

Alvin C. York

This essay was adapted from an essay prepared by Lauren Grisham for a project created in association with the Fentress County Chamber of Commerce by the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

Alvin C. York was born in Pall Mall, Tennessee on December 13, 1887. He spent all of his life in this area, 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 York 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 York 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 York's died. During a revival conducted by H.H. Russell of the Church of Christ in Christian Union, York had a life-changing religious experience. Following biblical teachings, York became opposed to 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).

While at Camp Gordon, Georgia, York received permission to go home for a couple of days to consider whether or not he wanted to apply for conscientious objector status. Upon his return, he determined that he was, in fact, going to be a soldier.

York traveled to France with the American Expeditionary Force in 1918. On October 8, 1918 during the Battle of the Argonne Forest, York's life took another extraordinary turn. York was part of 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.

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 for his actions on October 8. York also received the Croix de Guerre from France. He received numerous other awards throughout his life.

On May 10, 1919, Alvin began his journey back home to Pall Mall, Tennessee. When he arrived in New York, he was met by representatives of the Tennessee Society. York was given a hero's welcome and a ticker-tape parade. Although York 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 their 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. 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. York 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. However, once York saw the positive effects of the New Deal, he decided to support the president's relief efforts. In 1939, he was elected superintendent of the Cumberland Homesteads near Crossville.

In 1925, the Tennessee General Assembly set aside \$50,000 for the construction of the York Agricultural and Industrial Institute. Its mission was to train the students of Fentress County for a technological future. York, 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, it lacked funding. Fentress County refused to give the school any money. York 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, York was unable to continue funding the school the way he had been. York 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.

Throughout the 1930's York refused offers to make a film based on his service in World War I. York did not want his life to be used to glorify war. York was ultimately swayed by Hollywood filmmaker Jesse L Lasky's promise that the film would not glorify war and his need for funding for an interdenominational Bible school. After much negotiation, York settled on a contract that gave him fifty thousand dollars plus two percent of the gross sales. The film, "Sergeant York," was the highest grossing film of 1941. Following Pearl Harbor, it also served as an unofficial recruitment film. Gary Cooper won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of York.

In 1951, the IRS accused York of not paying taxes on the movie profits that had been given to the school. York spent ten years resolving the issue with the help of 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.

In the midst of this controversy, 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.

Source: Grisham, Lauren. "Biography of Alvin C. York." *Alvin C. York and World War I Teacher's Guide*. Sergeant York Patriotic Foundation, n.d. 21 July 2014, <<http://www.sgtyork.org/images/Teacher-Guide-AlvinCYork-WWI.pdf>>

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Summarize the text to write an epitaph for Alvin C. York.

An epitaph is a brief statement about the deceased person, sometimes in the form of a poem.

