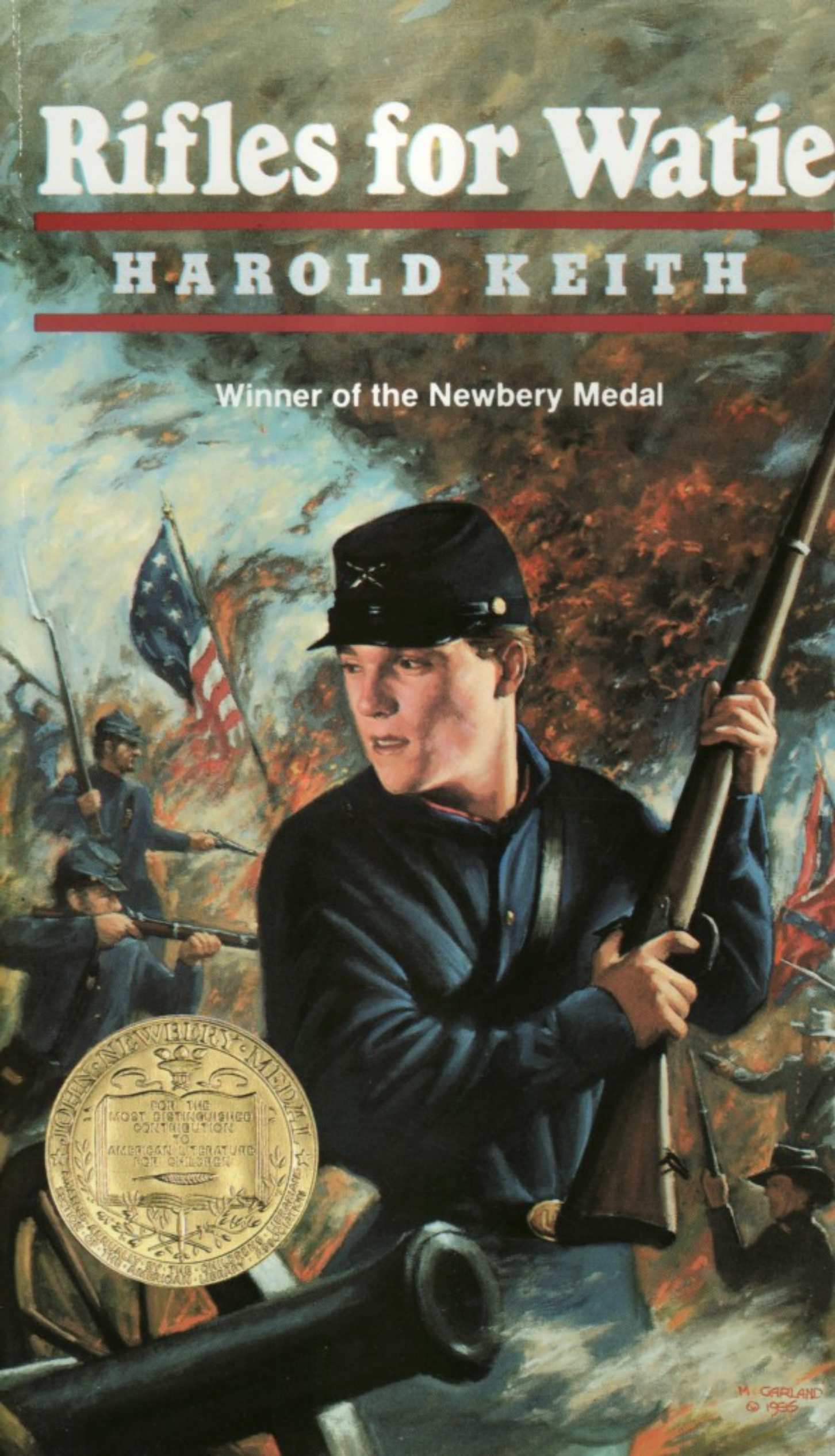
Rifles for Watie

HAROLD KEITH

Winner of the Newbery Medal



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Linn County, Kansas, 1861

The mules strained forward strongly, hoofs stomping, harness jingling. The iron blade of the plow sang joyously as it ripped up the moist, black Kansas earth with a soft, crunching sound, turning it over in long, smooth, root-veined rectangles.

