

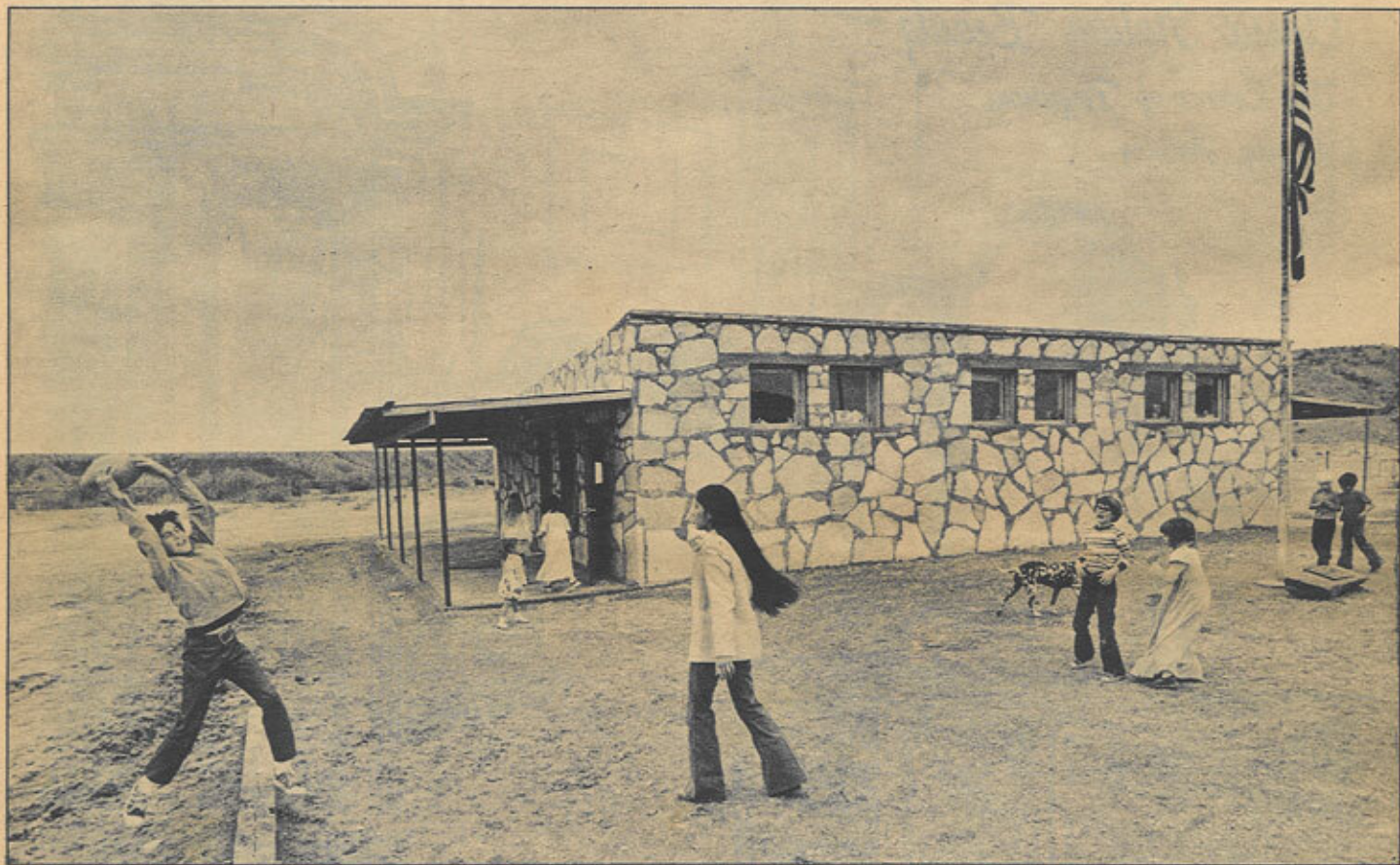
SUNDAY



**A teacher
in Terlingua**

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A teacher in Terlingua



By Joe Holley

Photography by Skeeter Hagler

Sitting quietly in a classroom on a warm sunny winter day has never been easy, especially when it's Friday and there's a school party in the afternoon, so it takes a little longer on this morning for the students of Terlingua Common School to put their sack lunches under their desks and get their books and pencils out to start the day. The teacher, a dark-haired young man in corduroy jeans and sport shirt, makes an assignment for part of his class—grades five through eight—in their science books. "You got that Pancho," he asks a slender, dark-skinned boy who seems more interested in the sun-drenched mountains outside. Pancho says he has it.

