

SERGEANT YORK and the GREAT WAR

HIS OWN LIFE STORY AND WAR DIARY

Originally Edited By
Tom Skeyhill 1930

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Sample

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CHAPTER 1

BOYHOOD

I was borned in Pall Mall, in Fentress County. Hit is under the mountain; that is to say, in the valley below. Hit is called the Valley of the Three Forks of the Wolf, because Wolf River forks into three branches not far from our home. Hit is in the Cumberland Mountains, in the eastern part of middle Tennessee, not far from the Kentucky line. I was borned in a one-room log cabin with puncheon floors, and the walls made of rough-hewn slabs. These walls was chinked with bark and mud, but jes the same, in the winter time the wind would whistle in through the walls and up through the cracks in the floor. Some of them-there floor cracks were so big we could look and see the chickens and pigs underneath. I was the third in a family of eleven children, eight boys and three girls. Most all of them were big and red-headed; and I was borned and growed up the biggest of them all. There was a whole litter of us and we jes sort of growed up like a lot of little pigs. I don't mean we was allowed to be dirty like pigs. I jes sorter mean that we were most always turned loose out-of-doors on the mountainside, kinder running wild, playing and hunting around. We was sort of brung up by the hair of the head.

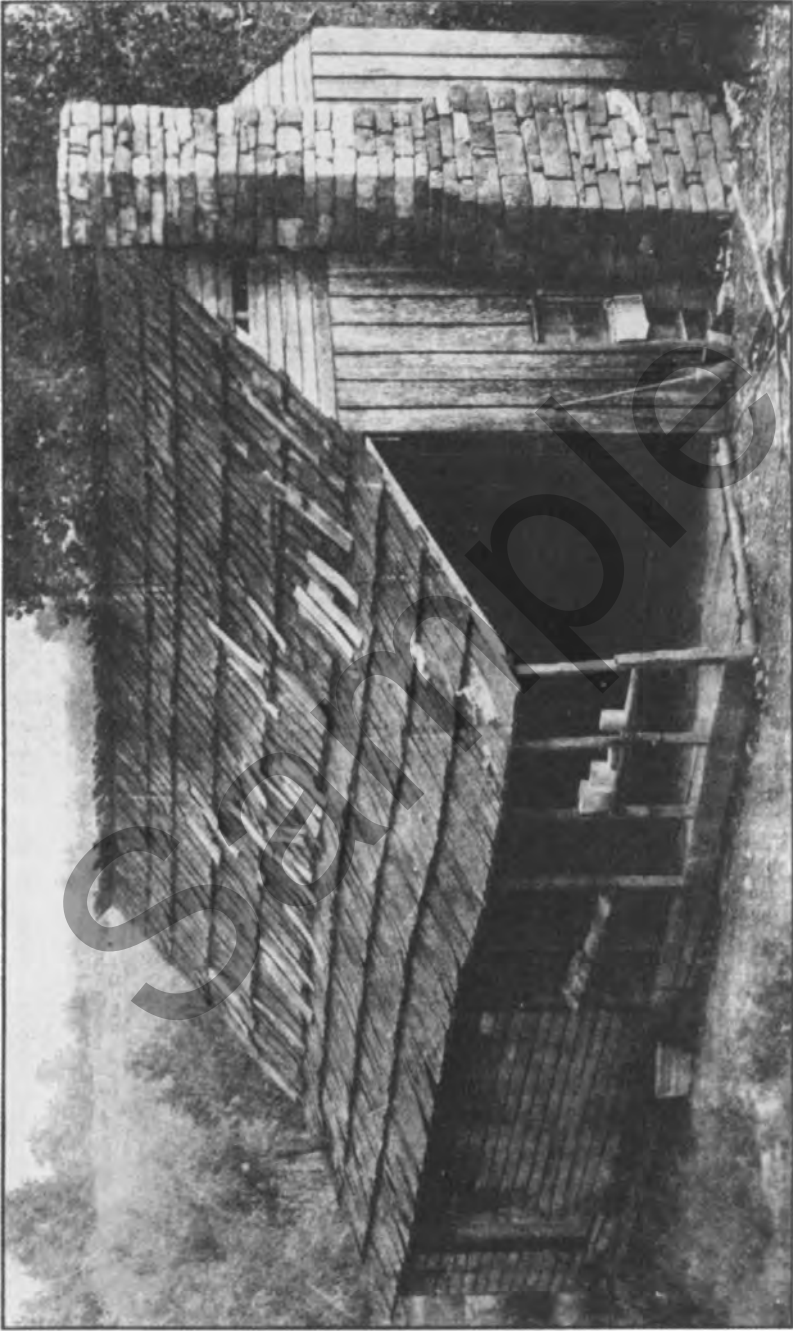
We weren't pampered. Mother and Father hadn't any time to pamper us. They was most awful hardworking people. They had to be to bring up eleven children like they did. Father was a blacksmith. His shop was in a cave or rockhouse, as we called it, at the head of the spring on the mountainside, just near our home. He knowed wonderful well how to handle mares and horses and never refused even the meanest of them. Some of the mules was most awful, but my father never backed up on them. I am telling you that shows character. But money was scarce in them times and he never made more than about fifty cents a

day. I don't mean to say he averaged that much. He didn't. He was so fond of hunting that he would neglect his blacksmithing and go out over the hills for days to get him some deer or some turkeys. But he wasn't lazy and like the rest of us boys it wasn't natcheral for him to resist the baying of the hounds and the call of the woods. I guess we've got it in the blood. He was a right-smart woodsman. He could follow a trail anywhere, or go out through the wildest country on the darkest nights, and never get lost for a minute. He was the best shot in the mountains. Often I have seed him take the centre out of a target, shot after shot. I have seed him fire a dozen times at a target and put most all of the bullets through the same hole.