Leather lines tied together over his left shoulder and under his right arm, Jeff trudged along behind the plow, watching the fresh dirt cascade off the blade and remembering.

Remembering the terrible Kansas drouth of the year before when it hadn't rained for sixteen long months. The ground had broken open in great cracks, springs and wells went dry, and no green plant would grow except the curly buffalo grass which never failed. That drouth had been hard on everybody.

Jeff clutched the wooden plow handles and thought about it. He recalled how starved he had been for wheat bread, and how his longing for it grew so acute that on Sundays he found

excuse to visit neighbor after neighbor in hopes of being invited to share a pan of hot biscuits, only to discover that they, too, took their corn bread three times a day.

A drop of perspiration trickled down his tan, dusty face. It was a pleasant face with a wide, generous mouth, a deep dimple in the chin, and quick brown eyes that crinkled with good humor. The sweat droplets ran uncomfortably into the corner of his mouth, tasting salty and warm.

But now the drouth was broken. After plenty of snow and rain, the new land was blooming again. Even his mother was learning to accept Kansas. Edith Bussey had lived all her life in Kentucky, with its gently rolling hills, its seas of bluegrass, its stone fences festooned with honeysuckle, and its stately homes with their tall white columns towering into the drowsy air. No wonder she found the new Kansas country hard to like.

She had called Kansas an erratic land. Jeff remembered she had said it was like a child, happy and laughing one minute, hateful and contrary the next. A land famous for its cyclones, blizzards, grasshoppers, mortgages, and its violently opposed political cliques.

Jeff ducked his head and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his homespun shirt, never taking his eyes off the mules. He would never forget the scores of covered wagons he had seen, during the drouth last fall, on the Marais des Cygnes road that went past his father's farm as one-third of the hundred thousand people living in Kansas Territory gave up, abandoning their claims and heading back to their wives' folks.

Curious, he had leaned on his father's corral fence of peeled cottonwood logs and asked some of them where they were going.

"Back to Ellinoy," or "Back to Injeany," they replied in their whining, singsong voices. "Don' wanta starve to death here."

Although Jeff had felt sorry for them and their families,

his father, a veteran of the Mexican War, was disgusted with their faint-heartedness. Emory Bussey believed that in one respect the drouth had been a blessing to the new state.

"We got rid of the chronic croakers who never could see good in anything," he maintained. Emory was a Free State man in the raging guerilla warfare over slavery that had divided people on the Kansas-Missouri border into free and slave factions. It was a political dispute that was far more serious than the drouth.

Jeff yelled at the mules and whistled piercingly between his teeth to keep them going. He liked the new Kansas country. He meant not only to live and work in it but also to go to college in it. His father had told him that the first Kansas constitution, made in 1855, contained a provision saying that "The General Assembly may take measures for the establishment of a university." Jeff wondered if the drouth would delay its coming. At the end of the row he halted the mules.

He took off his hat to cool his brown head. His mother had made the hat from wheat straw she had platted with her own hands at night, shaping the crown to his head and lining it inside with cloth to keep it from being scratchy. While Jeff stood bareheaded, enjoying the warm breeze blowing through his hair, his dog Ring trotted up, panting, and nudged Jeff's leg affectionately.

Jeff reached down and pulled Ring's ears, and the big gray dog's plumed tail waved in slow half-circles of delight. Ring was half shepherd and half greyhound. He had big shoulder muscles and a white ring around his neck. Although the dog weighed almost ninety pounds now, Jeff recalled how six years ago he had brought him home in his coat pocket. His father and mother hadn't wanted him to have the dog; they already had a collie and a feist. But Jeff begged so hard that they relented on condition that he keep the animal at the barn.

However, that first night Jeff had heard the pup crying

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