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PHOTOS BY BARNEY COWHERD

Harrison Mayes in his workshop. These are some of the signs he is working on to distribute about. Note that not all of the signs are in English.

The Man Behind the Signs

Clyde Mayes, 11, one of the Mayes' four children, stands beside a sign set in front of their home.

Harrison Mayes of Middlesboro has spent his life in planting religious words along highways

By DEAN CADLE

A FEW years ago, a man demolished his car and injured himself when he drove over an embankment. He had been trying to drive and at the same time read a sign above an underpass in the Virginia mountains. The sign read:

"PREPARE TO MEET GOD."

The sign, and hundreds like it all over the United States, was the work of a small, sandy-haired, coal miner named Harrison Mayes, of Middlesboro, Ky. For 30 years now, Mayes has been carrying on what he considers his evangelistic work. The 50-year-old coal miner has become a familiar figure in the towns and hollows of the Cumberland Mountains. But that region is only his workshop, so to speak. The results of his work may be found in the most obscure corner of the world. Stretched overhead across a jungle path in the interior of Africa, for instance, one may come upon an oil-cloth sign in native dialect reading, "Jesus Is Coming." Or a beachcomber on the coast of Borneo may find washed ashore a half-pint whisky bottle with a card inside telling him also that Jesus is coming and that he should therefore prepare to meet God.

Mayes began his evangelism when he was 20. Five years earlier he started working as a coal digger at Fork Ridge, Tenn., located in one of the several hollows that lead spoke-like into the hills out of Middlesboro. The son of devout parents, he was early fascinated by the idea of becoming a missionary. However, he had had practically no formal education, and was needed at home to help support a large family. He realized he would have to find some less exacting means of teaching the Bible to nonreligious people. His answer came one day when he read in a church magazine that millions of people do not go to church or read the Bible. He decided then that he would take religious reminders to those people by means of "sermons" of his own. He bought a bucket of red paint and began lettering his pleas and admonitions near mine entrances, on the faces of mountain cliffs and beside footpaths that crossed the mountains. Soon he changed to cardboard and to wooden planks, and a few years later began making wooden crosses which he posted along highways in Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia.

WITHIN a few years, his work was beginning to attract attention. Mayes began receiving small amounts of money from neighbors and through the mail. The mining company gave him a partially destroyed two-room house to use as a workshop. The company also agreed to let him mark the cars he loaded with an extra number other than his own. These numbers are used to check each miner's loadings. Mayes uses the second number, the one he calls his "sermon number," when he works on Saturdays and holidays, and uses the proceeds to pay for his signs. Occasionally his friends will let him put his "sermon number" on cars they loaded.

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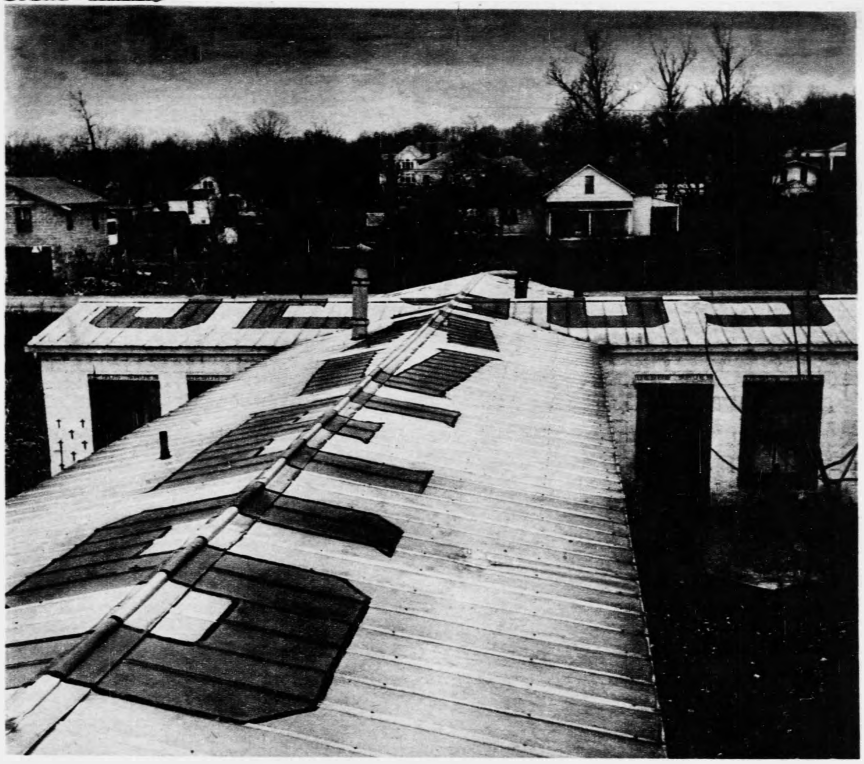


Mayes' home is built in the shape of a cross, and carries the message on top, "Jesus Saves," for the benefit of people in airplanes. Crosses also decorate the house, as can be seen in photo below.

