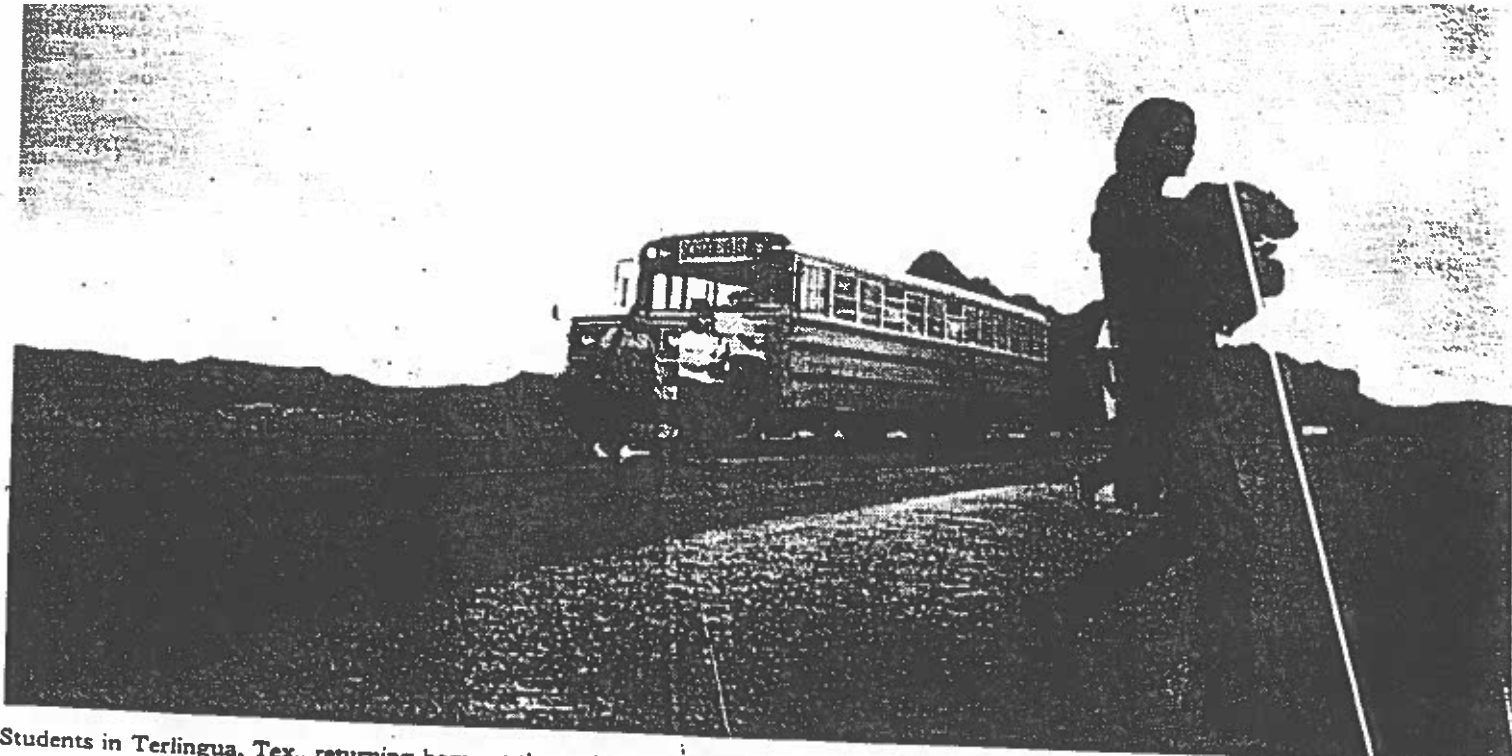
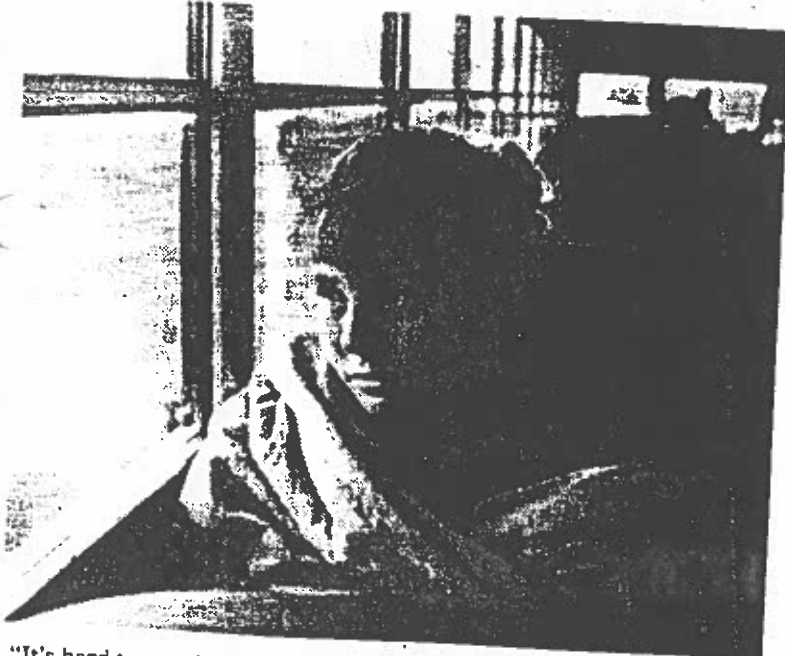


