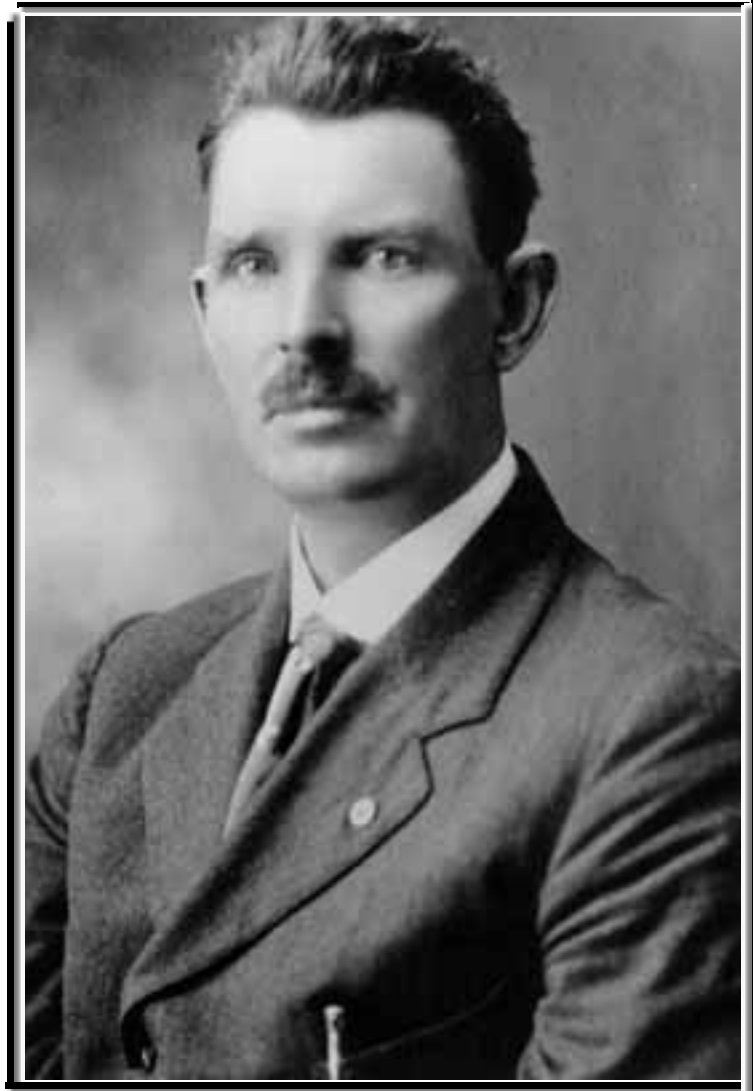


ALVIN C. YORK AND WORLD WAR I



BIOGRAPHY OF ALVIN C. YORK

Alvin C. York was born in Pall Mall, Tennessee on December 13, 1887. He would spend all of his life in this area, also known as Valley of the Three Forks of the Wolf, except for the eighteen months he served with the United States Army during World War I. The third son of William and Mary Brooks York, Alvin had seven brothers and three sisters. He received the equivalent of a third-grade education within the community, went to work at his father's blacksmith shop, and later worked as a farm hand. When Alvin was a young man his father died, and he assumed the role of sole provider for his mother and younger siblings.

During his early years, it was reported that Alvin was considered a bit on the wild side. When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, he was working on a highway construction project for \$1.65 a day. It was around this time that a close friend of Alvin's died. Shortly following, Alvin had a life-changing experience that would set a new tone for his life spawned during a revival conducted by H.H. Russell of the Church of Christ in Christian Union. Alvin began to hold moral conviction against violence and war. He initially considered becoming a conscientious objector when he was drafted. Later he reflected in a speech:

“I loved and trusted old Uncle Sam and I have always believed he did the right thing. But I was worried clean through. I didn't want to go and kill. I believed in my bible. And it distinctly said “*THOU SHALL NOT KILL.*” And yet old Uncle Sam wanted me. And he said he wanted me most awfull bad. And I jest didn't know what to do. I was worried and worried. I couldn't think of anything else. My thoughts just wouldn't stay hitched” (Lee, 17).

At Camp Gordon, Georgia, Alvin received permission to take a leave of absence in the mountains for a couple of days to consider the stance he was going to take concerning the war. Upon his return, he determined that he was, in fact, going to be a soldier.

