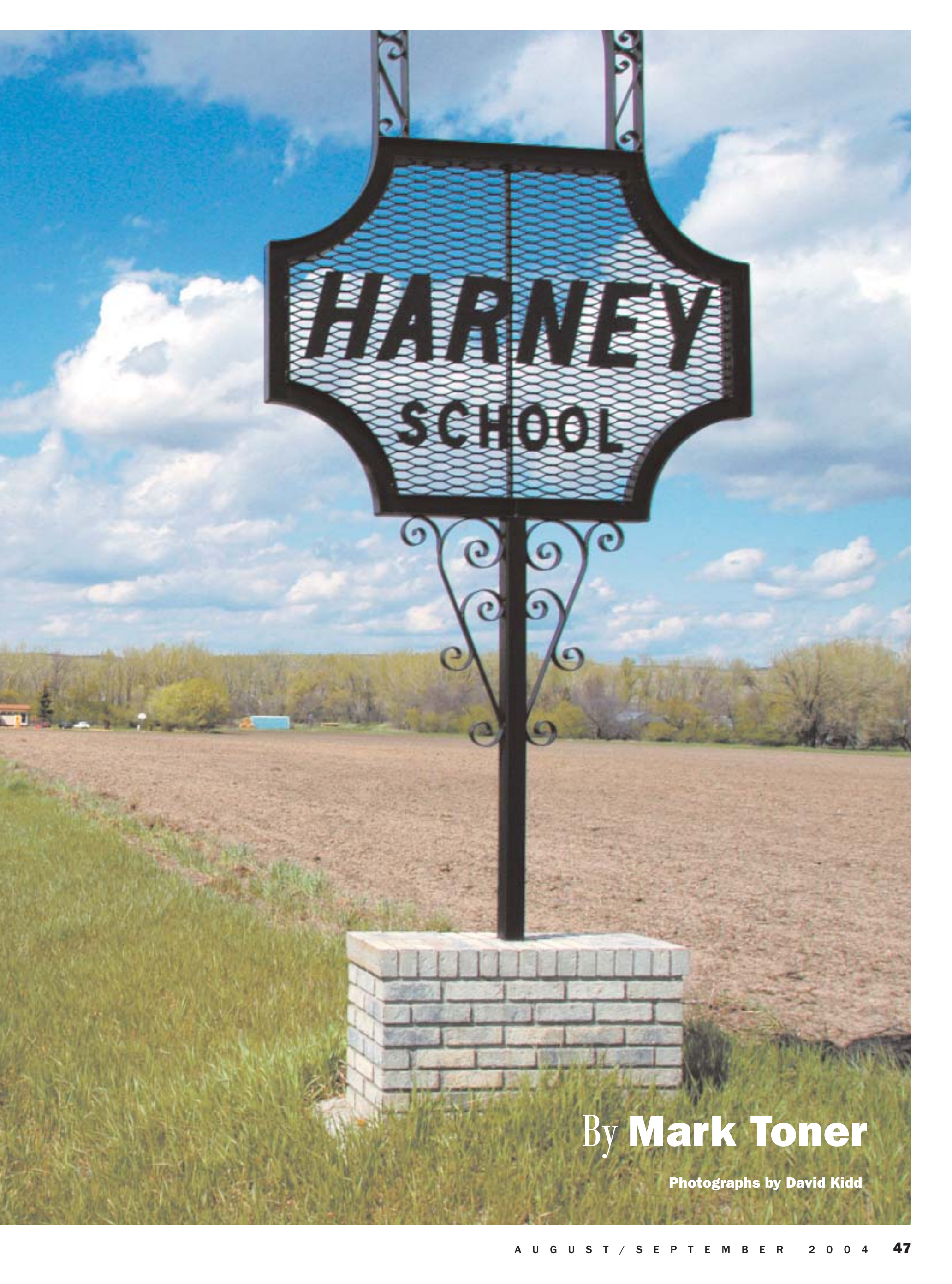




Alone on the Range

Standing in open prairie a dozen miles from the nearest town, the Harney School in western North Dakota had just one student during its final year. But the influence of country schooling continues to be felt, even in more urban areas.



By **Mark Toner**

Photographs by David Kidd

It's a crisp, clear morning, the kind of day when a kid with an active imagination could think he has the entire world to himself. But Daniel Kennedy Jr. pays no attention to the vast, sweeping backdrop of green and brown North Dakota prairie around him, focusing only on the half-court patch of asphalt he's currently pacing, looking up at the basketball hoop.

