

HAROLD & MOLLY

He was a senior citizen—renowned, revered and retired. She was a feisty promoter who wouldn't take no for an answer.



Photos by Gil Jain

Publisher Molly Griffis and author Harold Keith face off in the offices of Levite of Apache.

by Kathryn Jenson White

When Harold met Molly, the sparks—and ink—began to fly.

In November 1990, Molly Griffis, owner of and do-it-all for Levite of Apache, her then three-year-old publishing house, began her professional relationship with Harold Keith, OU's sports information director from 1930 to 1969 and award-winning author.

Harold was 87 at the time and enjoying the soft bed his laurels had provided for him to rest upon. Not that he was doing nothing. A former Sooner track man, he still was running a mile most days, enjoying time with his wife, Virginia (who has since died), and keeping in touch with their two children, Johnny in Las Cruces, New Mexico, and Kitty in Houston, and three adult grandchildren.

He also was still answering the occasional fan letter from devoted readers



Harold Keith's story of the Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1893 was reissued in the spring of 1993 to coincide with the centennial celebration of the historic event. Gracing the cover was a Jim Argo photograph of the Cherokee Strip mural by Fred Olds.

of his books, although he had not published a new title since 1977. Given that only three of his 14 books were still in print—including the John Newbery Medal-winning *Rifles for Watie*—his active life of authorship had slowed considerably.

Then along came Molly with the idea that Harold should get off his laurels and consider reissuing *Komantcia*, named a New York Times Best Book when it first was published in 1965. Molly went to work persuading Harold that she was just the woman to handle the reissue of this novel for young readers that had been translated into four languages.

"Frankly, I was stunned to find out that only one of his children's books was still in print," Molly remembers. "I thought that great books by great authors just stayed in print. But when you're almost 90, your agent has died and everyone who handled the business end for you has moved on, things tend to fall through the cracks. *Rifles* had won the Newbery, so when



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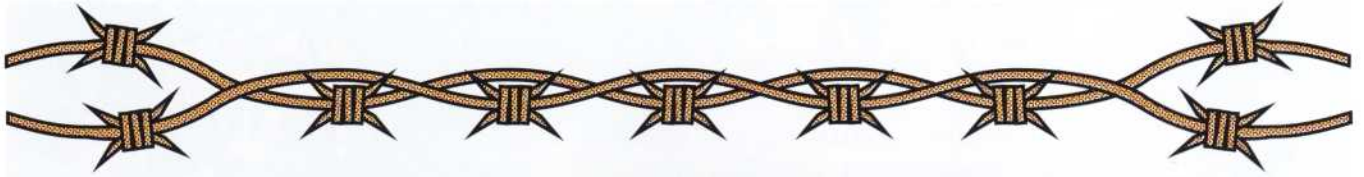
HarperCollins bought the publishing company that first brought it out—Thomas Y. Crowell—the company kept it in print. The other books were good and had received other awards, but they had been allowed to slip away.

"When I spoke with him about *Komantcia*, he was nice but a little

apprehensive. My father would have been the same way. Mr. Keith just didn't know if I could do what I said I could. He asked a million questions and was very businesslike through all of it. What really excited me was that he mentioned casually that he had a never-before-published sequel to *Komantcia*; he wouldn't give that to me right away. I think he was testing me to see how I did with the reissue."

Molly did well. The book appeared in April 1991 on Harold's 88th birthday, and since that time the two have published the sequel, *The Sound of Strings*, and reissued two other Keith books. In fall 1991, they brought out *Will Rogers: A Boy's Life*, followed in spring 1993 by *The Obstinate Land*, a story of the Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1893. That publishing date was chosen to capitalize on the centennial celebration of the historical event.

Sounding at times rather like Burns and Allen in one of their comedy routines, Harold and Molly talk and tease and taunt each other with the famil-



ilarity that almost-daily contact for three years will create. Of Molly, only the second editor he has ever worked with, Harold has only good things to say, and he says them in a soft, dry-edged voice and with a smile so warm it could melt butter in the next room.

"What I like most about working with Molly is that she calls me 'honey,'" he says. "I don't remember how that got started, but I like it. And I've certainly gotten busier since she got involved in things. She thought my books would have a new chance with a new audience, and I guess she was right. They've done very well. I would say I'm content."

Molly chimes in: "Did you say you were content with me?"

