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A legacy lives on

Sgt. York died 60 years ago. But his legacy in TN is still felt today

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Sgt. Alvin C. York achieved international acclaim more than a century ago for his heroism at a German machine gun nest on a hill in northern France. • But his legacy lives on in rural Tennessee for his decades of public service after his World War I fame, which he leveraged to build a community school that still educates children 60 years after his death. • York died on Sept. 2, 1964, a passing commemorated at the time by President Lyndon B. Johnson and covered by newspapers across the country.

The U.S. Army veteran and Tennessee farmer was laid to rest in a humble Pall Mall cemetery, located in the rural Tennessee valley he called home his entire life, save for the brief, if notable, stint in battle torn France.

The soldier, one of the most decorated veterans in Tennessee history, rocketed to international fame after the Saturday Evening Post reported an account of his 17-man unit ending up behind German lines on the Western Front in October 1918. As a German machine gun nest cut down most of the unit and its sergeants, York and the surviving unit members helped to capture the nest, leading to the surrender of over 100 German soldiers.

York was later promoted to sergeant and honored with the Medal of Honor and the French Croix de Guerre medal.

Months later, the Post article was syndicated around the world and York became a household name, lauded with a huge celebration at his arrival back to the U.S. as publishers and businesses clamored to work with him. The Nashville Rotary Club held a fundraiser to buy York a farm in Pall Mall, where the Alvin C. York State Historic Park sits today.

"For Alvin, he's offered an absolute fortune and he turns it away," said military historian and park Ranger Tanner Wells, who works at the state park. "Like many fellow veterans, he just wanted to go home and return to a sense of normalcy. And it was dishonorable, in his mind, to make a profit from a war when so many didn't come home."

York was a complex, "multi-faceted" man, Wells said.

Though he was something of a hell-raiser in his youth, a religious conversion and influence from his devout mother pushed York into a pacifist position at the outbreak of World War I. He later would say he did not intend to be a conscientious objector, though he had applied and was denied objector status.

Wells said York always wanted to serve, but was hesitant to fight and potentially kill others. However, once he was in the fight, he wanted to finish it. Decades later, York became a vocal pro-interventionist as the European conflict broke out in World War II. At the time before Pearl Harbor, intervening in the war was deeply unpopular among the American public. But York, who saw firsthand the colossal loss of life in World War I, understood the longer America stayed out of the war, the more people would die.

"It's a weird dichotomy. He's perceived as this pacifist who didn't want to fight the first time around," Wells said.



FROM THE ARCHIVES



▲ Two World War I Congressional Medal of Honor winners, Sgt. Alvin York, center, and Maj. Dwite H. Schaffner, right of York, received selective service medals for their work on draft boards during World War II from Tennessee Gov. Jim McCord at the state Capitol on March 26, 1946. THE TENNESSEAN

State's most famous soldier

More about Sgt. York's reluctant heroism in World War

◀ The hearse leads the funeral procession to York's Chapel for the funeral service of Sgt. Alvin C. York on Sept. 5, 1964, near Pall Mall, Tenn. The procession winds past the Wolf Creek Methodist Church where York attended services as a youth. BILL PRESTON / THE TENNESSEAN



East Tenn. World War I history

Look back at Knoxville from the era of "the war to end all wars"



Georgia.

"He realized in the service how much he didn't know, especially in the context of what's beyond the valley and how the world has changed," Wells said, a common theme among veterans in certain conflicts who come home with broadened world views. "They realize they can pursue what they saw in the war back at home and improve lives. For York, it's the idea that in many ways education a liberating tool."

In 1926, York leveraged his fame to raise funds to open a school in Jamestown, Tennessee, eager to provide local children the type of education he didn't have access to. He would go on to remortgage his farm to keep the school afloat, paying teacher salaries and transportation costs out of pocket.

In 1937, amid local political disagreements and the Great Depression, the Tennessee General Assembly agreed to take on the financial costs of the Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute. York would continue to hand out diplomas personally at the end of every school year until 1957, when health conditions left him housebound. The York Institute remains the only secondary school operated by the state of Tennessee.

York's story spread even wider at the advent of World War II, when movie star Gary Cooper portrayed him in the blockbuster movie, "Sergeant York." Wells said York was sometimes frustrated by the myth that had grown around his service, with retellings often depicting York's heroism as a one-man operation despite other men in the unit he fought alongside.

Still, he wielded his name when necessary, Wells said.

"That's what makes him special," Wells said. "He didn't build up a life off of the fame for the war. He didn't play up the fame for decades to make money. He used it to play up other causes like education and the rise of fascism in Europe."



▲ The rural Wolf Creek Cemetery, here on Sept. 2, 1964, is where York was buried. JACK CORN / THE TENNESSEAN

◀ World War I hero Alvin York's death in 1964 made the front page of the News Sentinel. NEWS SENTINEL ARCHIVE

"But for Alvin, there wasn't a conflict. It was about trying to save lives."

For Wells, the most notable aspects of York's life emerged after he returned home. York shipped off to France from an agrarian Tennessee community, pre-

viously decimated by the Civil War, that was in many ways left behind by the advancements of the 20th century.

York became keenly aware of his lack of formal education as soon as he began his Army service at Camp Gordon in