



Reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic

Twelve child-sized winter coats hang from black metal hooks in the cloakroom. An old, red-painted park bench leans against the wall. In the next room, muffled voices and soft giggles interrupt the steady hum of the automatic gas furnace.

Inside the room are 12 school-aged children sitting in their metal and formica desks, studying diligently. Their teacher, Denise Clem, sits casually at a table near her front desk, instructing students.

Colorful drawings and scrawled essays line the walls of the warm, peaceful, tangerine-painted room. An American flag — that 12 soprano voices sing "America the Beautiful" to every day — hangs above a walnut, ivory-keyed piano.

Nothing seems exceptional about Baker School No. 18. It has all the elements of a typical school. Nothing seems exceptional about it . . . except it is a one-room schoolhouse.

Today is like most days in this Otoe County school seven miles west of Nebraska City. Groups of students, according to their grade, take their homework to Clem to be graded. The others sit quietly finding other things to do. A book from the old, varnished bookshelves, homework for the next day or a crayon drawing usually keep the children busy.

Clem has been teaching at Baker School for one year. She says that whenever she is busy instructing a student, she never has to worry that other children are wasting time. They talk and giggle, but they always work on something, she said. They always seem to be alert to her next move. Clem rarely has to raise her voice.

"They're really good kids . . . for the most part, I don't have to get after them," the 26-year-old teacher said.

Sixth-grader David Kasbohm, 11, and second-grader Nathan Heng, 9, sit quietly in a corner rehearsing their lines for a Christmas play. During the dialogue, they helpfully correct each other on lines the other missed.

At the sound of Clem's soft commands, the boys scamper to their desks and give her their homework for the day.

The one-room, one-teacher closeness is the main reason for the students' discipline, Clem said, who is assisted by part-day helper, Dee Johnson. From kindergarten to eighth grade, children are encouraged to be independent and think for themselves.

Although she has a good relationship with her students, Clem said her

emphasis on independence sometimes frustrates them.

They will have questions they want answered, she said, but they know she will refuse to answer them. Eventually, they work out the problems themselves, she said.

"I believe education should foster independence and the ability to think for oneself," she said.

Clem said students also are fully aware of the threats or promises she makes.

"They know I'll carry them through," she said. The usual punishment: cancelled morning recess for students who fail to complete their homework.

At 13, Susan Gripenstroh is the oldest student at Baker school. She said Clem doles out a stiff penalty by cancelling a student's recess.

"If your homework is not done, you have to stay in class for recess until you have it done," the eighth-grader said. Sometimes students with the same homework must stay inside together so they can help the other who is having problems.

Midmorning recess arrives with gay hysteria. Throwing on their coats, the children immediately bolt for the door with their collection of toys.

They burst through the doors of the 114-year-old, white-painted schoolhouse. Boys carry automatic toy rifles and play their version of television's science fiction series "V." Girls clamber on the paint-worn teeter-totter and slide. Clem, chaperoning, joins in a game of volleyball or football.

The children sound a chorus of dismayed groans as recess ends all too soon. Back inside the schoolroom, white, mushroom print curtains flutter and a brass Casablanca fan spins slowly.

Clem sits at her table giving students the individual care she says is an advantage. "The children get more personalized attention," she said. However, Clem admits that being the only teacher does have its disadvantages.

