

Terlingua teacher returns

Jones brought accreditation to TCSD Story by Sam Richardson

"It is strange how different a place looks when you attach a permanence to it, when it becomes your place of daily residence rather than an occasionally visited vacation spot," Trent Jones once observed.

In 1973, Trent, his wife Olga and their two children Anna and Cassandra, learned that visiting the Big Bend on holiday, which they had done many times, was one thing. Moving here, joining a remote community on the crusty edge of Texas, and teaching in a one-room schoolhouse was another.

But before they left five years later, the Jones made their mark on Terlingua. And Terlingua left its stamp on them.

Trent and Olga returned to Terlingua last week and toured the campus of Terlingua schools. They met many former students, shared some memories, and attended the Renegade Roundup at Villa de la Mina.

Like a bronc rider who'd been thrown many times and learned how to break horses "from the ground up," Trent Jones encountered many challenges when he first arrived in Terlingua in '73. They included a hostile school board, a lack of resources, changing times and increasing demands from distant bureaucracies, a daily clock that only included 24 hours, and a work week of only seven days, which, at times, didn't seem like enough.

On Jones' first day as maestro at the small one-room school, only three students showed up. But by the second day, the full enrollment was onboard — thirteen students. The highest number of students he taught in one year during his tenure between 1973 and 1978 was 30. But as the only teacher, his load was 30 times six, since the curriculum included as many as six subjects.

The Terlingua program was challenged in many ways. Among Jones' daily surprises was disorderly plumbing. "For awhile, I sent those students who needed to be excused 'over the hill,'" he said.

"You know, Mr. Jones," a student said as he returned to the classroom one day, "I'll bet the Terlingua School is the only one in the world with a five-thousand acre bathroom."

Later, the school got indoor flushies but they didn't always perform up to standard.

According to Gabe Acosta, a former student, Jones later turned plumbing problems into a teaching opportunity and one day when a pipe broke stopped class and said, "OK students, here's how we fix leaky plumbing." Then he proceeded to fix the problem while the class looked on.

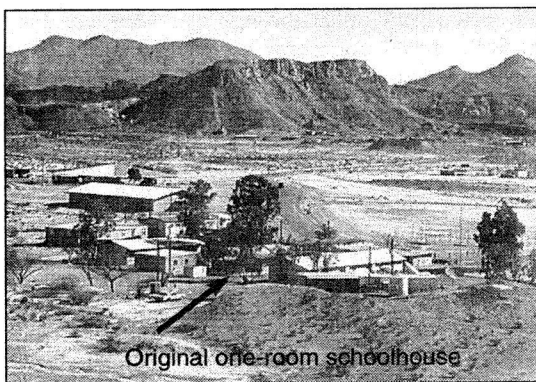
In spite of a heavy academic load, Jones knew how to pace his teaching and kept his students on the move to avoid classroom burnout, not to mention his own.

"I remember a lot of field trips," said Acosta. Jones later constructed a second building on the campus with a budget of just \$10,000. Adobe makers from Mexico camped at the school, made bricks, then Jones and helpers, built the new addition. Rock siding was later added. Both the original one-room school and the second addition are still very much in use on the school campus today.

In his first year in the Big Bend, Jones encountered, but survived, a politically dysfunctional school board. Two of its three members resigned when the young teacher asked for a vote of confidence. A new board was seated, which included Glenn Pepper who was a great help to Jones, and

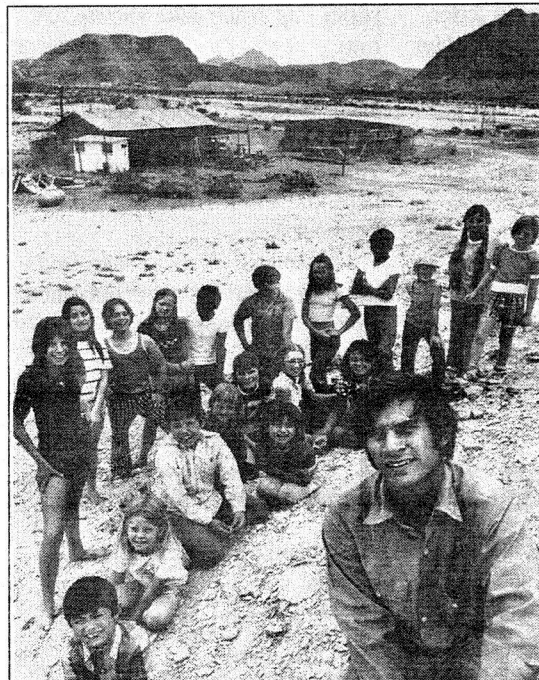


The Jones in front of the school house they built with a few former students. Standing, L-R, Larry Acosta, George Acosta, Trent and Olga, and Marcus Pepper. Seated, Gabe Acosta, Melissa Pepper, and Vickie Harris.