"I'd go 'fur,' but I wouldn't go that 'fur,'" Harold replies. "When my books first came out, the publisher did all the promotion for me. I was too busy doing my job at OU and writing to travel around and promote the way I have with Molly."

"He doesn't seem to mind my dragging him around," she counters with her customary rapid-fire delivery. "I've never said, 'Let's go to Lawton or Enid or Tulsa or Houston' that he's said, 'No.'"

"I'm not writing books now, Molly," Harold re-counters with his customary considered delivery, while cutting his eyes slyly at her. "I've got time."

Harold may have time, but he and Molly work hard at filling it with book-related activities. Together they have amassed enough anecdotes to fill yet another book. Since both are strong-willed and have a clear sense of what should be done and how, the anecdotes



In his own office at Levite of Apache, Harold Keith has spent several hours a day for the past three years autographing books, planning promotions and sometimes rereading his old favorites.

range from the touching to the touchy.

"When he met me, I was a 'girl' to him," the 1960 Sooner graduate says with a laugh. "I was a girl, and he was willing to tolerate me. I come on really strong—and I know that—so I tried to hold back with him because he is of another generation. We've grown very close, but we've had some tug-of-wars."

For example, there was their disagreement about the cover art for *Komantcia*.

"I called Doc Tate Nevaquaya, who

had been a friend of my father in Apache, and asked him to read *Komantcia* and do a painting for the cover," Molly says. "He had never done anything like that before—but this is the story of a boy kidnapped by the Comanche, and Doc is a Comanche and a renowned artist. I thought he would be the perfect choice for the job. He sent this wonderful painting, but it was a horizontal rather than the vertical a book cover normally requires.

"I loved the painting so much I decided to print the cover horizontally. Mr. Keith loved the picture, too, but he thought it was a bad idea to create a sideways cover. We had a big argument. Finally, he told me that if Savoie Lottinville, who had been the director of the OU Press for years, said it was acceptable, we could do it.

"Mr. Lottinville was thrilled that we were going to reissue *Komantcia*. He said it was the best book Mr. Keith ever wrote. I was panicked as I put the picture out on the table, because I had placed myself in a box. I really wanted to use the picture, but if Mr. Lottinville said it

wasn't a good idea, I couldn't. I told him I knew it was kind of a gimmick, but that I thought it would work for us. He walked around and around the table for what seemed a long time. He did everything but take a bite out of the picture before he said, 'Go for it.'"

Nevaquaya did a companion painting for the cover of *The Sound of Strings*, and both books are sold in the galleries that sell Nevaquaya's work as well as in bookstores.

These minor skirmishes pale be-

Asked at 90 if he still ran, he said, "To tell the truth, in a run with a pregnant woman, I'd come in third."

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In their friendly dispute over the use of Doc Tate Nevaquaya's paintings as horizontal covers for the reissue of Keith's books, both Harold and Molly came out winners.

side the peaceful routines and pleasant experiences Harold and Molly have accumulated. He comes into his own office at Levite of Apache almost daily for at least a few hours. They go through the mail together, make plans for promotions and enjoy each other's company.

"I walked into his office one day after he had been very quiet for about an hour," Molly says. "He had picked up *Komantcia* and had been reading it intently for the whole time. He looked

up at me and said, 'You know, I just can't put this down.' I roared with laughter and told him I knew the author well and could get him an autographed copy if he wanted."

Molly especially has enjoyed the fruits of their labor as they show up in responses from teachers and schoolchildren all over the country who have been touched by Harold's way with a story.

"My favorite was the sixth grade teacher from Minneapolis," she says.

"He called Mr. Keith one day from Tahlequah and told him that he had read *Rifles for Watie* to his classes every year for 35 years. In 1958, when it won the Newbery, he was a first-year teacher, and the librarian gave a book talk on it. He had a tough class, he said, and he kept them enthralled by reading it aloud. It became a tradition.

"He retired in June, and he and his wife, who is a librarian, decided to trace the trail of Jeff Bussey, the main character. He met Mr. Keith at his home, then they came here to the office. I videotaped the meeting. At one point he said, 'Mr. Keith, I stood where Jeff Bussey stood.' Mr. Keith began to grin. 'I know he wasn't really real,' the man said, 'but you made him very real to me.' As he sat next to Mr. Keith with the signed copy of *Rifles* in his arms, he kept saying, 'I can't believe this. I can't believe this.' It was great.