The teacher moves to the other side of the room where he assigns his younger students a story in their reading books. He then takes a seat at his desk and invites two little blond-haired boys, first graders, to come up to his desk and read to him.

"Y'all practice last night?" he asks them.

"Yeah."

"Whole lot or a little bit?" he asks, smiling.

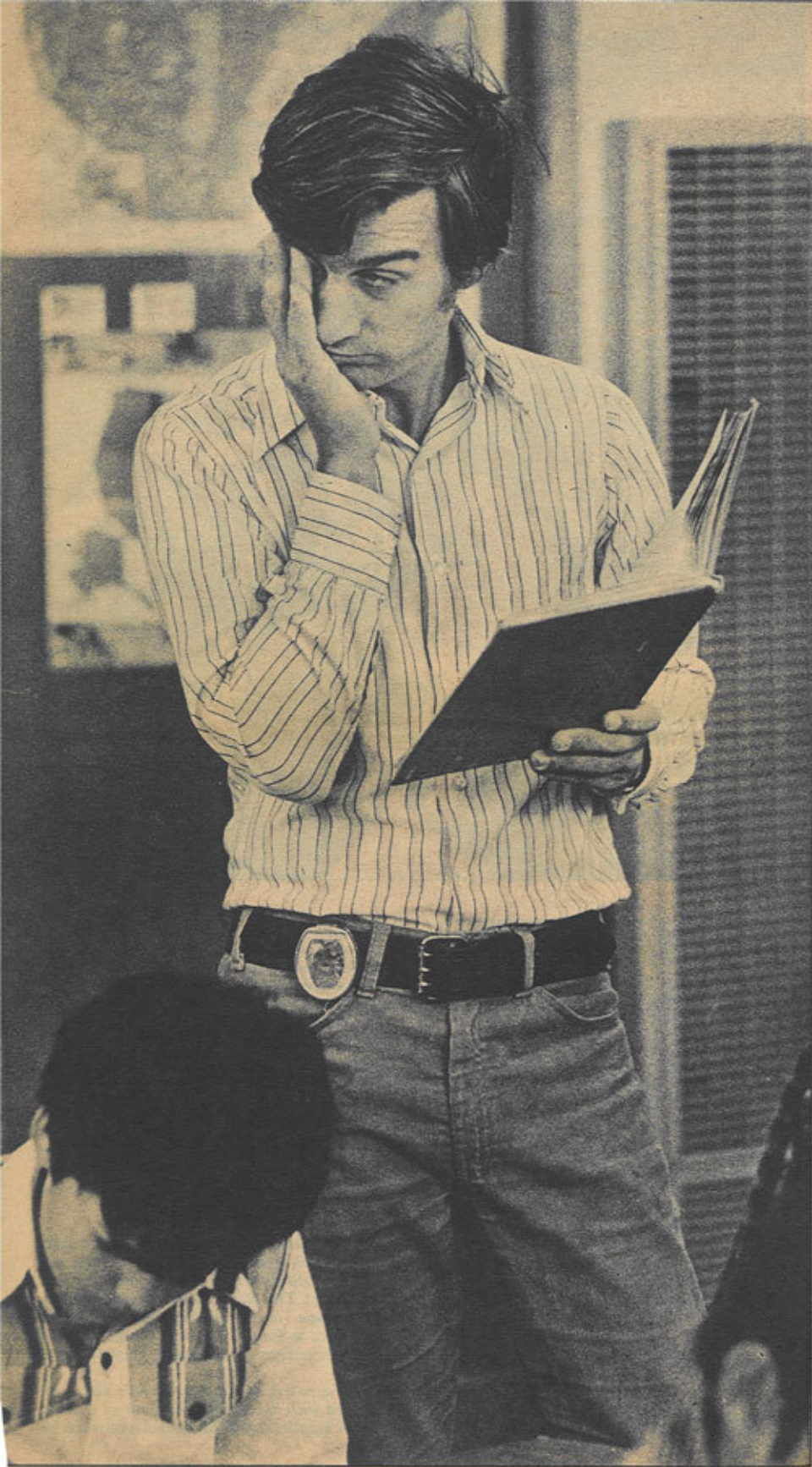
"Whole lot."

