The Life of Alvin York

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age 12

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A German major shouted. He had alerted the machine gun nests. All of the sudden, Alvin York and his squad were under fire. All but two of Alvin’s comrades went down. Gunshots filled the air and shredded the undergrowth around Alvin. The situation seemed hopeless, but Alvin started shooting back.

Alvin Cullum York was born in the small rural community of Pall Mall, Tennessee, in 1887. He was the third child in a family of eleven children. His life as a child included many chores. Before he was six, he was hoeing cornfields and doing housework. Alvin York experienced amazing changes in his life, from being a rowdy drinker and fighter to being a devoted Christian, servant of God, and soldier.

Alvin was a deadeye marksmen; he loved hunting and would often compete in shooting contests, which were popular in his community. One of the town’s favorite games was “beeves”, where each contestant bought shots at a target, and the money would go to buying a cow. The cow would be divided into five parts of meat, and the ones with the best five shots would win the parts. Once, Alvin got all five best shots, and took the animal home alive.

Alvin’s father died when Alvin was around the age of 24. Both his older siblings had married and moved out, so Alvin was left in charge of supporting the family. This led to grueling, low-paying jobs. To find relief from this, Alvin began to drink, gamble, and roughhouse. This often got him into trouble, such as a time when he shot six of someone else’s turkeys while drunk to test his sobriety, earning him a trip to court. These troubles continued until one fateful night when Alvin’s whole life changed.

On December 31, 1914, Alvin had come home from a bar; he walked through the door of his home, and let in a blast of cold air. He saw his mother in her chair, shivering under her blanket at the frigid wave of air. His heart changed on the spot. Alvin wrote in his diary, “Then I saw it was no use, that I was missing the better things, and I decided to change my life and be a better boy.” He walked over to his mom, fell to his knees, and began to cry. He said, “Mother, I promise you tonight that I will never drink again as long as I live. I will never smoke or chew again. I will never gamble again. I will never cuss or fight again. I will live the life God wants me to live.”

After his conversion, Alvin began going to church frequently, studying the bible and strongly opposed drinking. Early in 1915, Melvin Russell, a circuit-riding minister, came to Pall Mall to preach. He would speak to his audiences in vivid detail about the joys of heaven and the terrors of punishment in hell. Over the next year, Alvin went from not paying much attention to what the preacher said to believing the church was too lax to uphold the Bible’s standards. By the time Melvin Russell returned to Pall Mall, Alvin had become one of the most faithful and active members of his congregation.

Alvin was like this until June 5, 1917, when a little red postcard arrived from Washington D.C. The postcard was from the federal government, ordering Alvin to
register with the local draft board to fight in World War I. Alvin was not happy about the draft, because he did not believe it was God’s will for one man to kill another. The sixth commandment was unequivocal in his mind: “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13). Alvin had become a pacifist in his conversion to Christianity. Alvin knew that it was possible to be excused from duty on religious ground as a conscientious objector, one whose faith led him to believe all fighting was wrong. He went to the pastor, who helped him compose a letter to the draft board requesting exemption from duty. The appeal was denied. He passed the physical examination and was drafted into the army.

His doubts about the morality of war made his first few weeks in the army uncomfortable. He did not tell his superiors about his doubts until he was assigned to a battalion. He talked to Captain Edward Danforth, who took him to Major George Edward Buxton to talk about his doubts. The new ways of thinking Alvin was exposed to in this conversation left him more confused than ever, so Danforth and Buxton gave him a ten-day pass to go home and collect his thoughts. He arrived in Pall Mall on March 21, 1918. He went to the mountains for one day, all night, and part of the next day praying for divine guidance. He wrote, “So He took pity on me and He gave me the assurance I needed. I didn’t understand everything. I didn’t understand how He could let me go to war and even kill and yet not hold that against me. I didn’t even want to understand. It was His will and that was enough for me.” Alvin came back from the mountains convinced God wanted him to fight and would keep him alive in battle.

He and his battalion were transported to France by boat and arrived on June 27, 1918. Life in the trenches was hard. There was a German-controlled area nearby. German snipers would pick off those who were careless, and the Germans would bombard them with gas and artillery shells. Alvin was ordered to take his squad on a mission to surprise attack the nearby German area. When they did this, they were attacked by machine gunners. In his diary, Alvin wrote: "There were over 30 of them in continuous action and all I could do was touch the Germans off as fast as I could. I was sharpshooting. I don't think I missed a shot. It was no time to miss." Alvin had captured a German Major, who offered to surrender his entire command if Alvin would “just stop shooting”. When he returned to allied lines, York had captured 132 German soldiers. For his actions, Alvin was promoted to the rank of Sergeant. He was also awarded The Medal of Honor, the American Distinguished Service Cross, the French Croix de Guerre, and the Italian Croce de Guera.