Freshly tilled fields are at the 10-year-old's back, stretching off to a distant two-lane highway called the Lewis & Clark Trail, so named for the explorers who camped nearby on their westward expedition. Beyond the highway, the bluffs of the Missouri River just barely jut into

schoolhouses run by her own mother.

A school with one student makes for some equally strange bedfellows. Basketball games like the one Daniel's playing are often interrupted by sightings of deer, quail, and turtles. Team sports involve improvised croquet matches between Daniel and his teacher, a mother of eight who hasn't had that many kids at her school in years. Inside, a wall-size collection of awards and certificates of achievement—Super Reader, good attendance, Keep ND Clean Poster Contest, musical achievement—all have one name: Daniel's. Schoolhouse- and apple-shaped picture frames from past years show a constellation of smiling

ever have student-teacher ratios in the single digits, are looking back to the country schoolhouse as they struggle with how best to teach kids of varying abilities. "It's easy to romanticize educational experiences in small towns," admits Miles Bryant, a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's College of Education and Human Sciences. Still, they have a lot to offer, he insists. "Instead of trying to produce computer geniuses, they produce people who can contribute to society and be good citizens."

For his part, Daniel talks about his year the same way he discusses his drawing, or Japanese *anime*, or dirt biking—matter-of-factly, with just a hint of dry humor. "It's been kind of boring," he says with a thin smile, as he continues pacing the basketball court. "At least I don't have to fight over any balls," he adds, taking another shot. This one goes in.



Shirley Hageness taught Daniel Kennedy Jr. for four years. Until last fall, they always had company.

the ever-changing sea of prairie sky. In front of Daniel is the Harney School, a cream-colored, modular building nestled in a sheltering copse of trees. It's late May, the last week of school in Williams County, and as Daniel starts taking shots on the basket, it's clear his thoughts are already elsewhere. He misses his first few tries, the last one clattering off the rim with a crash that, in the desolate emptiness of the countryside, sounds as though it could be heard miles away. He grunts in frustration.

"It's pretty bad when you're losing and you're the only person playing," Daniel says.

So goes recess at Harney, a country school that sits in empty prairie a dozen miles south of Tioga, North Dakota, and where, this past school year, the 5th grader was the only student. In his past four years at the school, Daniel had company—five classmates one year, six the next—but in the end, it was just him and Shirley Hageness, a cheerfully timeless veteran who once slept in one-room

faces, but this year's portrait is a snapshot of Hageness and Daniel together on the merry-go-round out front.

While the Harney School is an extreme case, rural schools across the Great Plains have withered away over the decades as entire communities have faltered and, in some cases, vanished. In the 1920s, more than 4,700 one-room schoolhouses dotted North Dakota's countryside, often no more than a few miles apart so kids could walk to them each morning after working the fields. By the end of the century, only about 10 remained, and this last week of classes is also the last week for the Harney School. Daniel is the school's last student, and Hageness its last teacher.

So the expected rhythms of the school year, which began with a birthday party for Daniel during the first week of classes, have nearly played themselves out in the least-expected of classroom settings. But other schools, even ones in burgeoning suburban areas unlikely to

Earlier in the morning, a half-hour before the school day starts, Elverne Hageness is standing on the school's wooden steps, leaning against a wall flecked by peeling paint. The faint sounds of a TV and a hair dryer come from inside, where his wife, Shirley, is getting ready for work. With home more than 180 miles away—near Rugby, the geographic center of North America—the Hagenesses often spend several nights a week in the building. When Harney was busier, the couple slept in a fifth wheel trailer parked outside, but in recent years, they've taken over the building's second classroom. Along with stored curriculum guides and other classroom material, a bed, refrigerator, and other homemaking items fill the room. Clothes hang from hooks once used for kids' coats and backpacks.

Elverne, a laconic man with a pencil-thin smile who's almost always wearing a baseball cap, smiles when asked what he does while school's in session. "Be quiet," he says in a crackly voice. "I can't even shave."

A few minutes later, a silver SUV pulls off the Lewis & Clark Trail and begins the long drive down the school's gravel driveway. It's the Kennedys' car, and after it turns into the circular turnaround out front, Daniel jumps out, dragging his camouflage backpack behind him. With his black button-down shirt, khakis and sneakers, and bushy shock of hair, he'd look perfectly at home in a school in the anywhere-is-everywhere suburbs. He glances up the steps, where Shirley Hageness has appeared at the door. Hageness, who won't discuss her age beyond generalities (she's in her 60s), has her auburn-tinted hair tied in a neat bun and is wearing an oversize floral shirt over her denim jumper—it's a cold morning. She, too, looks like she'd be at home in any elementary school in the country.

