

First Place Winner

Jana Flowers Humphrey
Oak Ridge, Tenn.
cthumphrey@people.pc.com

All in the Family

Alvin York has always been a part of my life. My grandmother and mother told stories of the family-Brooks, Pile, York; and their experiences when living in Wolf River, Tennessee. My parents, Floyd and Ollie Flowers visited family. Because of visiting I have memories of Willie Brooks, Allen Brooks, and John Sowders family dinners where people just showed up; the long tables of food that appeared like magic; and the men adjourning to the barn for horseshoes and marbles after eating. I never checked to see; who and how they cooked enough food for sixty or seventy people. How did they have enough plates and forks? And how did they wash all the dishes and cooking utensils?

When my mother, Ollie Brooks, was a young girl, her family lived at the head of Wolf River. She worked at the York home. They never knew how many to expect for a meal. It could be forty people. This was not unusual, my mother never knew who or how many dad had invited to dinner.

We have a photo from the Fentress County newspaper showing my grandfather, T. H. Flowers and the Fentress County draft board on the front porch of the Flowers home. Alvin was meeting with a family about their son. My grandfather died in 1944.

When I was in Allardt elementary school, the schools of Fentress County did a Music Festival to honor Sgt York. It was an all day affair. Mom made our long dresses of solid and print cotton with draped bustle on the side and long sleeves. Buses and children were everywhere. Groups were outside assembling to be ready when it was their time to perform. Others were in the gymnasium watching the dancing and singing. It took a lot of time, work and talent from everyone to accomplish such an amazing day.

My sisters and I graduated from York Agricultural Institute. York gave us clubs, organizations, and sports, a life other than the Methodist Church. It was a time of fun and the last years of innocence. Memories of getting to school early to meet "the group" that sat in the back of the auditorium; talk and laugh until classes began. One of us was your congressman Lincoln Davis. Remember the pine trees in front of the building where we sat, studied, visited or dreamed. We did not realize that Alvin Cullom York had given us the greatest gift a child could ever receive, an education. The problem was that we were not taught we could be anything we wanted because we had such a good education. At home we had three generations of family teaching us family values, traditions, and manners.

I learned in College that people recognized York and Pall Mall, but did not feel the way we do about our hero. One weekend when home from college, dad, a friend and I visited with Alvin. He was in bed. He was such a big man. He and dad had lots to talk about, so I could sit, look around and listen to them. I was so glad I went because he passed away the next year.

After I got married and lived in other states, I realized I needed to get on paper the family history. Coonrod Pile was my great, great, great. great grandfather. My line is

Coonrod's son Elijah Pile. Elijah's daughter Nancy married a Union soldier, William Brooks from Michigan. He has a story for later. My Ma, Maudie Barnett Brooks told the story of his murder, but did not know where he was buried. On a visit to Wolf Cemetery I found his grave. Joe Jennings was making a marker for his grave, but it was stolen or broken. Joe was married to Isabell, William's granddaughter. When Joe died, I knew his grave would be lost. I bought a 350-pound marker and had it placed on his grave. William and Nancy Brooks had Mary, mother of Alvin and William "Willie" Brooks, my great grandfather. Mary married William York. William Brooks gave the family red hair, fair skin and laughter.

I knew Alvin's sister Lucy York Rains the best. My sister married her son, Perry. I went to Lucy and her daughters for the York side; when doing a family book for Betty and Perry's anniversary. Lucy had family dinner at her house each Sunday, until she became ill. She had nine living children and their families. She was a working, cooking, and caring woman. No one will ever be able to make apple pies like her. I have never seen such thin, flaky crust. I hear her molasses stack cake were outstanding. She made twenty cakes one year for Christmas. Also she made every grandchild a quilt. She had twenty five grandchildren.

A few years ago my sisters, mom and dad and I were at the Old Mill in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. The lady owner wanted to know where we were from. After Oak Ridge and Cookeville, we mentioned Jamestown. She took time to tell us that her mother was an extension agent in Fentress County when Alvin and Gracie got married. She went with Gracie to Nashville to pick out her wedding dress. Gracie was wearing seven petticoats that day. The story made our day. They were married in 1919.

The story handed down through the years, the only man that could out shoot Alvin York was John Sowders. John was married to Willie Brook's daughter Maude. Maude was Alvin's cousin. John would spend days with dad fishing and hunting. I can see us sitting around the dinner table with squirrel and dumplings. John Sowders was my great uncle.

A visit today would take you to the Wolf River Cemetery. The generations of York's, Brooks', Pile's and all the people that married into the family are present. They are all together for the ages. I really hope they enjoy the beauty of the limestone escarpment, the trees, the streams of the three forks of the Wolf coming together, the fields with cattle, the sound of a panther in the distance; even the smell of the sulfur spring. They can share stories of walking to school, going to church meetings, the pot of gold in Coonrod's grave, Nancy Brooks travelling to Nashville in 1865 to testify against Champ Ferguson and the horror tales of going through the cemetery at night.