

The front gate of Mayes' cross-studded home bears the words of the Ten Commandments

Photos by Don Cravens

Highway Evangel

To advertise the wages of sin and herald the Second Advent on land, sea, in the air, and on the major planets is the self-appointed task of Harrison Mayes, who once nearly lost his life in a mine accident

By Bill Woolsey

VERY few men other than those in government's top echelons wrestle daily with \$2,000,000,000 problems. One of the few is Henry Harrison Mayes, a 51-year-old Kentucky coal mine employe, whose special, self-imposed burden it is to properly advertise the Second Advent and the wages of sin on land, on sea, in the air, and on the major planets.

To achieve this spectacular goal Mayes has built and painted thousands of signs that admonish travelers, in 10 languages and several dialects, "Prepare to Meet God," "Jesus Is Coming Soon," and "Jesus Saves." He has traveled thousands of miles to place his signs along most of the South's highways—and in the Southwest and Middle West too—and has distributed them to missionaries and cooperative laymen in many less accessible reaches of the earth.

How to get his signs to the Antarctic or to Jupiter is a detail the onetime coal miner is willing to let time solve. His one step in that direction has been to name his four sons and daughters after as many continents and his grandchildren after the planets (the youngest

grandson is Pluto) in the hope that they may agree to carry the signs to their geographical namesakes when transportation is available.

The children and grandchildren continue to use the names their mothers gave them, however, and to sidestep the issue of the signs.

MAYES shouldered the planetary phase of his responsibility a decade ago after some 20 years spent in training for it, so to speak, by promotion activities that he now regards as inadequate to the task.

Far from cracking up under the strain of his evangel, Mayes has gained in optimism, ingenuity and good humor since he pushed the limits of his work into the solar system and set a \$2,000,000,000 estimate on the cost. He is, as a matter of fact, looking around for a sponsor.

Although he in no way regrets the \$50,000 he figures he has contributed to the cause in labor and materials, Mayes feels he is ripe for hire by "some big outfit" that would pay him enough for handling its advertising to allow him to expand, during off-duty hours,

his promotion on the Lord's behalf.

The slight bespectacled preparedness advocate lives, at peace with himself and his neighbors, in a cruciform house a few blocks away from the main street of Middlesboro, Ky., a coal mining and tourist center in the shadow of the Cumberland Gap. In a workshop attached to the house he produces the highway "sermons" that are the backbone of his evangelism.

He began, 30 years ago, by daubing his messages in red paint on the craggy sides of coal rich mountains around Fork Ridge, Tenn., where he lived before moving to Middlesboro three years ago. As his interest in this avocation grew he paid a printer to turn out cardboard placards. Their impermanence distressed him and he turned to oilcloth strips and wooden crosses which allowed him greater freedom of expression. He got language scholars at the University of Tennessee and nearby Lincoln Memorial university to prepare translations of his exhortations.

SOME chroniclers of Mayes' career have traced his compulsion to an early desire to become a missionary, an ambition deflected by his lack of schooling, an early marriage and family responsibilities. Mrs. Mayes, who is both proud of and a little baffled by her husband's mission, was 14, Mayes 20 when they married.

Earnest as they must have been, Mayes' entreaties to the nation's motorists and hitchhikers to "Get Right With God" in those first years of his highway sermonizing seem positively desultory contrasted with his efforts since he nearly lost his life in a coal mine accident 18 years ago.

A maverick coal car crushed him flat as a pancake from his hips to his chest and made his eyes pop out of their sockets. "If he'd been a bigger man it would have killed him sure," says Mrs. Mayes, who is half a head taller than her husband. As it was, the doctors who looked him over decided he could not live more than a day or two. "Three days afterwards he was eating hearty as he ever did," his wife has stated. "The doctors said it wasn't anything they did. It was just a miracle he pulled through." During those three days Mayes addressed his Creator and vowed that if he lived he would work harder than ever to spread His gospel. Middle-aged but still spry, Mayes continues to fulfill his pledge.

The work has not been without its setbacks. Two of Mayes' most implacable opponents have been the American Automobile Association and the Commonwealth of Virginia.