The Battle of Argonne Forest, held on October 8, 1918 in Germany, became another life-altering event for Alvin. It was his extraordinary efforts during this battle that made him an American hero. Alvin was in a seventeen-man detail whose mission was to conquer German machine guns. Nearly single-handedly, he knocked out the German machine gun nests, killed 25 men, captured 132 prisoners, and gathered 35 machine guns. Nine of Alvin's comrades were injured or killed during this battle, including the sergeant in charge. It is reported that eight Germans were shot with exactly eight rifle shots and a seven-man patrol was killed with his automatic pistol. York summed up the scene by claiming, "Every time I seed a German I jes teched him off."

In addition, Alvin kept a diary recording his trials and tribulations while at war. The entry for October 8 read:

....there was 17 of us boys went around on the left flank to see if we couldn't put those guns out of action. So when we went around and fell in behind those guns, we first saw two Germans with Red Cross bands on their arms. So we asked them to stop and they did not. So one of the boys shot at them and they run back to our right. So we all run after them, and when we jumped across a little stream of water that was there, they was about 15 or 20 Germans jumped up and threw up their hands and said, 'Kame rad!' So the one in charge of us boys told us not to shoot; they was going to give up anyway.

(These prisoners included a major and two other officers). By this time some of the Germans from on the hill was shooting at us. Well, I was

giving them the best I had, and by this time the Germans had got their machine guns turned around and fired on us. So they killed six and wounded three of us. So that just left 8, and then we got into it right by this time. So we had a hard battle for a little while, and I got hold of the German major and he told me if I wouldn't kill any more of them he would make them quit firing. So I told him all right if he would do it now. So he blew a little whistle and they quit shooting and come down and gave up. I had killed over 20 before the German major said he would make them give up. I covered him with my automatic and told him if he didn't make them stop firing I would take his head off next. And he knew I meant it. After he blew his whistle, all but one of them came off the hill with their hands up, and just before that one got to me he threw a little hand grenade which burst in the air in front of me. I had to touch him off. The rest surrendered without any more trouble. There were nearly a 100 of them. We had about 80 or 90 Germans there disarmed, and had another line of Germans to go through to get out. So I called for my men, and one of them answered from behind a big oak tree, and the others were on my right in the brush. (All the non-commissioned officers had been killed or severely wounded except York. This left him in command). So I said, 'Let's get these Germans out of here.' One of my men said, 'It is impossible.' So I said, 'No; let's get them out of here.' So when my man said that, the German major said, 'How many have you got?' And I said that, 'I have got plenty,' and pointed my pistol at him all the time. In this battle I was using a rifle and a .45 Colt automatic. So I lined the Germans up in a line of two's, and I got between the ones in front, and I had the German major before me. So I marched them straight into those other machine guns and I got them. So when I got back to my major's P.C. (post of command) I had 132 prisoners" (qtd. in Alvin C. York Biography).

On November 10, 1918, only ten days before the war ended, Alvin was promoted to sergeant. Then on April 11, 1919, he received the Congressional Medal of Honor. During the time of his death, Alvin received over fifty war decorations. On May 10, 1919, Alvin began his journey back home to Pall Mall, Tennessee.

He boarded the U.S.S. Ohio in Bordeaux, France, crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and landed in Hoboken, New Jersey on May 22. At the port, he was met by the Tennessee Society in New York City and taken into New York City. They gave him a

hero's welcome and a ticker-tape parade. Although Alvin was very grateful, he wrote, "I wanted to get back to my people where I belonged and the little old mother and the little mountain girl who were waiting" (qtd. in Alvin C. York Biography).

One week and one day after his return, Alvin and his "little mountain girl," Gracie Williams, were married in a ceremony performed by the Governor of Tennessee, A.H. Roberts. After a two day honeymoon in Nashville, they moved onto a 385-acre farm which grateful Tennesseans had helped purchase.

However, the peaceful valley Alvin called home was not the same upon his return. People came from all over the country in order to meet him and to offer him business propositions, ranging from Broadway and Hollywood producers to advertisers wanting to commercialize and profit from his war efforts. He wrote at this time:

I knew if I hadn't been to war and hadn't been a doughboy they never would have offered me anything. I also knew I didn't go to war to make a heap or to go on the stage or in the movies. I went over there to help make peace. And there was peace now, so I didn't take their thirty pieces of silver and betray that there old uniform of mine. I just wanted to be left alone to go back to my beginnings. The war was over. I had done my job and I had done it the best I could. So I figured I ought to be left alone and allowed to go back to the mountains where I belonged (qtd. in Alvin C. York Biography).