Whisky bottles are used to spread the word, too

In the last 10 years Mayes has taken two trips to Texas, by different routes. Each time he loaded a truck with crosses and was accompanied by a group of neighbors. They assisted him in posting the crosses.

These religious signs, painted in red on white crosses or on barns and other buildings, may be seen in all 48 states. Mayes says he has posted more than 2,000 in 25 states himself. In the other states they have been posted by ministers to whom Mayes has shipped them, and by traveling friends.

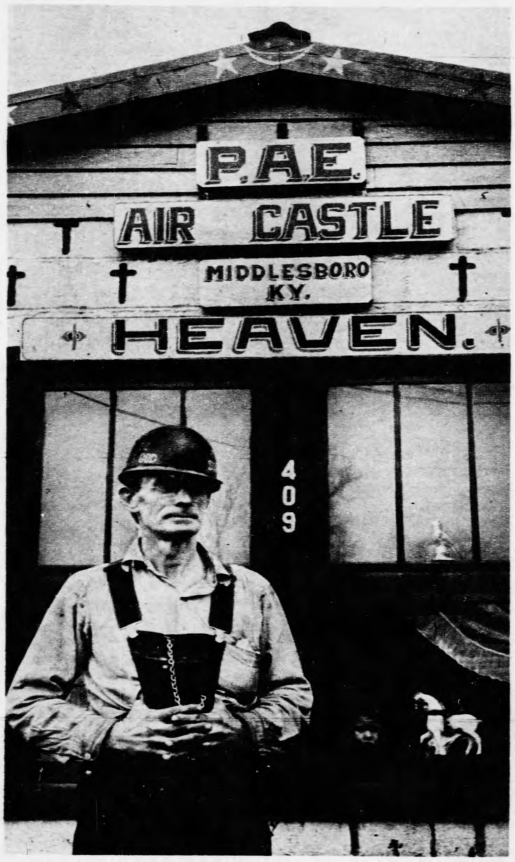
During the war Mayes' coal-digging wage increased sufficiently to allow him to begin making concrete crosses on which his messages are engraved. Each cross is more than 10 feet high, weighs about 1,800 pounds, and costs $15. He has erected 80 along the highways and six mountain states and plans to replace some of his wooden crosses in other states as fast as his finances will permit.

Mayes also spreads the word via whisky bottles. The story is told about a householder in Middlesboro who saw Mayes picking up whisky bottles he had thrown away. When he asked why, Mayes replied:

"You take out the spirits, brother, and I put in the Word."

IN A HALF-PINT whisky bottle, Mayes places a small card, on each side of which is a red cross bearing one of his favorite sermons: "Jesus Is Coming Soon; Get Ready," and "Prepare to Meet God." The two messages are printed in nine languages other than English—German, Italian, French, Spanish, Greek, Chinese, Japanese, Assyrian and Yiddish. On each side of the card is his name and address, a number he has assigned the card, the month and place where the bottle is thrown in the water, and this note: "Just to see where this bottle will go, I would like to have each one who finds and reads it to throw it back into the water and write me a postal card stating when and where you found and read this message."

These corked bottles have been thrown into the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Great Lakes and into every



Mayes calls his home the "Air Castle." The initials P.A.E. he calls his sacred name, which he refuses to make public.

Mayes is now making concrete crosses 12 to 15 feet high, weighing 1,800 pounds each, which he hopes to post in every state in the union. Here he pours the concrete in a form.

major river in the states; into the waters off the coasts of Australia, the Philippines and several other Pacific islands; into the Nile and the interior rivers and coastal waters of Africa; into the Amazon and South American coastal waters; and into Alaskan and West Indies waters.

Mayes brings this about by mailing the bottles to friends and church officials in this country and abroad, or to the postmaster at the desired location, asking that the bottles be thrown into the water.

MAYES and his wife, who handles all correspondence, have received responses from all parts of the world by people who have read the bottled messages.

Mayes' newest plan is to bring his sermons to the attention of airplane passengers. Since the expense would be too great to build signs large enough to be seen from normal flying altitudes, he is using copper sheeting letters, 5 by 7 feet, which he will fasten to the roofs of barns and other buildings near airfields so that they may be seen as planes take off and land. He hopes to place a "sermon" near each of the country's major airfields. As part of his planning he has studied aeronautical charts, hired private planes for short reconnaissance trips, and has written several letters seeking co-operation from owners of property adjoining various airfields. Although most individuals have not seemed averse to his request, he expects opposition from airport officials when they learn that their passengers, a moment after takeoff, will be reminded that they should "Prepare to Meet Thy God."