"Oh good," he says. "I can't wait to hear you read."

One of the little boys reads two pages straight through. "That's real good Bubba!" the teacher exclaims. "Golly you didn't miss any words." Bubba's face lights up. The other little boy doesn't do quite as well, but the teacher is patient, complimenting him on the words he does know.

As the boys go back to their desks, the teacher notices a little girl sitting at her desk not reading. She is biting her fingernails and tears are streaming down her cheeks. "Stephanie lost her reading book," a girl sitting behind her says.

"Don't cry about it, honey," the teacher says. "Pancho, you want to go outside and look for



Five years ago Trent Jones had a comfortable teaching job with the San Antonio school system, earning a good salary and doing what he liked to do best—teach. But he decided the city life wasn't what he wanted and he found a way out. Today he is teaching 30 students in a one-room school outside the ghost town of Terlingua.

Teacher

Continued



"The key to education," Jones says, "is basically individualizing instruction and getting the child into a relaxed atmosphere. I don't let my students fail. I just make them learn it." He tries to take time with each student and allows the students time to learn on their own, in and out of the classroom.



Stephanie's book? She might have left it on the playground yesterday."

Pancho found the book on the merry-go-round outside, little Stephanie wiped her eyes and grinned, and Trent Jones went back to work with his 30 students, grades one through eight, in one of the last one-room schools in Texas.

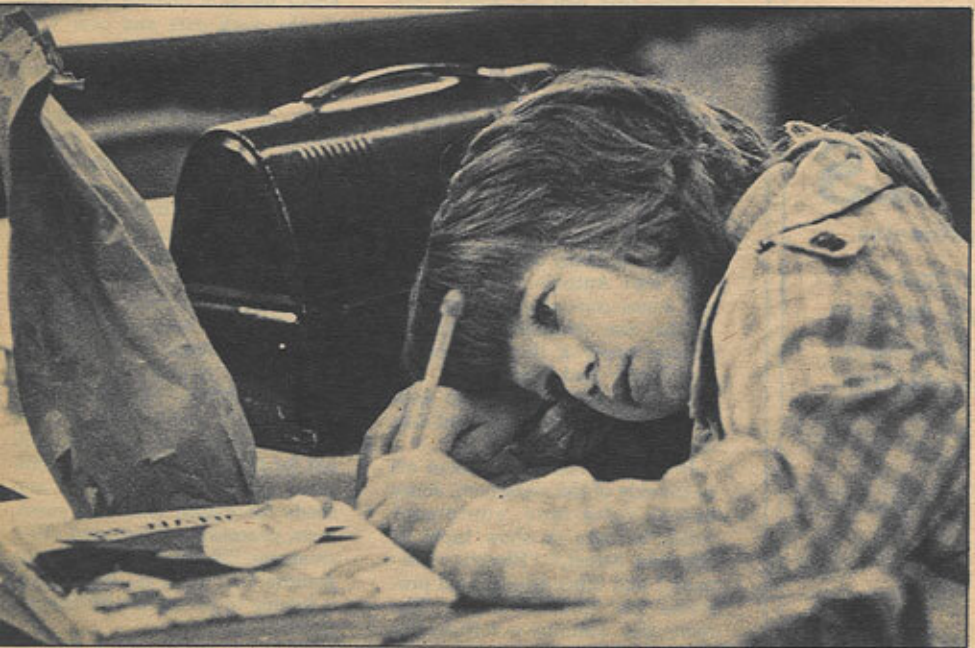
Five years ago, Melvyn Trent Jones was a fourth-grade special education teacher in San Antonio. A 1971 graduate of Trinity University, he was earning \$9,000 a year doing what he wanted to do, he lived in a comfortable house with his wife and new-born daughter, he had even been nominated as one of the outstanding elementary teachers in America.