A changed person, he realized the need for improved education in his secluded hometown community and decided to dedicate himself to improving educational opportunities. Alvin wrote:

I knew I wasn't like I used to be. The big outside world I had been in and the things I had fought through had touched me up inside a powerful lot... I was sort of restless and full of dreams and wanted to be

doing something and I didn't understand. So I sat out on the hillside trying to puzzle it out. Before the war I felt the mountains isolated us and kept us together as a God-fearing, God-loving people. They did that, too, but they did more than that. They kept out many of the good and worthwhile things like good roads, school, libraries, up-to-date homes and modern farming methods (qtd. in Alvin C. York Biography).

During the 1920s, York went on speaking tours in order to call attention to his mission for educational improvements for children in rural Fentress County, and to raise money for a school, the York Institute. Alvin also showed an interest in politics in order to obtain funding for better roads, local employment opportunities, and for education. During the presidential election of 1932, he changed his political party in order to support Herbert Hoover and to protest Franklin D. Roosevelt's promise to repeal prohibition. Once seeing the effects of the New Deal however, Alvin decided to support the president's relief efforts. In 1939, he was elected superintendent of the Cumberland Homesteads near Crossville.

Originally named the York Industrial Institute, the York Agricultural and Industrial Institute was a reflection of Alvin's vision to educate the youth in rural Fentress County, which did not happen easily. Located in the city of Jamestown, the school's mission was to train its students for a technological future.

In 1925, the Tennessee General Assembly set aside \$50,000 for the school's construction. Alvin, a Democrat, was at odds with the local Republican county executives over where the school should be located.

When the local officials threatened eviction from the site in 1927, he went directly to the state legislature and turned to the media for support. As a result, the Tennessee Department of Education was given control over the York Institute.

The school officially opened in 1929, but even with the state's backing, was under funded. Fentress County refused to give the school any funding. Alvin mortgaged his house twice to pay teachers' salaries, paying them out of his own pocket. He even purchased school buses. Although the investigation ultimately uncovered no wrong doings, Alvin faced charges by the Department of Education for incompetence, negligence, nepotism, and bringing in outsiders in 1933. Many felt that this was an accusation brought on by York's antagonists. Regardless, Alvin was unable to continue funding the school the way he had been.

Alvin was appointed President Emeritus and led the school's ceremonial activities. With this change of administration, the Department of Education required that all teachers have a bachelor's degree, along with other mandatory criteria. Today, the York Institute is the only state-owned and operated high school in Tennessee. It is also one of the largest high schools in the world, encompassing over 14,000 acres. The original York Institute building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hollywood filmmaker Jesse L. Lasky struggled with Alvin for ten years before he agreed to let Lasky create the film, "Sergeant York." When Alvin finally agreed to meet about the possibility of a film, he was getting ready to open an interdenominational bible school. The school was intended to compliment the preexisting York Agricultural Institute. Despite a twenty-year stance he had taken on not profiting off his war efforts, "Sergeant York" presented a financial opportunity to back his school. After much negotiation, Alvin settled on the movie contract in return

for fifty thousand dollars plus two percent of the gross sales. Lasky emphasized the fact that this was not a “war movie” that glorified war—a style of movie both Lasky and Alvin disliked. The film opened July 2 at the Astor Theater. “Sergeant York” gained much commercial success, rejuvenating Lasky’s career. Gary Cooper, who portrayed Alvin in the film, won an Academy Award for Best Actor.

In 1951, the IRS accused him of tax evasion from movie profits given to the school. Alvin spent ten years working this out with Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Sam Rayburn and Congressman Joe L. Evins. Additionally, citizens nationwide came to his aide with a York relief fund.

This committee of concerned citizens not only helped Alvin reach a settlement with the IRS, but a trust fund was established. In the midst of this turmoil, York suffered a stroke in 1954 that left him bedridden until his death on September 2, 1964. Alvin C. York was buried with full military honors in Wolf River Methodist Church Cemetery. An estimated 7,000 people attended his funeral.