

Remote County to End Students' 100-M

By SAM HOWE VERHOVEK

STUDY BUTTE, Tex. — For years, high school students in southern Brewster County, a vast West Texas outback of desert and mountain along the Mexican border, have laid claim to an odd and generally unwelcome title: commuters on 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 determined — and continuing — fund-raising drive that began a year and a half ago. And for parents and many of the 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 just about everybody here and, more seriously, was enough to cause some of the roughly two dozen students who took it each year to drop out altogether.

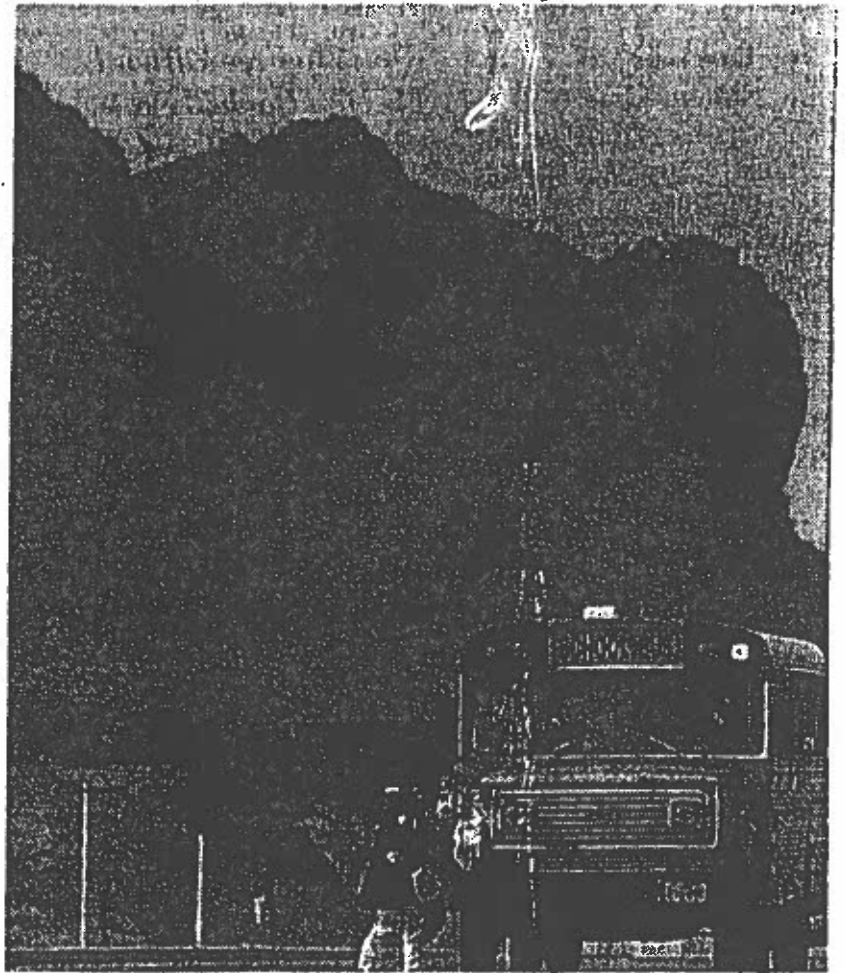
"I just couldn't deal with the ride anymore," said Charley Barnes, 19, who gave up last year after he finished his junior year. "You ride it once or twice and you think, 'Gee, that's a pretty view.' But it's nothing like having to ride it every day. I started to have back problems. It got to where I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

But now Charley, 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.

Still, teen-agers being teen-agers, there are at least a handful of students here who have decided they are 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 yet envisioning traveling sports teams for Big Bend High, or, for that matter, a full-scale li-



Teen-agers in Terlingua, Tex., and other hamlets in southern Brewster County, are looking forward to a new high school, in Alpine, Tex., 179.5 miles away. After the bus ride, some

brary 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 over the summer; if it is not completed, high-school students will begin the year by taking classes in the late afternoon and evening in classrooms at the Terlingua Common School, which covers pre-kindergarten through the 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 the Terlingua School who is about to become the district's superintendent, said the district received several calls offer-

ing help and residents decided to form the nonprofit Big Bend Educational Corporation.

And in subsequent months, 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 an entire septic system. A hardware store in Fort Stockton, Tex., donated the fencing. And before too long, Big Bend High was ready for construction.

Much work remains to be done. And whether the high school will be able to afford some of the grander plans afoot, like a two-way video link to other schools, remains to be seen.