



Rifles for Watie

Harold Keith

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Jeff Bussey walked briskly up the rutted wagon road toward Fort Leavenworth on his way to join the Union volunteers. It was 1861 in Linn County, Kansas, and Jeff was elated at the prospect of fighting for the North at last.

In the Indian country south of Kansas there was dread in the air; and the name, Stand Watie, was on every tongue. A hero to the rebel, a devil to the Union man, Stand Watie led the Cherokee Indian Na-tion fearlessly and successfully on savage raids behind the Union lines. Jeff came to know the Watie men only too well.

He was probably the only soldier in the West to see the Civil War from both sides and live to tell about it. Amid the roar of cannon and the swish of flying grape, Jeff learned what it meant to fight in battle. He learned how it felt never to have enough to eat, to forage for his food or starve. He saw the green fields of Kansas and Okla-homa laid waste by Watie's raiding parties, homes gutted, precious corn deliberately uprooted. He marched endlessly across parched, hot land, through mud and slash-ing rain, always hungry, always dirty and dog-tired.

And, Jeff, plain-spoken and honest, made friends and enemies. The friends were strong men like Noah Babbitt, the itinerant printer who once walked from Topeka to Galveston to see the magnolias in bloom; boys like Jimmy Lear, too young to carry a gun but old enough to give up his life at Cane Hill; ugly, big-eared Heifer, who made the best sourdough biscuits in the Choctaw country; and beautiful Lucy Washbourne, rebel to the marrow and proud of it. The enemies were men of an-other breed - hard-bitten Captain Clardy for one, a cruel officer with hatred for Jeff in his eyes and a dark secret on his soul.

This is a rich and sweeping novel-rich in its panorama of history; in its details so clear that the reader never doubts for a moment that he is there; in its dozens of different people, each one fully realized and wholly recognizable. It is a story of a lesser -- known part of the Civil War, the Western campaign, a part different in its issues and its problems, and fought with a different savagery. Inexorably it moves to a dramat-ic climax, evoking a brilliant picture of a war and the men of both sides who fought in it.

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