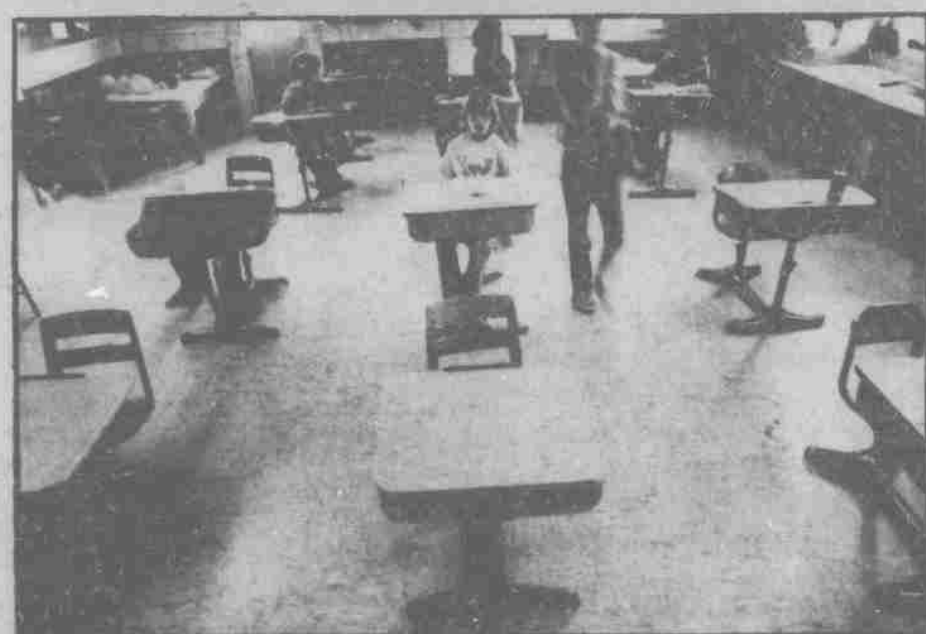
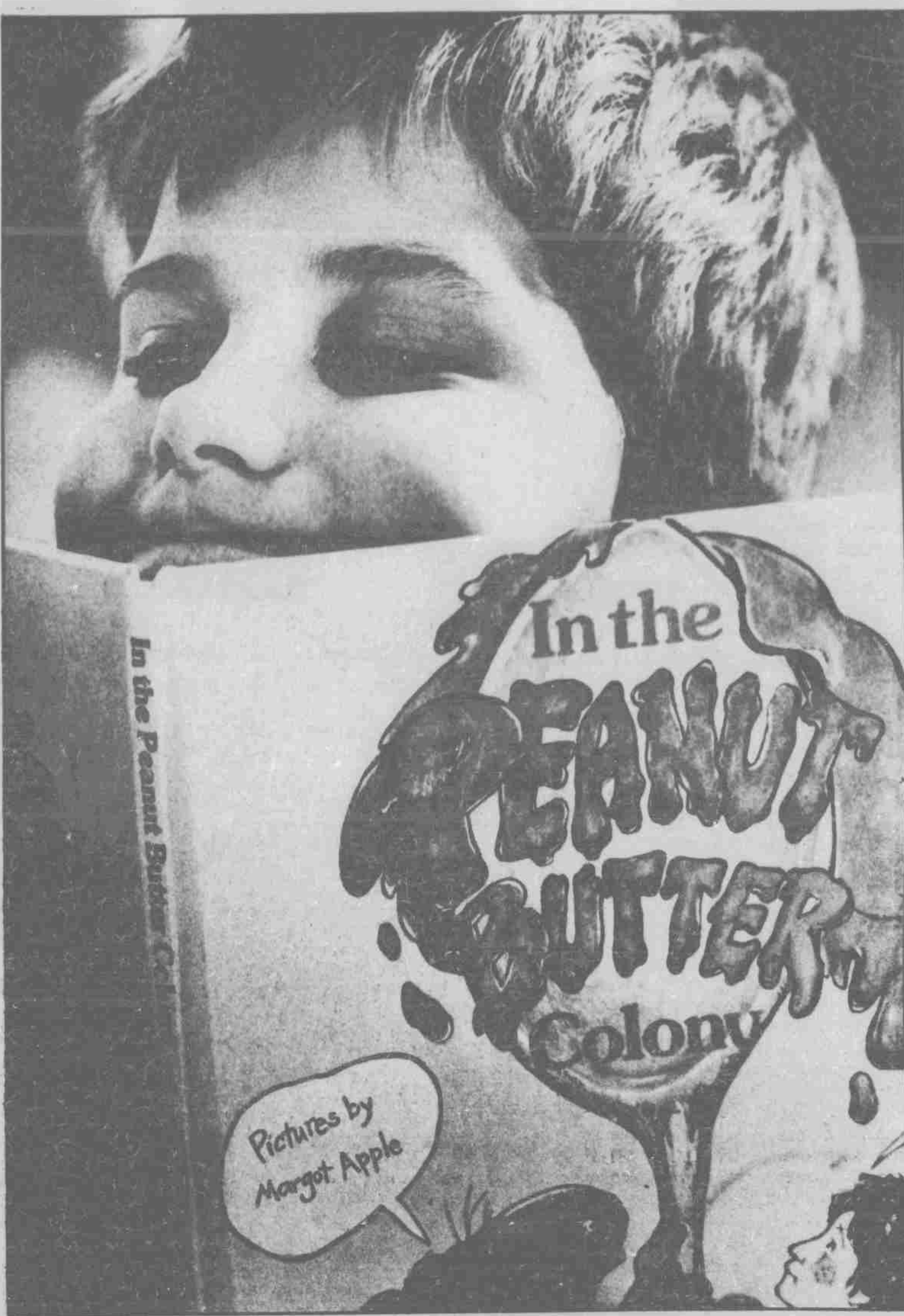
"Sometimes I find myself short-changing them on certain schoolwork because I run out of time," she said.

Clem said she enjoys giving personal attention to the students because it allows her to see the students develop.

"I like to teach the older students because I can relate to them," she said. But the biggest thrill, she said, comes from teaching kindergartners.

"With kindergartners, their eyes brighten . . . I can really see them learn," she said.

—Gah Y. Huey



Clockwise from top: Teacher Denise Clem reprimands second grader Nathan Heng over some mistakes in his homework. Chris Bando, a 9-year-old fourth grader, looks out over his reading book during a study break. Seventh grader Dale Ollis watches a football sail over his head during recess at the one-room schoolhouse. The school's 12-desk classroom.

Photos by Joel Sartore