

# Big Bend kids, big travelers

I think I found a high school in Texas that you can hardly get to from here. But if you do, it will be well worth your while to pay a visit. They have no buses, because the parents drive the kids 28 miles to school, and the teachers' biggest problem is the chewing gum.

Would you believe that Big Bend High School, started in 1996, gets its students from a staggering 2,200 square mile area around the Big Bend National Park, located in deep southwest Texas? The nearest town on the map is Terlingua, of which Big Bend High School is a part.



Carlos Deere

Last year, when the school had 47 students, Big Bend had the smallest graduating class (two people) in the state. This year they will graduate four students, and the enrollment has "jumped" to 59.

When I talked on the phone with Kathy Killingsworth, the school's principal, I questioned why they had more students this year. She replied, "Because more people are moving down here."

When I called telephone information for the school in Study Butte, Texas, the operator couldn't find it. She wanted to know what town it was close to. Fortunately, I had my road map handy, so I told her Terlingua. Then the folks in Terlingua charged me 50 cents to dial the high school in Study Butte.

Now you understand why I said it would hard to get there from here.

But this is nothing compared to what their golf team had to go through last year. Golf was the only UIL athletic event the school

entered. The boys' and girls' team had to travel 390 miles north to Abilene for the regional tournament.

However, since they have no football or pep rallies, the kids had a ball going to the mall. It made their year.

I asked Ms. Killingsworth if they still had to go to Abilene this year.

"If the golf teams qualify," she said, "we'll go to Sundown this year."

I asked her if that was as far as Abilene, and she thought it was about the same distance.

It turns out that Sundown, about 50 miles southwest of Lubbock, is 395 miles from Big Bend High School.

I don't know, but it seems to me there should be a better way to get a golf match.

The kids at Big Bend, though, are used to traveling long distances. For over 30 years they had to tough out the longest school bus ride in the United States, 160 miles round trip, to attend high school in Alpine. This led to a drop-out rate of 30 percent.

*The New York Times* and *The National Enquirer* wrote about the kids' problems. Soon after, donations from around the world started pouring in, along with some grants, and in 1996 Big Bend High School opened in makeshift buildings until the high school was built and opened in 1997.

Now that the kids don't have the extremely long bus rides, the drop-out rate is only 3 percent.

As one might imagine, there are pros and cons surrounding a school this size. It has no gym, cafeteria or library, although Ms. Killingsworth is hard at work trying to earn donations for a new library.

A Dallas foundation donated a computer lab, and there is a computer for every two students. The classes are small and individual attention is always available.

The school has six full-time teachers and five part-time, ranging from Gary Henderson (who worked on the Apollo space program) to Steve Breneke (who has courses in oceanography and meteorology).

These courses should be easy for Big Bend students. They've already had to navigate where few students have gone before.