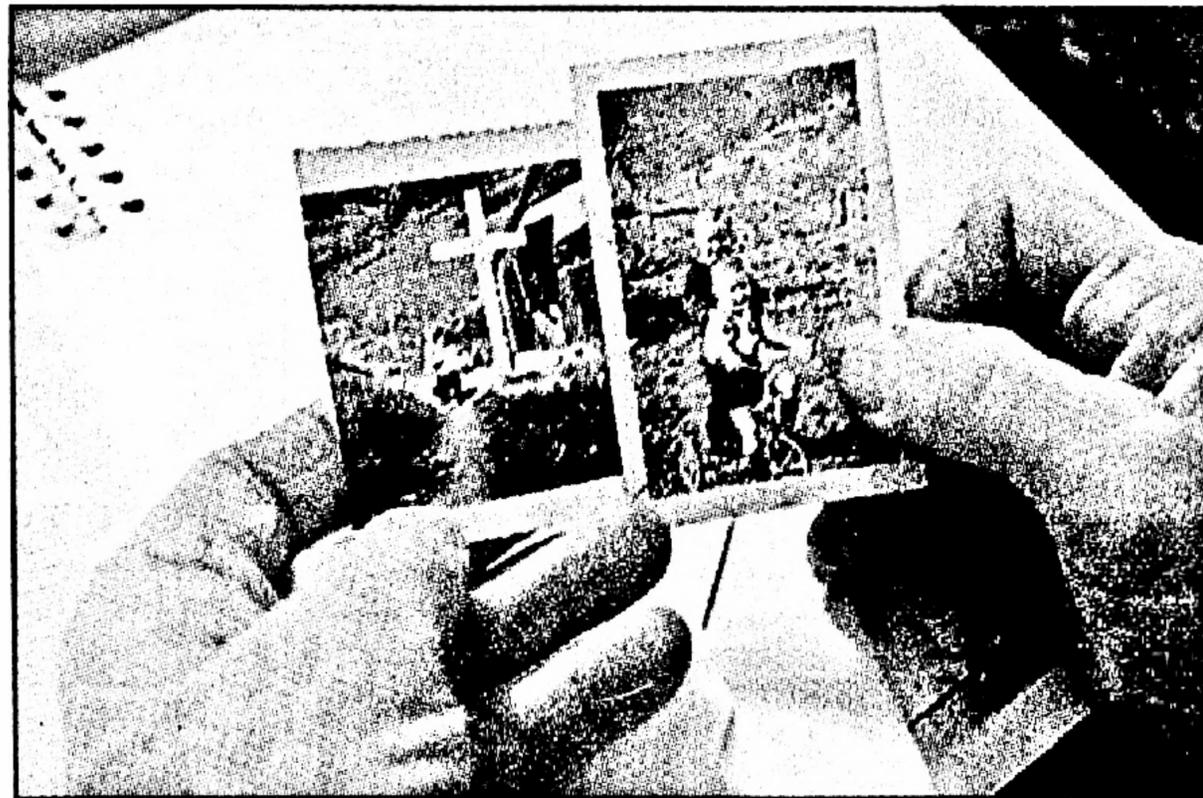
and hearts and red-and-white signs that read "Get Right With God," or "Jesus Is Coming Soon."

Mayes was absolutely convinced he was right, and his pilgrimage is probably the last thing you would expect from a skinny Kentucky coal miner whose nickname was "High Weed."

But from the 1930s until he died in 1986 at age 88, Harrison was a man who ran on a tank of religious energy that was always full. He was a hot-footing apostle and a fast-digging man.

Mayes was born on a farm in Claiborne County near Goins in 1898.

His family moved to Fork Ridge, a community of wood frame houses on stilts that was part of a series



Clyde Mayes looks at photos showing, at left, the first cement cross his father built in the early 1940s and a childhood photo of himself and nephew Bill Seals.

of coal mining camp towns near Middlesboro, Ky. By the time of his 15th birthday, Harrison was working in the mines alongside his father.

When he was about 18 years old, he was practically crushed to death by a runaway coal car.

Working in the deep mine as a coupler, Harrison was slammed against the side of the mine wall

by a fully-loaded car when it broke loose from the line. He suffered several broken bones, and his chest was smashed.

The night of the accident, Harrison Mayes danced a two-step with death, but by the next morning, he was awake and praying, asking the Lord to save him. He promised that if he were allowed to live, he would dedicate his life

to working for the Lord.

God got a good deal on that one.

After recovering, Harrison Mayes never considered not living up to his end of the bargain. He and God shook hands.

As soon as he healed, he tried preaching. Failing to arouse passions, he next attempted to become a gospel singer. With an off-key voice that raised hair instead of a joyful noise, he abandoned the hymnal and began painting signs on anything that would stand still — and some things that wouldn't.

His very first sign was on both sides of the family's free-ranging pig. It said: "Sin Not."

He made wooden crosses, and then, like an evangelical Johnny Appleseed, he planted them across the Southeast.

Sometime around 1940, Mayes latched on to the idea of casting cement. He built a wooden mold and began pouring.

The mold was in the form of a heart, 4 feet tall and 4 feet wide. The post supporting the heart was 6 feet high and 10 inches wide. Three additional feet were buried



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Southern Voices

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## Mayes

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in the ground, making the one-piece heart 13 feet tall.

That first sign is still standing in the cemetery at Fork Ridge where Harrison Mayes' father and mother, brother and sister are buried on a stark hillside. In the near distance, where trees grow unfettered in thick bunches, are memories of hundreds of coal camp houses jammed into the hills.