After the war, Alvin returned to Pall Mall and married a woman named Gracie. Alvin felt he was meant to bring education to his small rural community, and began raising the money to build a Bible school and a high school, which is now the Alvin C. York Technical Institute. Alvin farmed, hunted, preached, and did some blacksmithing for 35 years. Alvin suffered a cerebral hemorrhage in 1954 and was an invalid for the last ten years of his life.
This is a scene in Pall Mall, Tennessee where Alvin, in his younger days, is drunk. He and his friend, Everett Delk, see a white object floating in a creek, and start arguing about what it might be.

Alvin: Hey, what’s that?

Everett: What’s what?

Alvin: What’s that white thing floating in this here creek?

Everett: It looks like a pillow.

Alvin: Really? I’m not so sure.

Everett: Why not?

Alvin: I don’t know. I’m just not sure, that’s all.

Everett: Well then, why don’t you just believe me? You don’t know what it is, and I think I do. Makes sense to believe me, doesn’t it? Unless you think it’s something else. What do you think it is?

Alvin: Frankly, I have no clue. I do know one way to find out, though.

Everett: What’s that?

Alvin: (Aims gun at white thing) BANG!

Everett: Alvin, you shouldn’t shoot that gun while you’re drunk!

Alvin: Does it really matter? Loosen up a bit, you worry too much.

Everett: Uh...Alvin? It’s bleeding. I don’t think pillows bleed.

Alvin: A goose, then.

Everett: Yes, a goose. And the owner will be mad if he finds out. Let’s get out of here!

Alvin: Deal. RUN!

A bit after this incident, the goose’s owner learned about its death. However, Alvin was never caught for it, and thus avoided any legal trouble.
HOW-TO DIRECTIONS
LEARN TO PLAY “PONY PURSE”!

Want to learn how to play “Pony Purse”, one of Alvin York’s favorite shooting competitions? Well, get ready, because I’m going to teach you!

1. Find some people who would like to play with you, preferably a large amount. Make sure every player owns a gun and knows how to use it.

2. Pick a certain amount of money that all players have to pay, such as a quarter or a dollar. This will make the “pot” or the prize money.

3. You will need a target. Try to find one beforehand, so the players don’t have to keep waiting. Make sure your target has a bulls-eye – that will be important later. Try painting a bulls-eye on a wall or tree.

4. When Alvin York played this game, his friend Everett Delk would place bets on Alvin winning. To spice up the game, try to have side bets like this going. It doesn’t matter how much money the bets are, they are mostly to make the game more interesting.

5. Make sure each player gets a turn to shoot. The order can be decided in any way you want, such as youngest to oldest.

6. Each player takes one shot at the target. This is the only shot each player gets, so they should aim well.

7. The player with the most accurate shot (the shot closest to the bulls-eye) wins the game. Try to measure this by doing something like writing the player’s name above the bullet hole after they shoot.

8. Whoever wins the game also wins all the money in the “pot”.

Alvin York would often win and make a lot of money when he played this game. Now you can, too!
This was Alvin’s home in Tennessee. It is still owned by the York family today.
This is Alvin York’s former Bible school in Pall Mall, Tennessee.
This is the Wolf River, located in the Wolf River Valley in Tennessee. Pall Mall is also located in the Wolf River Valley.
This is the Wolf Creek United Methodist Church, the location of Alvin's grave.
This is Alvin on a hill in Argonne Forest. The famous battle Alvin fought in during World War I took place here.
This is a picture of Alvin sometime after his famous battle.
This is Alvin at a press conference. This appears to be where the above photo was taken.
This is a map of the battle of Argonne Forest. There is a legend to help you identify what some of the symbols on the map mean. The “X” on the map is where Alvin’s firefight (battle) occurred.
A larger-scale map showing the border between France and Belgium and the general area of the battle of Argonne Forest.
This is the York Agricultural Institute, the high school Alvin raised the money to build. This is a photo of the school taken in 1931.
Explanation of Genres

Dialogue: The actual event is factual. Alvin did argue with his friend about a white object floating in a creek. His friend’s name was Everett Delk, and Alvin did shoot the object. The actual dialogue is fictional. The dialogue is what may have been said, not what was said exactly. The entirety of the dialogue was new information.

How-to Directions: The game “pony purse” was real. How to play was factually described. However, one of the directions, how to tell whose shot was whose, was created by me. The entirety of this genre was also new information.

Photos with Captions: This genre is entirely factual. The new information in this genre was the name of the school Alvin raised the money to build and that Pall Mall was located in the Wolf River Valley.
Works Cited


Works Cited for Extra Genres:

Dialogue: Lee, 7

How-To Directions: Lee, 7

Photos with Captions: Lee, 34, 35
Brown, 6