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Students from Terlingua, Tex., taking the 89.7-mile bus trip this week to their high school in Alpine. Barbara Laing for The New York Times

## Where Time on Road Beats Time at Class

By SAM HOWE VERHOVEK  
Special to The New York Times

TERLINGUA, Tex., Dec. 7 — The stars were still looming large in the West Texas sky when 14-year-old Joee Barnes devoured her corn flakes and ran for the door, grabbing her book bag, a blanket and a pillow. She was off in her parents car to catch the bus and head for school, 97 miles away. The time was 5:20 A.M.

It was another day and another trip to Alpine High School for Joee, her older brother, Charley, and 22 other teen-agers from the Big Bend region along the Rio Grande, who travel the longest daily school bus route in the Unit-

ed States — 89.7 miles.

Past Hen Egg, Packsaddle, Elephant, Cathedral and a dozen other desert mountain peaks, the bus lumbered, climbing 4,000 feet, as most students tried to doze. A few whispered to each other; some just stared out the window. At 7:40, the bus wheeled into Alpine.

"It's hard," said Joee when she returned home to Terlingua 13 hours after she had left, hungry for dinner. "It's hard to eat, do your homework and have a life, hanging out on the bus all day."

For students here in the southernmost part of Texas's biggest county, where there is far less than one person for every square

mile of land, there is no local high school. The towns — Terlingua, Lajitas and Study Butte (pronounced STOO-dee byoot) — are too small and too poor to build one. The only way to get an education is to hop on the bus and head for Alpine. And many students, having to travel miles of gravel ranch roads simply to meet the bus, wind up spending more time getting to school than they do in class.

It is a ride that has its consolations, especially for the bus driver, Melody Clarke, who is paid \$27.50 each way, every trip. For one thing, she really does get to

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# School Days That Start With 89 Miles on a Bus

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watch the deer and the antelope play.

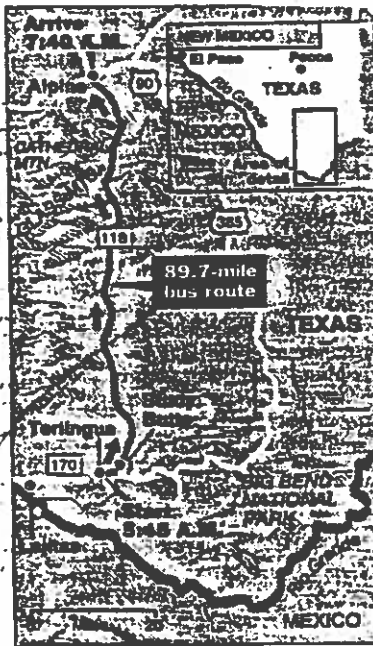
"We get some gorgeous sunrises and sunsets-out here," she said, "and I get paid to watch every single one of them." Indeed, on the trip home the other day, the early evening sun lit up the mesas of the Texas high desert in spectacular shades of purple, red and brown.

But for most of the students, who quickly grow oblivious to the scenery, and for their parents, who rise every day long before dawn to make sure their children get off to school, it is an exhausting ordeal.

"It's just awfully long," said Jack Probst, the superintendent of the Terlingua School District, whose school stops at the eighth grade. "It's too dadgum long."

The 89.7-mile bus trip from Terlingua to Alpine takes one hour and 55 minutes, and some students and parents drive as much as another 45 minutes to get to the bus pickup point.

The students sleep on the bus, they



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Students in Terlingua, Tex., ride 89.7 miles to school in Alpine.

socialize on the bus, a few even try to do their homework on the bus. "That doesn't really work, though," said Jo Ann Klingemann, a freshman from Terlingua. "You get nauseous. The teacher can't read it."

High school love has flared up and fizzled out on the bus, under the watchful eye of Mrs. Clarke and her husband, Robert, a retired deputy sheriff from the Houston area, who often comes along just to keep his wife company.

"Boys and girls may sit together, but they know the rules," said Mrs. Clarke, a jolly woman who sports wide pink glasses and a tie-dyed T-shirt. "I must be able to see both heads and all hands at all times."

And for many of the students, the bus has almost become an extension of their homes.

"Some days, I just wake up as we come in to Alpine," said 17-year-old Charley Barnes, a junior. "I'm already on the bus, and I don't remember how I got here."

People here and in Lajitas and Study Butte, which together have a year-round population of barely 500, have certainly tossed around a lot of ideas about building a high school. One plan would have interactive video in the classroom, linking the students by television screen to teachers in Alpine.

"But we don't have the tax base to float a \$4 million bond to do it all," Mr. Probst said. And so, students ride the bus, just as they have for the past 20 years.

Actually, the numbers riding to Alpine from southern Brewster County have climbed in recent years. Terlingua and Lajitas, once the center of the Big Bend mercury mining industry in the late 1800's, but virtual ghost towns for much of this century, have enjoyed a second lease on life in recent years as the center of a growing industry for tourists who want to travel on the Rio Grande or hike in Big Bend National Park. Joe and Charley's father, Ken, is a coordinator for Far Flung Adventures, a rafting outfit here.

Still, there are not enough students to support a high school.

Almost all 350 students at Alpine High are used to traveling long distances. The Fightin' Bucks basketball team rode a school bus 105 miles north to Pecos the other evening, lost the game by two points and returned home close to midnight, said the principal, Conrad D. Arriola.

But students from the Terlingua