THE AAA once demanded a senate investigation of "cranks who take a ghoulish glee in spreading . . . a message surcharged with the suggestion of violence and disaster." Its spokesman (Continued on page 8)



Mrs. Mayes puts messages in bottles for China and Mediterranean seas



A shield on the knob of Mayes' front door



opens to reveal the completion of message

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In Washington cited the case of a man driving through the Virginia mountains who tried to read a sign above an underpass. He crashed into an embankment, wrecked his car, and fractured his wrist. The sign he was attempting to read said, "Prepare to Meet God."

Virginia authorities were more direct with Mayes. They ripped up 39 of his signs from roadsides in that state and sent him a bill for \$39 to cover the cost of the removals. The sign maker refused to pay. Virginia threatened him with legal action but Mayes continued to sit tight and the irate commonwealth finally subsided.

The Old Dominion won a kind of victory, however. "I steer clear of Virginia, now," Mayes admitted to a visitor the other day, "and I never did get my signs back."

It would be difficult for Virginia or any other state to uproot the admonitions that Harrison Mayes carries to the highways these days. They are made of concrete, reinforced with steel rods, and sunk deep into the ground. Each one weighs about 1500 pounds, stands twice as tall as a man, costs \$15 to build and several times that sum to transport, in a rented truck, to whatever destination Mayes decides upon. He guesses that the concrete signs, some in the shape of the cross, others heart-shaped, will last for 140 years.

He has a specific destination for each one. His production schedule calls for a sign in every state in this country, one for every other nation on earth, for every continent, the seven seas ("Whatever they are," Mayes says), and the eight major planets. His instructions are neatly inscribed on each sign: "Erect on Planet Jupiter in 1990s." They stand close together, like the markers in some Brobdingnagian graveyard, at the rear of his lot.

MAYES' house and yard are fraught with religious symbolism. The five-room dwelling is built of concrete blocks made by the sign painter himself. A cross has been incised into each block. One doorstep is heart-shaped,

another cast in the form of the Old Testament tablets of stone. His front doorknob has a heart-shaped cover with the partial message, "Open to God Your Heart and Say . . ." that is completed once the knob is exposed, ". . . Jesus Save Me."

He points out to his visitors that the fence around his lot has 12 posts representing Biblical patriarchs and the apostles. Its barbed wire stands for all of mankind's aggravations ("From Solomon to John L. Lewis," says union cardholder Mayes). One post was deliberately stolen elsewhere so that it could symbolize Judas. "Nothing at all respectable about that post," the builder exclaims. The board walk from the road to the house is in the shape of an anchor. "Anchored to the cross," explains Mayes. Across the front gable are the initials "P.A.E." which the owner says stand for his "sacred name" which will be revealed only after his death.

Mayes calls his home the "Air Castle." He moved to Middlesboro, chose the site and built his house, he says, because he fancied the idea of bringing one of his favorite themes to the attention of airborne traffic at the nearby airport. His roof bears the message, "Jesus Saves," in big, block letters.

Mayes is stymied, at least temporarily, in his plan to install signs near other airports. One owner of a landing field even got a little hysterical, according to Middlesboro's messenger of mortality, at the suggestion that a "Prepare to Meet God" sign be constructed so that airplane passengers could see it during landings and takeoffs.