We most always had plenty of fresh meat from my father's rifle-gun. But jes the same, we was always poor. Mother used to hire out and work at other places, washing, spinning or weaving, or doing chores. She would earn about twenty-five cents a day.

So we growed up. We had our own log cabin and a little land. We raised chickens and hogs and some corn and we had a couple of cows and a whole heap of fresh air and plenty of room outside, but not much inside the cabin. Eleven children and mother and father take up a most awful lot of room, and that little one-room log cabin was kinder crowded at night, when we were all tucked in; but we was all under one roof, growing up good, strong, and healthy, and loving each other. Jes a mountain family. We children would all lie in bed, tucked in for the night. Mother would sit in front of the big open fire carding, or spinning, or weaving; and Father would sit in the corner in the light of a lantern or a grease lamp and clean and mend his guns; and that's the way we growed up.

We shore were pretty rough scrappers, and among ourselves and with the neighbours' children we used to fight right sharp. Of course, a whole heap of children like that will get up to all sorts of mischief, but Mother jes knowed where the most stingin hickory sticks growed and Father had a mule whip, and they



“It was from this home that Alvin went to war, and it was to it he returned.”

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both knowed how to use them. I guess the reason I growed up so big was that I was such a roughneck and Father had to whip me so much that he sorter kept my hide loose so that I could fill out. When I was sixteen I was nearly six feet tall and weighed one hundred and sixty pounds. Of course, they wanted us to go to school and we was most all anxious to get some larnin'. But we were very poor, and 'most all the other mountain people were poor too, and there was only money enough for the school to keep going about two and a half months each year, and that was in the middle of summer. It was too cold in the wintertime. The roads were bad. There were no bridges over the creeks and we couldn't get across; and we couldn't afford warm clothes neither. And even in the summertime they had to dismiss school for two or three weeks for crops and foddering. I went for about three weeks a year for about five years. I lamed to read and write. I had about a second-grade education. I don't think I could have passed the second grade. The schoolhouse was a little frame one-room building over on the hill. There were about one hundred pupils and only one teacher. We used to sit on benches made out of split logs with two pegs mortised in them. The benches had no backs. They were so high that when I used to sit on them I could scarcely touch the floor with my feet. During the last year we had two or three desks.

I never read no books till I was about twenty years of age. Then I read only one and that was the life of Frank and Jesse James.

I begun to work almost as soon as I could walk. At first I would help Mother around the house, carrying water, getting a little stovewood, and carrying and nursing the other children to keep them from yelling around after Mother while she was trying to get a bite of dinner for us all. I would go out to the field with Father before I was six years old. I would have to chop the weeds out of the corn. Father would be ploughing with the old mule, and I and my brothers would follow after until he was out of sight, and then I we would steal off and play and scrap

around; and then when we would get home he would give us some hickory tea, as he called it.

And it didn't take much of it to make a fellow wish there never was no hickory in these-here mountains. Our clothes was very poor. When I first went to school I wore a home-made linsay dress, and I guess I warn'd it that long it couldn't stay on me no longer nohow, and jes dropped off as if by itself. As I "rowed older and larger Mother would get some clothes from the neighbours, old ones for washings she done for them, to make us boys britches and coats to keep us warm in the winter months. We had clean cotton shirts which we were only allowed to wear on Sunday mornings, but we had no coats. I shore do remember the kind of shoes we wore in the winter-time. Father made them. They was brogan shoes with brass on the toes, and when we would get up in the morning our shoes would be cold and stiff and we would have to warm them around the old log fire before we could put them on. They were most awful hard and stiff and would take the hide off our heels and they slipped up and down when we walked.

When I was sixteen Mother went to the little country store and bought me a pair of dress shoes. I called them Sunday shoes, for I only wore them on Sunday. They were number ten men's shoes. They were the first dress shoes I ever had. I was most awful proud of them. The next Sunday morning Mother and I started to the little church meeting. Of course, I put on the new shoes. I shore felt good in them. I kept looking down at them, and I kinder thought that everybody else was admiring them. Before I got to church it come up a rain and got muddy and the red clay was very tough and pulled off one of the heels. I scraped in the mud, got it, and put it in my front pants pocket. I kept on a-going with one heel on and one off. When I got almost to the church the other heel come off and I got it and put it in my other front pocket. My, what trouble I was with my first pair of Sunday shoes with both heels off even before I got to church where I could really show them off, and I had no

coat and my shirt was all wet and muddy too I And there was a girl friend there that I kinder admired. So there I was with my first pair of Sunday shoes and my first time to wear them, and this trouble had to come, and I was slipping all over the road with those number tens with no heels on them, and that shore spoiled the pleasure of the day.

As I growed up I begun to look around for some work, but there wasn't much of it in the little valley. Father took me into the rockhouse, where I helped him to blacksmith. He taught me to handle them there mules and not to back up on them. I got to know horses and mules right smart, and I picked up the blacksmith business. But I most loved getting out with Father to help him shoot. We would hunt the red and gray foxes in the daytime and skunks, possums, and coons after dark. Often we would hunt all day and do the blacksmithing at night. I did a heap of farming too. I worked for Mr. E. J. Williams and others for forty cents a day.

In 1911 when I was 24 years old my dear father takened sick and died of typhoid fever. He was kicked most awful bad by a mule he was trying to shoe. She lashed out and got him. She was the only one that ever out-smarted him. She would not have done it nohow, only he didn't know she was mean. He was most awful sick for some time and I think it led up to his death. That left my mother with a family of eleven small children. Although I was only a young boy, I had to go out and work with the men to help support Mother and the smaller children.