She's been at Harney for more than a decade, but between teaching and serving as the superintendent of a small district elsewhere in the state from 1972 to 1992, Hageness has run the gamut of rural schooling experiences. With a master's in educational administration, she was certified in every grade level but one—kindergarten—when she first came to Harney; that accreditation soon followed.

"We're only going until 2 today," Hageness says before the car pulls away. While Harney follows the same curriculum as the county's other schools, day-to-day arrangements are more flexible—school usually starts 45 minutes earlier and often lets out early, with liberal amounts of recess and PE to help break up the one-on-one time in the classroom.

"Bye, bus," Daniel jokes as his parents' car heads to the highway and the school day begins.

Harney's main room could easily accommodate a full class of students, as it once did, but now it's set up in a way that lets Daniel alternate between working closely with his teacher and working on his own as the day progresses. A long, low bookshelf nearly cleaves the room in the middle, with a handful of student desks lined in a short row on one side and a long table for activities on the other. A horseshoe-shaped desk sits directly in front of Hageness' own desk, behind which a white board lists the day's schedule. Framed pictures of old country schools, yellowing newspaper clippings, and a collage of state facts fill the remaining wall space under narrow windows still adorned with adhesive snowflakes—winter's over in the Dakotas, but just barely.

Daniel walks in and hangs his backpack on one of a row of pegs, then goes directly to the center seat of the horseshoe-shaped desk—his "near desk," as Hageness calls it. After she takes her own seat, the two sit face to face, just feet apart. A fax machine in a distant corner starts spitting out pages, and the faint sound of the television comes from the adjoining room, but otherwise, the school is as quiet as the countryside around it. Following the Pledge of Allegiance, today's lessons start with a review of some previous penmanship exercises. The two shuffle papers wordlessly, then move to a reading activity. Hageness and Daniel take turns reading



Daniel split classroom time between working one-on-one with Hageness and studying quietly at another desk near the back of the room. At times it was "more like tutoring," the teacher said.

textbook passages about the White House, the teacher periodically interrupting Daniel's measured recitation to ask questions. "It wouldn't look like that today?" she asks, pointing at a picture from before the War of 1812.

"Doubt it," Daniel responds.

When it's Hageness' turn to read, Daniel sits with a slight slouch and twiddles a pen with two fingers, but he's clearly paying attention. At the end of the passage, Hageness shoots off rapid-fire questions, and he responds just as quickly, interrupting one multiple-choice question with an insistent "B. B. B!"

All of this is little-removed from the long-standing tradition of country schooling, which requires a single teacher to work with kids ranging in age from 5 to 14, all at different grade levels and abilities. Daniel's "near desk" is the modern equivalent of the recitation

bench, where, one by one, students were drilled by the teacher as the rest of the class worked quietly on their own.

In this setting, a mastery of the entire elementary curriculum is a necessity, says Marilyn Simmons, who, as superintendent in the 1990s, hired Hageness for the job at Harney. For that reason, Hageness, along with a group of about a dozen former colleagues, have landed consulting jobs with much larger school systems in Arizona, California, and elsewhere. While multiage classrooms



are falling out of vogue nationally, the multi-level approach embodied by country schooling takes on renewed significance wherever students of varying abilities are grouped together. The strength of country schooling, says Bryant, the UN-Lincoln professor, is that it "tends to be driven by an educational philosophy that's developmental in nature." Put simply, the teachers know their students and tailor the curriculum to their needs.

And at Harney, even though the day's schedule is written on the white board, Hageness and Daniel work at their own pace, moving from subject to subject as material is covered and questions answered. Daniel keeps track of their progress on a printed form called the Daily Work Plan, and when it's time for math, he grabs the textbook and whispers



“Yes!” before tackling a series of geometry problems.

“He loves math,” Hageness says. When all’s said and done, he gets 25 out of 25 questions right.