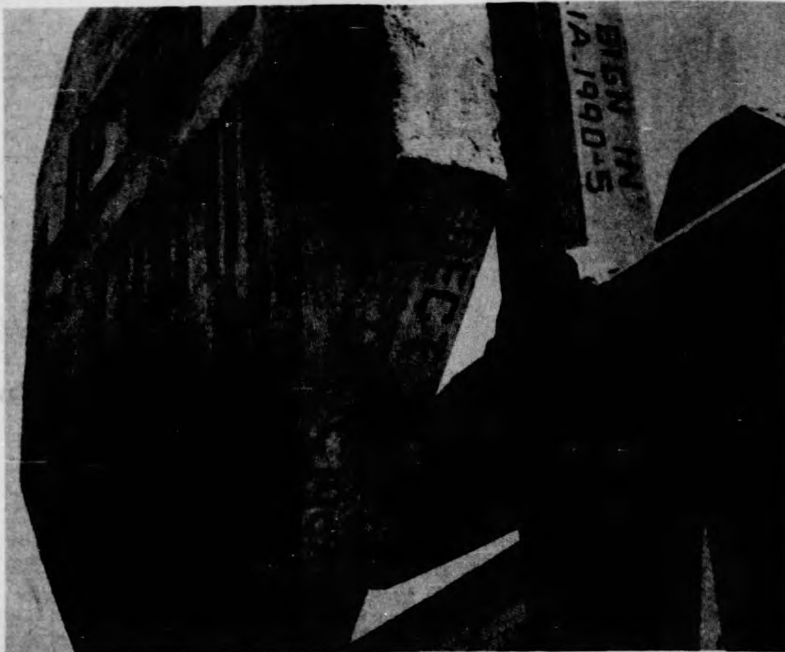
HIS success with an illuminated cross 140 feet high on a mountainside overlooking Middlesboro has compensated Mayes for his rebuff at the airports. He pays the light bill himself but the utilities company in town was kind enough to extend a power line to the site of the cross. "Not a single light has burned out yet," he tells visitors.

Financing his cause has not been easy. When he worked in the mines he was able to put in enough overtime to support both his family and his avocation but he had to quit

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"Air Castle" in cruciform shape, bears a message for fliers at nearby airport



Mayes, optimistic, thinks somebody will follow instructions for erecting signs

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such strenuous work and currently is a supply clerk and bathhouse attendant above the mines. He doesn't own a car because he couldn't meet that expense and carry on the "work of God" too.

His plan to put the bite on all the inhabitants of the earth—he estimated the global population at two billion and planned to tap everybody for one dollar—hasn't met with much success. Not long ago he issued what was merely his 19th "International Evangelistic Work of God Souvenir Receipt" entitling the contributor to a blessing or his money back.

The missionaries of some religious sects have cooperated in erecting his signs in remote countries—mostly in the Caribbean. Even passersby, the cockles of their hearts suddenly warmed by Mayes' roadside messages, have volunteered to help him distribute his signs. He also mails out whisky bottles stuffed with his texts to far places and asks that they be consigned to rivers and oceans.

So far as he knows, only one other person, a preacher in one of the states of the deep South, has embarked on a similar evangel. Mayes doubts, however, if the other man's efforts have been as far-flung as his own.

HE WAS tremendously pleased, not long ago, to receive word from Australia that one of the empty whisky bottles into which Mrs. Mayes helps him stuff slips reading, "Prepare to Meet God" and "Jesus Is Coming Soon; Get Ready," has turned up down there. He scraped

up \$5 and sent it to the finder as a reward.

His next move, he says, will be to ask somebody to toss a few bottles into the Danube "so they'll wash up on Uncle Joe's shores."

The whisky bottle containers are symbolic of his concern for the amount of evil kicking around in this world, a concern that has led him to collect a few examples—guns, dice, liquor bottles, lottery tickets, cigarettes, cosmetics, brass knuckles and pornography—in a museum in his home.

As a personal rebellion against evil, which he feels is always concealed under a smooth and attractive exterior, he shaves only intermittently, seldom dresses in a suit, purposely left the outside of his house unfinished, and often tells Mrs. Mayes—with only indifferent success—not to cut the grass in the yard.

"I want you to think I'm worse than I really am," he sometimes tells acquaintances. "Then when you find out I'm not a crank at all you'll have learned a lesson."

Eclectic in the matter of dogma, Mayes describes himself as Christian, Jew and Mohammedan; he never stops thinking of new ways to advertise his belief that mankind needs religion more than anything else in the world.

He tried to persuade a national magazine to see things his way a year or so ago, suggesting that it place before its millions of readers an article of his titled, naturally enough, "Prepare to Meet God." The editors rejected the manuscript, explaining that it didn't quite fit in with their publishing plans. They said they hoped he'd understand.

Mayes scrawled across their letter this wistful judgment of the magazine's editorial policy: "No room for Jesus." ★★★



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