Opposition, however, is an old thing to Mayes. Although he has never been arrested for posting his signs, he has had innumerable run-ins with road officials and highway patrolmen. "When they stop me," he says, "I just tell them the truth as I see it. That is my way of worshipping, I tell them, instead of preaching in the churches."

Two steadfast opponents of Mayes have been the American Automobile Association and the Commonwealth of Virginia. Several times the Washington headquarters of the association has urged investigations "in the interests of safety and the prevention of the desecration of the nation's highways," into the erection of signs by "religious cranks who take

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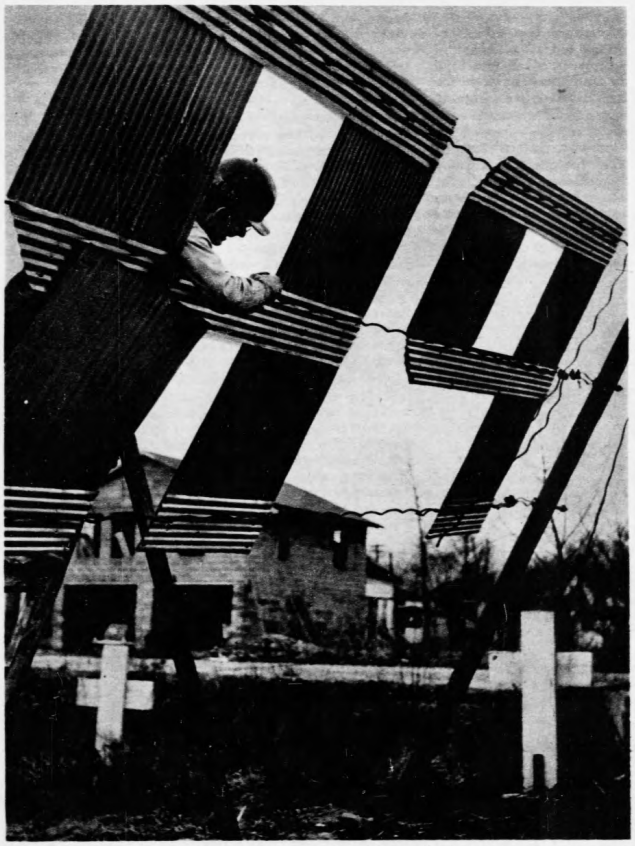
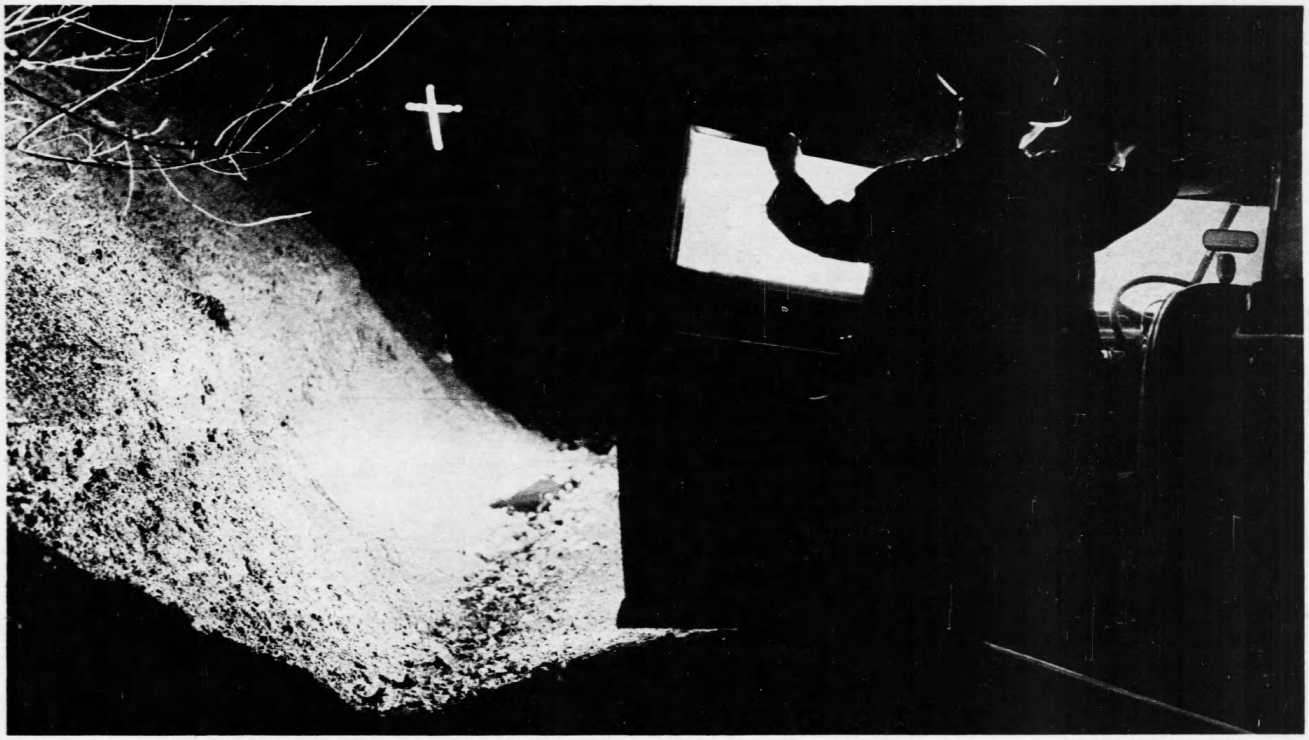
Mrs. Mayes runs the bottle department of the family's evangelistic work. She puts messages in whisky bottles which are sent all over the world to be thrown into the water in hope they'll reach sinners.