Harrison cut his biblical messages into the molds. One side said: "Prepare to Meet God." The other side proclaimed: "Jesus Is Coming Soon." Rarely did he change the message on the hearts or the crosses, and his signs mostly read: "Get Right With God."

Harrison continued to work in the mines while casting crosses and hearts and painting signs. Then, after casting his first concrete cross mold, he decided to broaden his sphere of activity. He began planting his hearts and crosses around the nation.

The cement crosses were just as large as the hearts and weighed 1,400 pounds each. He painted their messages in red, so they would be visible from long distances. Over time, his crosses changed from 4 to 8 inches thick. He transported four crosses at a time on a flatbed truck.

Upon arriving at a chosen site with a hired driver, he would dig a hole and back the truck to its

edge. He unloaded the crosses by pushing them across a row of pipes. Then he would slide the cross into the hole and back the truck slowly toward the hole until the big cross dropped into place. Later, Harrison developed a block-and-tackle arrangement to handle the heavier monuments.

He repeated this process thousands of times across the nation, missing very few states. Before advanced age stopped his traveling plant-as-you-go mission, Harrison had erected crosses, hearts and signs in some 44 states.

He left instructions as to in what states the rest of his crosses and signs were to go if he died before finishing the work he had promised God he would do.

He also mapped a plan to put crosses on the moon and other planets. He envisioned big cement crosses in Egypt and Jerusalem as well. As Harrison Mayes widened his horizon of influence, he also began signing his name in a strange code - P.A.E. He revealed the meaning only to two granddaughters.

After his death, one granddaughter recalled that the initials were his religious shorthand for Planetary Aviation Evangelism.

He fully intended to go out of this world.

Harrison Mayes didn't stop with crosses and signs, though. They were his signature, but there was much more to the man.

He created a large sign with an arrow pointing toward the skies and fastened it to his

bicycle, which he rode everywhere, since he didn't have a driver's license or own a car.

Mayes collected bottles of all description - plastic and glass - in which he stuck religious messages. He floated them in streams across the land. Some estimate that he sent some 50,000 bottles downstream.

Until warned not to, he scribbled on the sides of railroad cars.

*"I was fascinated with him, but I didn't always agree with my father. But he was dedicated."*

**Clyde Mayes**

Son of Harrison Mayes

He tacked large lettered signs to wire fences along airport runways.

He built his home in Middlesboro in the distinct shape of a cross.

On the roof of his house, he painted 12-foot-high words in red. The message, "Jesus Saves," could be read by those flying overhead in airplanes.

The house was built with heart-shaped slab porches in three corners of the cross. Go out the fourth door where there was no porch, and you were lost, physically as well as spiritually, he said.

Small 6-inch crosses were etched into each of the house's handmade cement blocks, which he also cast.

Five cross-shaped double windows represented the 10 commandments, and its 12 single

windows were symbolic of the 12 apostles. "Jesus Saves" was carved into the headers above the windows. Eight outside doors were for the eight people saved on the ark.

The house was surrounded by a seven-strand wire fence held in place by seven corner posts. The strands and posts represented seven planets and seven continents. The home's walkway was made in the shape of an

anchor, with the arms connecting to the house.

Harrison Mayes called his home the "Air Castle."

Cement crosses. A home in the shape of a cross. Thousands of crosses and signs planted across the nation.

Was this the work of a religious zealot, frenzied with faith, or something else?

Mayes' son, Clyde, who lives in Middlesboro, grew up in the cross-shaped home and has, at age 61, become interested in his father's work.

He says his father was somewhat extreme but also dedicated to religious thought and freedom - and to spreading the word.

In order to fund his work, the elder Mayes worked double shifts in the coal mine, sometimes spending the night in the mine.

He became so adept at painting signs that the Coca-Cola Co. hired him to paint the company's signs they gave away to country stores.

"He was always working," says Clyde. "I never met a man who could measure up to him. I'm still learning about the man."

Harrison never sought donations for his work, but miners had the mine company set aside \$1 from their pay to be put in a fund for Harrison and his signs. Some churches donated, as did some Middlesboro businessmen.

Of that time, Clyde recalls that his family - mother, two sisters and brother - felt somewhat deprived. If Harrison had \$6, he gave the family \$3. The other half went for his crosses and signs.

"My mother, Mary Lillie, was a midwife in Fork Ridge. She had the healing power. She was a church-going person. He was a highway person.

"We had all we needed," Clyde says of his father, "but I didn't appreciate what he was doing. I thought of him as a little way out. I guess I was a little embarrassed by what he did.

"I was fascinated with him, but I didn't always agree with my father.

"But he was dedicated."

Clyde, a mechanic and carpenter, and his wife, Catherine, are attempting to document the

crosses that are still standing. They have found about 20 crosses and hearts that still stand where Mayes erected them.

Many were torn down when interstate highways moved through an area. Others fell into disrepair when roads changed with progress.

Some of Mayes' crosses even made it to Wyoming, Clyde says. Some are in Colorado.

"He didn't ask permission to put up his crosses and signs," says Clyde. "He usually put them along fence rows so they wouldn't bother the farmer or the road. He called that 'no-man's land.'

"He also put a sign on his crosses saying that if they were torn down, that would be between the person tearing down the cross and God. If you wanted to go to hell, that was your own fault.

"He once put a cross on a golf course," says Clyde.

Harrison Mayes didn't believe in belonging to one church. He felt he was a member of God's own church. He was non-denominational and never hesitated to attend any church of any denomination, including Catholic, black and Jewish synagogues.

See, Harrison Mayes was God's own messenger. The way he figured it, he would fit in just about anywhere.

**Mr. and Mrs. Jack Norman  
Will Celebrate Their  
40th Wedding Anniversary**

