

## WORLD WAR I AND THE UPPER CUMBERLAND

“Cumberland Tales”

By Michael Birdwell

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When the United States declared war on Germany April 6, 1917, the war seemed of little consequence to many in the Upper Cumberland, though the war would have significant impact on the region even before the United States entered the fray.

First of all, the war caused a serious depletion of life and resources in Europe and both belligerents looked to America for resources. Both sides needed coal to fuel their war machines, causing the mines in Fentress, Putnam, Overton, Scott, Morgan, Roane, Campbell and Anderson Counties to enjoy a boom economy during the war. In fact, the war created the largest demand for Cumberland coal in the industry’s short life.

Upper Cumberland citizens played a significant role in the war. Crossville native George



Ashburn was the first doughboy wounded in action. The duty of carrying out the draft fell to individual states, though it was overseen by a staff in Washington. The man in charge of the draft for the entire state of Tennessee and the Southeastern region of the United States was none other than

**Tennessee Central Railroad’s vice president Maj. Rutledge Smith** of Cookeville. He was the



only man in the country to oversee both military and civilian mobilization. Dividing his time between Washington, training camps and the states in his territory, Smith tried to administer the draft fairly. With the help of his formidable wife, **Graeme McGregor Smith**, he spearheaded war-related work on the homefront, rationing, and morale building.

Most of the men from the Upper Cumberland mustered into the army found themselves in the 30th Division, better known as the Old Hickory Division, composed of primarily seasoned Tennessee National Guardsmen and troops from Virginia and the Carolinas. The Thirtieth Division was commanded by Gen. Edward Lewis with the 59th Brigade headed by the only general to hail from Tennessee, Gen. Lawrence Tyson of Knoxville.

It gained international fame by being the first allied unit to crash through the infamous German fortification — the Hindenburg Line — with a division of Australians following them through.

Crossvillian Milo Lemert lost his life during the engagement but was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for eliminating three enemy machine gun nests. Other Upper Cumberland soldiers populated the ranks of the 82nd Division, made famous by the exploits of **Alvin C. York**, who with seven other doughboys captured



132 prisoners on Oct. 8, 1918. York returned to the United States as the model civilian soldier and the most renowned hero of the war.

“Cumberland Tales,” created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region’s history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at [cdickinson@tntech.edu](mailto:cdickinson@tntech.edu) or Michael Birdwell at [birdie@tntech.edu](mailto:birdie@tntech.edu).

\*Read more “Cumberland Tales” at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>