One way to understand how the educational experience at the Harney School has boiled down to one adult and one child is to drive five miles due north, where an unassuming monument sits on a faint rise of rolling prairie. There, in 1951, speculators struck oil for the first time in North Dakota, transforming nearby Tioga, with six street lights and no running water, into a boomtown as workers—

drilling business—oil rigs, with their hypnotic circular motions, still outnumber buildings on the open prairie, and familiar names like Haliburton and Amerada Hess are everywhere—it’s a sleepy shadow of its former self. And like elsewhere in the Great Plains, the area’s farmers have been struggling for years as low commodity prices, declining land values, and mounting debts have led more and more of them to give up the business and move on. During the past two decades, Williams County has seen its population fall from a little more than 22,000 to about 19,700—a decline of just several thousand, but in less than half a generation, one person out of every 10 has left. “They can’t make a living,” Bryant says simply.

well. The district’s student body of about 220 has dwindled from 265 in recent years, and looking ahead, the numbers are no more encouraging.

It’s a familiar story across the rural stretches of the Great Plains, where the state of the local schools often serves as a barometer for the health of the community and as an emotional reminder of more prosperous times. During the second half of the 20th century, rural counties throughout the 11-state region lost more than one-third of their population to urban areas on the outer fringes of the prairie—thriving places like Denver, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Minnesota’s Twin Cities, according to an analysis published in *Rural Development Perspectives*. And as in

Williams County, state governments have used a combination of arm-twisting and financial incentives to combine independent country schools into larger districts, not all of which have thrived, according to Bryant. “When people move out of these small towns, they leave behind schools that will struggle for a while but really can’t sustain themselves,” he says.

Now a sunglasses-wearing 72-year-old whose insistent tone recalls the times he’d jump on tables to make a point during contentious school board meetings, Harney often jokes about ways to sustain the area’s schools—kidnapping children or buying them outright usually top his list. And his namesake school, traditionally the district’s smallest, has closely followed the area’s turns of fortune. Harney, along with others living in the rural expanses around Tioga, fought to keep the school open as the oil industry waned in the

1960s and, in later years, to ensure that kids there would receive the same benefits—activities, central air conditioning—as those in the larger buildings. The school was renamed in his honor during the following decade. Since Hageness has been at the school, she’s always been able to count the student body on her fingers—seven one year, three another—but until this past year, there has always been more than one.

If the local school serves as a barometer of a community’s health on the prairie, at Harney, the bus route became the barometer’s needle. Craig Hartsoch, an alum who farms the land across the highway, was the school’s bus driver, and in recent years, he had to drive farther and farther to pick up kids. “The bus route started out as a circle,” he says. “Then it became a T. Then it was 30 miles before I picked up the first student.” Eventually he wound up driving nearly 300 miles a day, picking up and dropping off just five students. This year, the



Daniel’s “near desk” was the modern-day incarnation of the recitation bench, where teachers once drilled students. Opposite, the 10-year-old at play during recess. “At least I don’t have to fight over any balls,” he said.

company men from places like Tulsa and Houston—poured into the area, living in granaries and churches until housing could be built.

“They stayed as long as the oil fields did,” says Tom Harney, who came to work 16-hour days not far from the school that now bears his name. Oil has always been a speculative business, and as the boom ended in the 1960s, many of the wildcatters left. Some would return during the oil crisis of the late 1970s, only to depart just as quickly when prices cratered again a few years later. But Harney wound up staying, serving on the local school board for more than three decades as he eked out a living during boom times and bust.

The Iverson Discovery Well Marker, named after the rig that first struck oil on Clarence Iverson’s farm, resembles nothing more than an oversize grave marker, and it serves as a half-written epitaph to the area’s prosperity. While Tioga is still headquarters to an active

The area’s schools followed the same arc, consolidating during the peak of the oil boom only to face a gradual decline in the years that followed. In the late 1950s, the state consolidated 42 independent school districts in Williams County—mostly one-room schoolhouses—into the New Public School District #8, which, covering 1,185 square miles, is still one of the largest in North Dakota. The old whitewashed schoolhouses were replaced with four modern K-8 schools, and some are still booming, like Garden Valley, which today is home to about 60 students, and Stony Creek, which packs about 160 kids into a warren of modular buildings set up around an old country school used as the district’s consolidated kindergarten. But Round Prairie has just seven kids, and Harney, of course, has only Daniel. Older kids go to high school in one of the county’s incorporated towns, like Tioga, Williston, or Ray, and this year, most of Daniel’s former classmates have followed older siblings there as





At recess, Daniel entertained himself by trying to beat his previous best time around the school's circular driveway or playing basketball with an elaborate set of improvised rules. "It gets boring sometimes," he admitted.

only vehicles that turn into the school's driveway are the Hagenesses' aging station wagons and the Kennedys' SUV.