He wanted out.

For Trent Jones and for his wife Olga, a full-blooded Greek from Perth-Amboy, N. J., it was a gradual realization that the city, any city, was not for them. The noise, the traffic, the crowds, the red-tape of a big-city school system outweighed, as far as they were concerned, any of the advantages. Fortunately, they found a way out.

Jones, a native of Corpus Christi, had been impressed with the rugged grandeur of the Big Bend on vacations with his parents, so when he

LONG DISTANCE



found out the Terlingua job was open, he jumped at it. The three members of the school board, who had seen quite a few teachers come and go, liked him, and the job was his. He resigned his position in San Antonio to become teacher, superintendent and janitor for a one-room school in perhaps the most isolated area in Texas. His salary—\$4,500 a year. (Jones was able to earn a little extra as a guide for raft trips on the Rio Grande, but “we nearly starved to death that first year,” he recalls.)

Instead of a comfortable suburban home, the Jones' moved into a second-hand, two-bedroom trailer with no telephone and no running water. They had to haul water five miles to fill the 1,800-gallon tank behind the trailer. Their parents were aghast and most of their friends thought they were crazy, but Trent and Olga Jones have never had a moment's regret.

The Terlingua Common School, in the foothills of the Christmas Mountains a few miles from the ghost town, was organized by the 100 or so adults who live within roughly a 35 mile radius of the school. Most of them are ranchers, ranch-hands, employees of a local land development company, or owners of small cafes or curio shops on Highway 118. “A bunch

of weirdos live out here," Jones says, laughing, "you know, misfits."

The Jones', with their two small daughters, now live on the school grounds in a small tar-papered, three-room building—with running water no less—that until last year was the schoolhouse. Both the house and the new school sit in a yellow rocky open area directly in front of a small greasewood-covered hill.

They've transformed the old schoolhouse into a modest, pleasant home, and life is a bit easier than when they were in the trailer. It used to be that a monthly trip into Alpine, 80 miles away, for hot showers, television and a meal in a restaurant was a gala occasion; now they go in several times a week. Last summer they lived in Alpine while Trent took courses at Sul Ross State—philosophy of American education the first semester; welding and auto mechanics, the second. "I've picked up all kinds of skills living out here," he says, "carpentry, plumbing, welding, you name it. Out here you have to."

To get to work Jones steps out his back door and walks a few feet across the playground to the new schoolhouse, a Spanish-style adobe and native stone structure built last year. The building—along with light fixtures, lumber, windows and doors—was donated by the Ft. Stockton Sheriff's Posse Association after the school outgrew the original one. It cost the district \$12,000 to transform the donated building into a school.

"The first day we moved into the school building it was too small," Jones says. "We're just sitting on top of each other." The schoolhouse is a cheery place nonetheless. There are fluorescent lights, a brown carpet and the green walls are covered with posters, student art work and alphabet charts. Several racks filled with paperback books stand in one corner. Many of the books are from San Antonio. A few years ago Jones convinced the Friends of the San Antonio Library to donate nearly a thousand books the library had planned to discard. "You know, out here with no TV, my school kids read like crazy," he says.

In a small book-lined room off to the side of the classroom, Jones keeps video-tape equipment which he uses to show tapes of "Sesame Street," "Electric Company," and other educational programs his students enjoy. The room also contains a refrigerator

and small stove where Jones sometimes makes popcorn for his students.

It's that kind of place—relaxed, easy going, informal—and Jones wants it that way. "The key to education," he says, "is basically individualizing instruction and getting the child into a relaxed atmosphere." In a one-room schoolhouse he can do both.

