

Lee, David. Sergeant York: An American Hero. The University Press of Kentucky, 1985.

A Review
by Marvin Downing, Ph. D., Professor of History,
The University of Tennessee at Martin

Professor Lee of Western Kentucky University analyzed the life of Sergeant Alvin York of Fentress County in the Cumberland Mountains. York became a World War I hero after he captured 132 German prisoners after having shot a number of their comrades. The notable roundup resulted from his own hunting and shooting skills and the low German morale. He almost did not become a soldier at all because prior to being drafted he opposed all wars. After his battle feat, the shy, unassuming young man rejected offers of those who wanted to use him and his name to make money. Along the way he decided that some measure of fame could help his efforts to improve his home community economically and educationally.

Dr. Lee had two major purposes in writing this volume. First, he sought to examine the myth in order to find the true York. Second, he analyzed hero-making itself and specifically as it applied to York. The professor's task was certainly not easy, for though York was listed as the author of the three major sources about him, they were actually written by others.

Lee concluded that York became a household word due to U. S. press coverage in 1918-19. In particular, the Saturday Evening Post played the pivotal role in discovering and publicizing the Tennessee warrior-mountaineer. Upon learning of the story about her son, York's elated mother insisted the news bearer read the account seven times the evening the account was brought to her.

Yet, book and movie offers to cover York's heroic status puzzled him from the beginning. He had served his country for patriotic reasons, not for personal gain. Nor did he want to commit his name to distant causes. Ironically, the one present he

accepted was a partly equipped farm from the Nashville Rotary Club, a gift that kept him in debt for many years. Unfortunately, he experienced much personal failure and embarrassment after the War. However, he steadfastly used his public image to help his own neighborhood to gain good roads and schools, its greatest needs.

Another World War later York's status became a lasting part of American legend. His fame came in the form of the Sergeant York film of 1941. York did not relish the publicity, though he endured it out of patriotism, and he sometimes used the publicity for his public service causes. Professor Lee presents and analyzes the various biographies of York that pictured him more as the authors thought he and the other members of the mountain society should be rather than as they were. Reporters assumed that Henry Fonda, Raymond Massey, Spencer Tracy, or Gary Cooper would play York. The latter actor accepted the role with some reluctance though with considerably less reluctance than York had originally shown toward military service. The shooting was done in ninety days, and the movie thrust York before the public. He used that opportunity to support President Franklin Roosevelt's policy of preparedness in 1941. Seemingly, the film itself supported preparedness over isolation.

More than once York thought of running for office. Each time, though, he always decided against doing it. At one point he considered the U. S. House, thinking, "I figure Albert Gore is young and could fill a place in the fighting forces." Albert Gore, Sr., was the incumbent in York's district.

Through the years York's time in the limelight was dimmed somewhat. During World War II the military would not allow him to join. Meanwhile, Audie Murphy emerged as the war's most decorated U. S. combat soldier. Lee devoted several pages to comparing and contrasting those very different men.

In the 1930s York predicted major troubles with the Soviet Union. His prescription was the atomic bomb. The Korean conflict only enhanced his frustrations. Unfortunately, his later years also brought bad health. It deteriorated as a result

of pneumonia, high blood pressure, several strokes, and failing eyesight. During the 1950s and '60s when he was an invalid, he experienced a protracted dispute with the Internal Revenue Service. Finally the highly influential U. S. House Speaker Sam Rayburn and York's congressman, Joe Ewins, helped provide the needed relief. Their work and that of locals buoyed his spirits.

Overall, Lee concluded that York, who died in 1964, was "the most common of men . . . a very unlikely hero." That status caused him problems, but he generally did more things right than wrong, and he retained his basic beliefs throughout.

Perhaps a few tidbits from the book are in order. During the filming of Sergeant York Warner Brothers Studio encountered a somewhat minor casting difficulty when it discovered its trained dogs did not bay in the mountain key. Professor Lee included a fact that some Tennesseans would contest. He acknowledged their notable volunteering tradition in earlier conflicts, but said, "York's native state won the nickname of the Volunteer State because so many Tennesseans, among them Alvin York's grandfather, flocked to the colors during the Mexican War" (p. 65).