It's now recess at Harney, and Daniel is walking around to the back of the school, through tall grass to the edge of the copse of trees that encircle the building. For most kids, recess serves as a chance to play and socialize with friends, but at a one-student school, it's a more introspective affair.

Crouching at a well-worn spot where he likes to sit and watch wild animals—gophers, badgers, deer, turtles—he points into a small ravine. "I try to get my work done so I can go outside," he says. "A lot of times, I take my notebook and write about what I see." But no animals are out today, and Daniel's not content to sit for long. He meanders along the perimeter of the trees, stopping to point out a shattered pheasant egg. The faint smell of lilac is in the air, and the chill of the morning is pretty much gone.

The wildlife reminds him of home, where his family keeps ducks and chickens around their trailer, which rests at the bottom of a small hill halfway between the school and Williston, the area's largest town. Daniel spent time in Washington state and Montana,

where his grown brother and sisters still live, before his parents, both on disability, pushed eastward to the Dakotas, trying to stay ahead of the crime, noise, and other problems they saw spreading from big cities into the countryside. His father, Daniel Sr., decided to send him to Harney because he was inspired by his homesteading grandfather, who attended country schools while settling in Idaho more than a century ago. "If [his stories] were so interesting to me looking back," says the 48-year-old, stroking his beard thoughtfully, "imagine what they'll be like in 2050, or 2100."

At home and elsewhere, Daniel's life is hardly one of solitude. Along with dirt biking, he often plays with friends, including former classmates. And three times a week, he goes into Williston for swimming lessons, which help fulfill his PE requirements. Still, he misses having classmates—they participated in the Young Citizens League, a school-based civic group, they'd build enormous forts during snowstorms, and the rest of the time, they clearly goofed off. Last year, one of his friends "would go and talk to the toilet when it would



run," he says. "Everybody made fun of each other, but we were nice."

As recess ends, a white station wagon adorned with the familiar CBS logo pulls into the driveway. The Williston affiliate has sent a reporter and cameraman to capture a bit of the last week of classes at Harney. Over the past year, the school has received attention from local media and elsewhere in the Plains states, though the tone has been less one of astonishment than a wistful acknowledgment that the state of country schooling has come to this.

After the cameraman wanders around, recording images of empty desks and pictures on the walls, it's time for Daniel's 15 minutes. The reporter sits down at the horseshoe-

shaped desk with him, and the cameraman zooms in to get a tight shot of the 10-year-old's face as the two talk in clipped sentences.

"What's your name?"

"Daniel Kennedy. No, I'm not related to the president."

"Is it hard being the only student?"

"It's not tough. It's just boring."

"What's good about it?"

"Not so many distractions. I get more of my work done."

"No homework, then?"

"I've only had homework a couple of nights this year."

"That's a real plus, you know."

"Yeah."

"What's your biggest memory?"

"All the animals. We get squirrels in the trees, pheasants, deer."

"What's the best part?"

"The teacher."

While teaching at a one-student school is "more like tutoring," as Hageness says, it still requires considerable skills in classroom management, even with a student she calls one of the best she's had in her time at Harney. With a good part of the day devoted to one-on-one drilling, it's clear that Hageness has included ways to let Daniel be a kid. She tolerates periodic lapses in attention, letting him draw, for example, an ornately detailed picture of a tree branch while listening to audiotapes during a reading comprehension activity. When the fax machine spits out a couple of pages, Daniel retrieves them for Hageness as she continues lecturing. And though Daniel spends most mornings sitting across from his teacher, after lunch he often withdraws to a computer or his "further desk"—one of the standard student desks behind the bookshelf—to read quietly or draw.

A small irony is that the very tactics that

pique the interest of bigger schools—the back-to-basics approach combined with a flexible curriculum—were born not by design but of necessity, and they have their limitations in a rural setting. One failing often cited by reformers, says Bryant, is that rural schools don't offer kids enough connections with their communities to entice them to stay once they get older. With its service projects, the YCL once helped fill that bill at Harney, but it's no longer being offered at the district's other schools. Another criticism, says Simmons, the former superintendent, is that students are required to work more independently of their teachers, and that's true even at Harney—a good part of Daniel's day is spent answering questions and filling out worksheets. Yet Hageness watches him closely, prompting him as he struggles with a word puzzle filled with phrases gleaned from 20th century history. "I'll give you a hint," she says. "One word is 'cold.'" Daniel quickly identifies the second word—"war"—and looks up. "Done," he says.

Hageness smiles. "Did you do fine on it?" she asks. "Good!"

