

Alvin C. York's captured German Machine Gun at Museum of Appalachia

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 2, 2010)

One of the most interesting and historically important military artifacts from World War I has made its way back to Tennessee. John Rice Irwin and the Museum of Appalachia are proud to have legal possession of the actual machine gun that Sergeant Alvin C. York captured along with 135 German soldiers in the Argonne Forest in 1918 during World War I.

On Sunday, February 7, 2010, at 2:00 PM, at the Museum of Appalachia, you can see this significant historic artifact on display at the GRAND RE-OPENING of the Sgt. York Family exhibit. If you attended the excellent reception at the Tennessee Theater on January 24, 2010, retain the top portion of that ticket as it is good for entry to the February 7, 2010, event at the Museum of Appalachia as well.

I was pleased to be asked to attend the January 24, 2010, reception and viewing of the classic film *Sergeant York*, at the historic and beautiful Tennessee Theater in Knoxville. What a wonderful venue for this event. Even with the constant rain on Sunday, a huge crowd, nearly filling that majestic old theater, was on hand for the movie. The reception filled the giant expanse of the entrance lobby.

As always, our local statesman - Howard Baker, Jr. who has served our nation as Senator, Presidential Chief of Staff and Ambassador to Japan, spoke with dignity and great aplomb, when he recalled his personal experience meeting Sergeant York. He even had the forwardness as a young child to ask the good sergeant if he could see his "medal." To which his father, Howard Baker, Sr. grimaced, but Alvin said, "Of course you can, son."

Senator Baker said, "He went to the mantle piece, took down a small glass vase and while holding the vase in one hand he shook the medal from the vase into his other hand." This is so typical for Alvin C. York. He was so self-effacing and so humble regarding his singular accomplishments in the war that he had a hard time accepting any praise for his deeds there. It was right in character for him to have placed that valuable and most precious Medal of Honor in a common small glass vase!

This one event has obviously stuck with Senator Baker all his life. Can you just imagine the courage it took for a small boy standing in the shadow of such a great man to speak up and ask the one question he wanted most to know, but was afraid to ask. This is characteristic of another of our great Tennesseans.

Throughout his career, Senator Baker has asked the tough questions, and not just "what did he know and when did he know it?" but consistently in all he has undertaken, he has never faltered in his strength of resolve. From the Panama Canal decision to the environmental issues he had to face in his service to his country, never has he backed away from a challenge for the good of the people.

He is the epitome of a present day Davy Crockett who, as you know, is renowned for saying "Know you are right and then go ahead." That can be said of our own Huntsville native and beloved statesman, Senator Howard Baker, Jr.! He has demonstrated it again and again. He has no fear, when he knows he is right he has gone ahead regardless. And time has proven him right again and again.

Several others spoke to the reception audience on Sunday, January 24, 2010, including John Rice Irwin who acknowledged the people who had helped obtain the treasured machine gun. Among those in the audience that John Rice recognized included Dean Stone, editor of the Maryville Times who had first called regarding the machine gun being "discovered in the closet of a small library in Nahant, Massachusetts."

John Welch, Trustee of the Nahant library, was also among those recognized by John Rice as having played a key role in the return of the machine gun to Tennessee. These individuals and others who were instrumental in helping bring the artifact to the Museum of Appalachia were obviously filled with a justifiable sense of pride in accomplishment. Bringing the machine gun home was no simple task.

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When contacted by John Rice, John Welsh said the library had no right to display, or even own, such a lethal weapon and were in a quandary as to what to do with it. They knew it was a valuable heirloom but did not know how to legally hold on to it.

As might be expected, when word started to leak out about the machine gun, there were several entities that began to express a significant amount of interest in this 90-year-old historic artifact. The United States Army was among the most interested. However, even the Army had legal restraints and was at a loss about how to leap over the various hurdles to acquire the most desirable and unique machine gun.

Of course John Rice was busy telling John Welsh that the only rational thing to do with such an historic artifact with such a close tie to Tennessee's hero, Alvin C. York, was to bring the piece to Tennessee near York's home. And where more appropriate to display the machine gun than with the York family exhibit in the Museum of Appalachia!

The Museum Board required no persuading to understand the importance and historic value of this artifact. In a meeting during 2008 the Board agreed to make an offer for its purchase. The Nahant Public Library Board agreed to the offer, however, no one knew how to legally consummate such a sale. Remember, this is a working automatic machine gun, a Class III regulated firearm, illegal to own!

Mike Evans, a member of the Museum's board just happens to be one of the country's most knowledgeable weapons experts. He has the exclusive dealership of the Benelli brand guns throughout the United States.

Being experienced in working through the bureaucratic maze of firearms regulations and securing, at a personal cost of \$2,700, the services of Robert Bilbo, a retired Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent, Mike was able to ferret out the details required to possess the machine gun. Without the expert help of these two dedicated men, there is no way the Museum staff could have navigated through the bureaucratic requirements. It was a literal mess!

The weapon could not legally be in the possession of a Museum. Therefore, an arrangement was made whereby the transfer could be made to the Norris Police Department with the understanding by Norris Mayor Chris Mitchell, City Manager Tim Hester and Police Chief Danny Humphrey, that they would pass along the weapon to the Museum of Appalachia as a long-term (permanent) lease.

On January 7, 2010, the special artifact machine gun was turned over to the Museum of Appalachia being accepted by Chairman of the Board, Buddy Scott and Museum of Appalachia Executive Director Elaine Irwin Meyer. I imagine John Rice Irwin was nearby beaming with pride at this latest addition to the museum he founded and has fondly managed for these many years. We have a premier historical museum in our area because of his dedication and determination to collect significant historical artifacts over the years. The Museum of Appalachia has once again added a jewel in its crown – Alvin C. York's Machine Gun.

Thus ended a chapter in the history of this World War I historical artifact and began a new chapter whereby the public will be able to see the gun on display. As visitors view the machine gun they will be taken back to the heroic actions of a Tennessee native who was a humble man with no desire to harm anyone but one who saw his duty and did what he felt he had to do to right the wrong he saw.

Alvin C. York was the undoubtedly the greatest hero of World War I as noted by the French Marshal Ferdinand Foch when he bestowed on Alvin the Croix de Guerre with Palm. He said, "What you did was the greatest thing accomplished by any private soldier of all the armies of Europe."

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Senator Howard Baker, Jr., Andrew York and John Rice Irwin with Alvin C. York's captured Machine Gun



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