Some idea of the size of this sign, which will read "Prepare to Meet God" when completed, can be had from the size of Mayes. It is for an airport.

The fence posts around Mayes' house are in the form of crosses, each of which bears some religious or moral admonition. Barbs on wire represent temptations.



High on a mountainside overlooking Middlesboro is a 140-foot high sign illuminated with electric lights. Mayes pays for the electric bill himself.

Mayes denies being a religious crank; all he is doing is advertising religion, he says

ghoulish glee in spreading not a gospel of peace and good will but a message surcharged with the suggestion of violence and disaster."

Virginia has been decidedly more emphatic. The state has a law requiring that all signs along its highways—except those advertising one's place of business—be tagged with a license plate. Consequently two years ago road officials of three counties pulled down 39 crosses, hauled them to the state line near Cumberland Gap, Tenn. and sent Mayes a bill for $39. In other counties of the state, however, his crosses are still standing.

Contributions to Mayes' work have been small. He estimates that he has spent close to $50,000 that "I have dug out of that mine up there on the mountainside." Also, he has recently erected two other reminders of the crucifixion. On the side of a mountain overlooking Middlesboro he has placed a 140-foot high cross of electric bulbs that at night may be seen for several miles up a hollow that is filled with mining camps, and in Middlesboro he has built himself a concrete block home in the shape of a cross.

Mayes' house is built of concrete blocks that he made himself. Each block has the form of a cross sunken into it. Mayes calls his house the Air Castle, and at the peak of the roof in front there is a sign with the initials "P.A.E." These initials, he says, make up his "sacred" name, which will be revealed only after his death.

He seldom appears dressed up, saying that God looks into the heart, not on the outside, of man. His coal-mine helmet has the legend "Prepare to Meet God" on one side, and "Jesus Is Coming Soon" on the other.

There is a museum in the living room of the Mayes home containing exhibits of what is good and what is evil. This is part of the evil goods—dice, cards, liquor, a slot machine, tobacco and such.

THERE is much symbolism about his house. The gateposts and the corner posts—there are 12 of them on the barbed-wire fence surrounding the house—each bears the name of one patriarch (a son of Jacob) and of one apostle. All these posts are of concrete except the one bearing Judas' name. That is only a rough wooden post, and to put him further in his place, Mayes has driven horseshoe nails into it.

The other fence posts are wood, in the form of crosses, each bearing some religious or moral admonition.

The knob of the front door is covered with a heart-shaped box bearing the inscription, "Notice, Open to God Your Heart and Say . . ." and when one opens the hinged cover, inside is the knob plus the rest of the inscription ". . . Jesus Save Me."

The Mayeses have mailed their bottle-contained messages all over the world, but so far, they said, they have not been able to break through the Iron Curtain. "I guess we will have to float them in," Mayes remarked. They mailed four to the postmaster at Istanbul, asking him to throw them into the Bosphorus, forgetting that the current there runs away from Russian territory, and not toward it. However, the package was returned, probably because the Istanbul postmaster could not read the Turkish on the card which they had inscribed with the help of language experts at nearby Lincoln Memorial University. Mrs. Mayes now is planning to mail some to Vienna in the hopes the bottles will be thrown into the Danube, which will carry them toward Russian territory.

Many people in commenting on Mayes have dismissed his work by classifying it with such religious fanaticism of the Cumberland Mountains as snake handling. It is true, he admits, that his work may be related to the hysteria of street-corner preaching and traveling-tent evangelism, but he says he wishes people wouldn't consider him a fanatic.

"I'm not a crank at all," he says. "It's just that I'm interested in religion and that I believe in advertising it to other people. I do my preaching pretty much like some people sell their goods. That's what you've got to do to make people come around to seeing that religion is a normal thing, just keep telling them. And, brother, when you come right down to it, a man needs religion more than he needs a pack of cigarettes or a tube of shaving cream."