

Longest ride soon will end for kids in wilds of Texas

■ After news reports of students' 179.6-mile round trip by bus every day, donations arrive to build a new school

By SAM HOWE VERHOVEK
New York Times News Service

STUDY BUTTE, Texas — For years, high school students in southern Brewster County, a vast West Texas outback of desert and mountain along the Mexican border, have claimed a generally unwelcome title: the longest school bus ride in the United States.

But now the students' daily, exhausting ordeal, a 179.6-mile round trip on bus plus as much as 35 miles more by car to get to their homes off dirt roads, seems to be coming to an end. The hamlets of Study Butte, Terlingua, Lajitas and Panther Junction are getting their own high school.

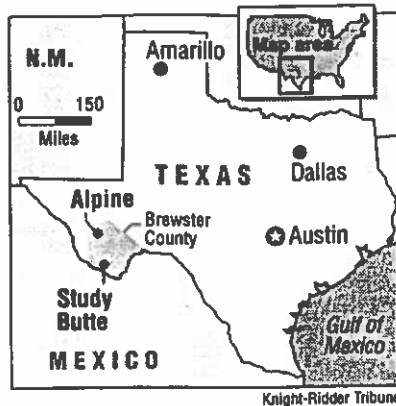
The planned opening this fall of Big Bend High School arises from a fund-raising drive that began a year and a half ago. For parents and many students, it is a cause for unmitigated celebration.

"It's exciting," said JoAnn Klingemann, a 16-year-old who just finished her sophomore year. "Just the thought of it — being able to wake up at 7 o'clock in the morning to go to school, rather than 5 o'clock. A lot of kids can't even imagine it."

The two-hour bus ride from Terlingua to Alpine High School was a chronic source of complaint for almost everybody. More seriously, it was enough to make some of the two dozen students who took it each year drop out altogether.

"I just couldn't deal with the ride anymore," said Charley Barnes, 19, who gave up last year after he finished his junior year. "You ride it once or twice, and you think, 'Gee, that's a pretty view.' But it's nothing like having to ride it every day. I started to have back problems. It got to where I was having headaches every day."

Barnes, who plans to be a self-



employed artist someday, said he hoped to get his diploma by going to the new high school this fall.

Some teens still unhappy

Still, teen-agers being teen-agers, at least a handful of students decided they're unhappy that the bus will stop running.

"It's kind of hard to explain," said Justin Wells, a 15-year-old who just finished his first year at Alpine High. "I wasn't crazy about the bus, but I'd still like to go back to Alpine. Now I've got a lot of friends there. And I was thinking of going out for the basketball team and all."

Nobody is envisioning traveling sports teams for Big Bend High or, for that matter, a full-scale library or science lab. But the Terlingua district and the adjacent district covering the Big Bend National Park have managed to raise \$148,000 in cash and in-kind services, enough to erect a spartan, six-room high school.

The foundation is being poured in early June, and residents plan to build the school during the summer. If it is not completed, students will begin the year by taking classes in the late afternoon and evening at the Terlingua Common School, which covers pre-kindergarten through eighth grade.

The fund-raising started in December 1994, a few weeks after an article in The New York Times described the students' daily journey

and some residents' wishes for a local high school.

Kathy Killingsworth, the principal of Terlingua Common School and soon the district's superintendent, said the district received several calls offering help, and residents decided to form the nonprofit Big Bend Educational Corporation.

As other articles appeared, more help came. A man who read about the bus ride in The Dallas Morning News donated 320 acres of land in West Texas, which the corporation sold for \$18,000 — "not exactly Manhattan prices, but it sure helped," said the Rev. Judith Burgess, vicar of the Big Bend Episcopal Mission, who heads the corporation.

The National Enquirer ran a story, and more contributions came in. A company in Ohio called to donate a septic system. A hardware store in Fort Stockton, Texas, donated fencing. Before long, Big Bend High was ready for construction.

Much work to do

Much work remains to be done. The district is extremely poor, though it is growing, which should make a high school an increasingly sustainable proposition. The hamlets of Terlingua, Lajitas and Study Butte had populations of 25, 6 and 120, respectively, in the 1980 census. Now they have a combined year-round population of about 700, with much of the economy built around hikers, rafters and other tourists.

JoAnn Klingemann's mother, Maria, has spent 10 years getting her children — including JoAnn's older siblings, John and Daphne, who are now students at Sul Ross State University in Alpine — on the bus at 5:30 a.m.

"It was a lot of work, a lot of work," she said. "I just always said, 'Keep at it. You'll get your diploma. You'll feel good after you finish.'"

But now the marathon is over. Which students will have the new longest bus ride is a matter of contention: Education officials in Wyoming and New Mexico report school routes that are about 75 miles one way.