The two are ahead of schedule, so Daniel's out the door again for another brief recess. And once again, he won't stand still for long. Scrambling up to a tree fort he built a few years back with his classmates, he ponders whether it'll be strange going back to a school with other kids. "Yeah, probably," he says, and



Daniel used a fort built by former classmates to watch animals.

then he's gone. When Hageness comes outside to look for him a few minutes later, he's crouched behind the trash bin, hoping to buy an extra moment of solitude before tackling the remaining work to be done until summer begins and the school closes its doors for good.

While board members had originally planned to keep Harney open for one more year, as spring and its attendant budget deliberations arrived, they concluded that the arrangement was simply too expensive. Daniel was given the option to attend Stony Creek, and Hageness was offered a position elsewhere in the district. "We can't wait until we find no one is there," board member Beth Innis told the local paper at the time. As it turns out, that's probably what would have happened. During the final weeks of school, Daniel's parents decided they wanted to move on again, this time to a remote stretch of Alaska.

For Hageness, it's the second time she's endured a school closing. During her stint as a superintendent, she oversaw a high school outside of Esmond that went from 400 students to 25 before it, too, had to close its doors. Now Harney is just days away from joining the ranks of the county's older abandoned schoolhouses—simple yet distinguished buildings easily identifiable by their whitewashed belfries. Just west of Tioga, one sits on a modest slope overlooking the railway tracks linking Chicago and Seattle, among the ruins of a once-thriving hamlet called Temple. Following a ramrod-straight





Tom Harney, who served on the school board for more than 30 years, fought to keep his namesake from joining the county's other abandoned schoolhouses as an oil boom turned bust.

dirt road west from there, another abandoned school appears minutes later, flanked by the naked frame of a swing set, the seats and chains long gone. But Harney will be full one last time, and Hageness is already looking beyond Williams County—both for herself and for the building in which she's spent the past decade.

Wearing jeans, ornate boots, and a hat emblazoned with a picture of an oil rig, Tom Harney is standing on the steps of his namesake, greeting people as they walk inside. It's late afternoon on another day during this final week of classes, and some folks from the community have arranged an open house so former students, parents, and teachers can

make a final visit. Harney's daughter, Kelly, arrives with a covered dish. "We've got quite a few here," she says. He picks at his nails with the corkscrew of a pocketknife and shakes his head.

"We're losing a good damn deal here," he says.

Hartsoch, the former bus driver, joins Harney and a few other old-timers on the stoop. Two girls, former students at the school, walk by. "I miss you as my bus driver," one tells him. Inside, Hageness is with a group of former students' parents, talking and laughing as they pore over old scrapbooks. Eventually, people settle into the classroom, squeezing into chairs along the walls and holding plates overflowing with food. One by one, each stands and shares what rural schooling has meant to them. "My heart will always be with the coun-

try schools," one woman says. Another reminisces about going to the same school as her great-grandfather. "It closed," she says, to the surprise of no one in the room.

Don Wick, the district's current superintendent, says that Harney reminds him of his own time as a student at a two-classroom school. "It was always a treat to come out here," he says. "When I first came to Harney," adds Jan Herfindahl, a former teacher, "I felt sorry for myself. It wound up being the best teaching experience of my life."

Then it's Hageness' turn. She's decided to take early retirement from the district, but otherwise, she's been vague about her plans. Now, pointing to two ornate floral arrangements in the front of the classroom—sent by school districts in Arizona and Minnesota for which she's done consulting—she says she's planning on continuing that work, only with a hands-on twist. While North Dakota doesn't allow charter schools, she's come up with the idea of launching an education clinic—a place for students of all ages and abilities to come for summer programs, and for adults to learn basic computer skills.

As for the school itself, the modular building, which sits on leased farmland, is about to become surplus property. When it's advertised for sale, Hageness intends to bid on it and have it moved near her hometown of Rugby to use for the clinic. "We can't let go of the school," she says. "We've got to have it someplace, doing something." And with Harney, who's from the same neck of the woods, sitting in the crowd, Hageness announces the clinic's name, as inspired by another, better-known oil tycoon: The Harney Educational Center. "It's like Carnegie to Carnegie oil," she says as the crowd laughs.

Outside, two kids, both Harney alums, are making a beeline for the basketball hoop, joining a handful of other youngsters clamoring on the playground equipment. Someone hollers out, "Do you miss it?" One shouts back no, but the big grin on his face makes a liar of him. The sounds of happy kids playing echo clear across the prairie, and perhaps further still. ■



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