Original one-room schoolhouse

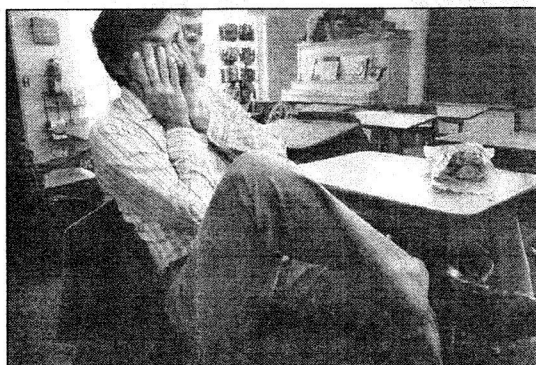
Terlingua school, the library and Big Bend High School today.



Jones and students in front of the one-room school house in 1975.



The Jones with Ken Barnes working on the new building in the early seventies.



Jones in 1977 at the end of a long day teaching 30 students six subjects.



Trent driving the Terlingua "school bus" in 1975.

moving to the next, and so forth. Older students who had mastered some skills could help, at times, with younger ones. Challenged students and those who didn't speak English got as much attention as possible and eventually learned the basics.

Gabe Acosta, who didn't speak a word of English when he started school, said, "He (Jones) gave each student a lot of individual attention. He worked his butt off." Acosta, who now works for OSHA, lives in El Paso with his wife Geisela who he married in Germany. Their son, Alejandro, speaks three languages — English, Spanish, and German.

Larry Acosta said, "Mr. Jones made us learn. If we were stubborn, he was more stubborn than us that we would get it."

As times changed in Texas during the seventies, it became more and more challenging for rural school districts to get matching state funds and small financially pressed districts like TCSD were the first to feel the bite of broadening bureaucracy and the scrutiny that came with it. And the Terlingua school faced the monumental task of getting accreditation.

"From the day school opened, I seemed to be meeting myself coming and going," Jones said. After some difficult decisions, like raising taxes, and a lot of detail work, the Terlingua school board and its teacher went to the state capitol to present their case. If they failed to gain accreditation, the school would have to close.

At their hearing in Austin, a state official finally said to Jones and Pepper, "When you were able to show how the tax rates were going to go up and provide needed financing and then offered a suggestion that the Alpine superintendent move in and lend a hand (as ex-officio super), that did it. That was what we needed to hear."

Probationary accreditation was granted, followed soon by permanent status.

Terlingua schools also got a big helping hand from Dr. Raymond Wheat, a retired professor at Sul Ross, who prepared the 27 volumes that were required to meet the state's curriculum requirements.

After five exhausting and productive years, Trent and Olga felt like they had climbed a mountain and decided it was time to move on.

When they left Terlingua in 1978, they attended Sul Ross State where they obtained their masters, then they moved to Boerne. Trent taught but Olga became a real estate agent.

"She made as much in one year selling real estate as I did in two teaching school," said Trent. He later got into the real estate business himself.

A short time later, along with journalist Carlton Stowers, Trent published a book about his experiences in the Big Bend called *Terlingua Teacher*.

Today the Jones live in Ojai, California where Trent sells real estate and Olga has her own financial planning business. Their daughter Anna is in her last semester at USC and plans

to be a doctor of physical therapy. Their daughter Cassandra is finishing her MFA at Carnegie Mellon Institute in Pittsburg and will be presenting her graduate art show this month.

Standing in front of the original one-room school house on the Terlingua campus last weekend, Trent Jones said, "I see a lot of incredible progress here. What they've done is really great. They're doing a good job."

He could have added his own name to the equation and said, "What we've done is really great." ■

the crisis brought the community together with the conviction that the things would run smoothly at Terlingua school.

However, from Jones perspective, the weight of his responsibility was increasing. As the only teacher of eight grades, he was responsible for knowing and teaching from dozens of textbooks. One year, he remembered, the curriculum was using 53 separate texts.

Jones, like all one-man faculties, developed a system of starting one group on an assignment, then