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Students in Terlingua, Tex., returning home at the end of the day after their nearly two-hour bus ride from Alpine High School. Photographs by Barbara Laine for The New York



"It's hard to eat, do your homework and have a life, hanging out on the bus all day," said Joe Barnes, 14, of the long ride to school.

first I'd have to find a place to live" in Alpine, said Joee, dressed in a plaid shirt and fresh-faced even hours before dawn, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Ever since a school district in the California desert split in two a few years ago, ending a bus ride there that was about as long as the one here, Terlingua has asserted an unchallenged claim on having the country's lengthiest school bus ride.

Among the states cited for having long routes by the National School Transportation Association — a group in Virginia that represents school bus contractors — Texas has a notable but hardly overwhelming lead. In Wyoming, for instance, the longest such ride is 75 miles one way; in New Mexico, 72 miles; California, 70, and in Montana, 59.5 miles.

The bus left from the parking lot at the Terlingua elementary school the other day promptly at 5:45. A scene of chattering chaos on the ride home the previous day, it was stone silent but for a few soft snores on most of the morning run. The windows fogged up from the students' breath. The first hint of color did not grace the eastern sky until well after 6:30.

"It's not for everybody," said Mrs. Clarke, who has had the route for

five years and endured four engine breakdowns, two terribly odorous skunk hits but, knock on wood, not a single flat tire. She stays in Alpine all day, running errands for people from Terlingua. The other day she bought some Christmas lights for one family, filled a prescription for another and made a deposit at the county's only bank — a third.

She sees something new in the landscape every day, but not all her predecessors felt that way.

"The previous driver," she said, "he just walked in and laid his keys down on the supervisor's desk one day, and he says, 'I can't do this anymore.'"

The students on the bus already joke about what they will tell their own children. "It's like those parents who say they walked to school five miles every day without any shoes or something," Charley Barnes said. "I'll say, 'You kids, stop your whining. I traveled to school hundreds of miles, through the jungle, 115 degrees outside.'"

Others are less dramatic. "I'll just always feel proud of myself that I made it," said 17-year-old Susy Garcia of Terlingua, a senior riding the bus for her fourth and final year. "I didn't give up. But when I go college, I know one thing. It'd be real nice to be able to walk to class."

area are different because they have to ride long distances every day. And because there is no late bus — the one bus arrives back in Terlingua at

5:40 P.M. — they miss out on extra-curricular activities, like sports or cheerleading or band.

"I'd love to try out for track, but