"I was excited and telling him all the stories about the other books. My arm was in a sling because I had fallen and broken it earlier. Mr. Keith listened to me go on for a few minutes, then when I finally paused to take a breath, he said, 'You should see her when both arms are working.' He is funny.

"Not too long before that someone asked him at his 90th birthday party if he still ran. He said, 'To tell the truth, in a run with a pregnant woman, I'd come in third.' His wit takes you off guard. It pops out when you'd least expect it."

Although Harold is witty, he has a streak of shyness in him.

"I don't mind talking to people about my books, but I don't like to make speeches," he says. "When I won the Newbery, the first thing I said to them was, 'I don't have to give a speech, do I?' My editor then, Elizabeth Riley, said I did but that there would be only 75 or 100 people there.

"Turns out there were about 1,300. I was so amazed at that many librarians in one place, I forgot to be scared."

Harold has had to overcome his reluctance to speak in public many times, most recently in March 1993 when the



Sooner Magazine's Kathryn Jenson White is caught in the crossfire of teasing, taunting and flying witticisms when she meets Molly and Harold at their office.

Oklahoma Center for the Book presented him with the Arrell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award. The crowd at the Cowboy Hall of Fame was a large one. He wowed them, of course, although what he remembers about the experience is tripping on the steep stairs leading to the podium.

The Daughters of the Confederacy also recognized Harold's contributions to American history with the Jefferson Davis Medal.

"Molly, you superintended that; you tell about it," he says.

"I had nothing to do with it," she fires back. "A librarian from Oklahoma City gave a copy of *Rifles for Watie* to a national officer in the Daughters of the Confederacy, and she suggested you for the award. You always think I'm behind everything that happens to you. I don't know why."

Harold knows why. Molly, not just for sound business reasons but because

she believes passionately in the worth of the man's work, does labor hard to promote the books. She involved Oklahoman A. Max Weitzenhoffer Jr., producer of the Broadway hit "The Will Rogers Follies: A Life in Revue," in the reissue of *Will Rogers: A Boy's Life*. At OU Homecoming in fall 1991, Harold presented Weitzenhoffer with the first copy of the limited edition. The book was sold at "The Follies" souvenir table in the Broadway theater. Molly also called Will Rogers Jr. in Arizona and received a glowing cover blurb from the subject's son.

On Harold's 89th birthday, she rented a booth at the Texas Library Association's meeting and flew him to Houston to sign copies of the newly published *The Sound of Strings*.

"I took out an ad saying I had a new Harold Keith, and they lined up around the hall," she says. "They sang 'Happy Birthday' to him, and he

was thrilled out of his mind."

"I'd forgotten about that," Harold says.

"Sure," she says mockingly. "They had printed 'Happy Birthday, Harold Keith' on their name tags, but there were *only* 4,000 of them. That's why you forgot."

His grin gives pause. Trick or truth?

It doesn't matter to Molly; she has gotten used to the sly guy and goes blithely along telling and selling. She knows her market and plays to it.

"Every time we go somewhere, we have adults coming up to us saying, 'Mr. Keith, our mama read us *Komantcia* or *Rifles* or *Will Rogers* every night before we went to bed or as we traveled on vacations,'" she says. "It's touching because the stories are all so family oriented. Teachers read the books to kids who aren't quite old enough to read them themselves. They're written for young adults, but adults love them. They bring the generations together."

Mary-Lynn Cross Sachse, daughter of OU President Emeritus George L. Cross and his wife, Cleo, came by Levite of Apache recently to buy some Harold Keith books. "She mentioned she was getting them for the fourth generation in her family," Molly recounts. "Dr. Cross read them, she read them, her daughter read them and now she was buying them for her daughter's children."

Before Harold met Molly, he was doing just fine. Since that fateful moment, however, he has found himself afloat on the fast-moving waters of a new career. Molly is rowing like crazy, and Harold is at the tiller lending an occasional hand. While discussing what book they should reissue next, Harold mentions that he receives a lot of letters from *Rifles for Watie* fans who want a sequel in which the hero and the heroine get married. Both laugh off the idea of a new book, then Harold gets serious.

"They want that sequel, but you wouldn't do a sequel just to get a couple married," he insists.

Molly gets equally serious, pondering the thousands and thousands of people who had read and loved the book.

"Well, Mr. Keith," she muses, "now that I think about it, that would sell reeeeeeally well. I just know it." ☞