"There's a lot of work involved in school, but a lot of pleasure too," Jones says. "I like to get outdoors so a lot of times we go down to the creek and read stories to each other or write poetry or we identify plants and rocks."

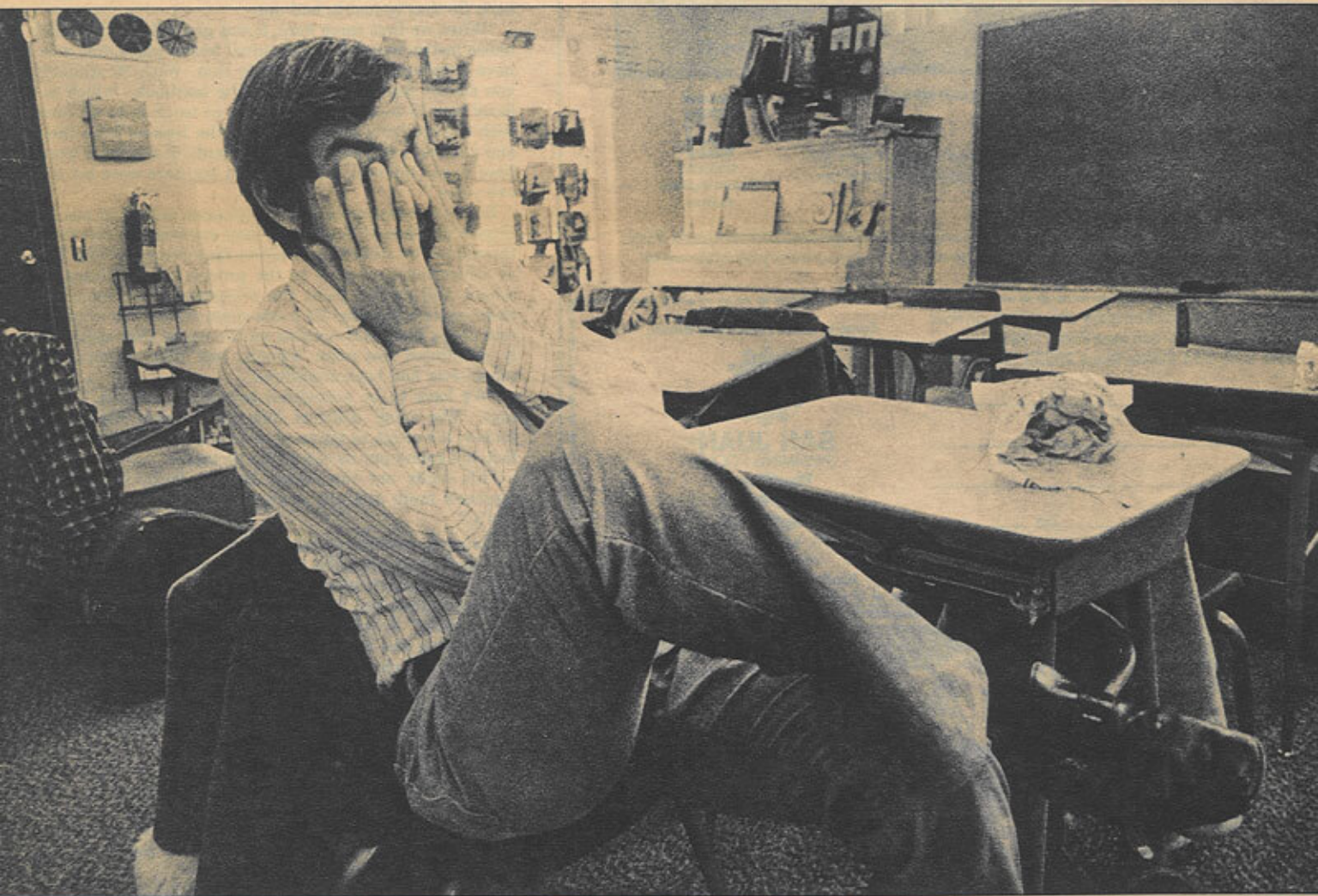
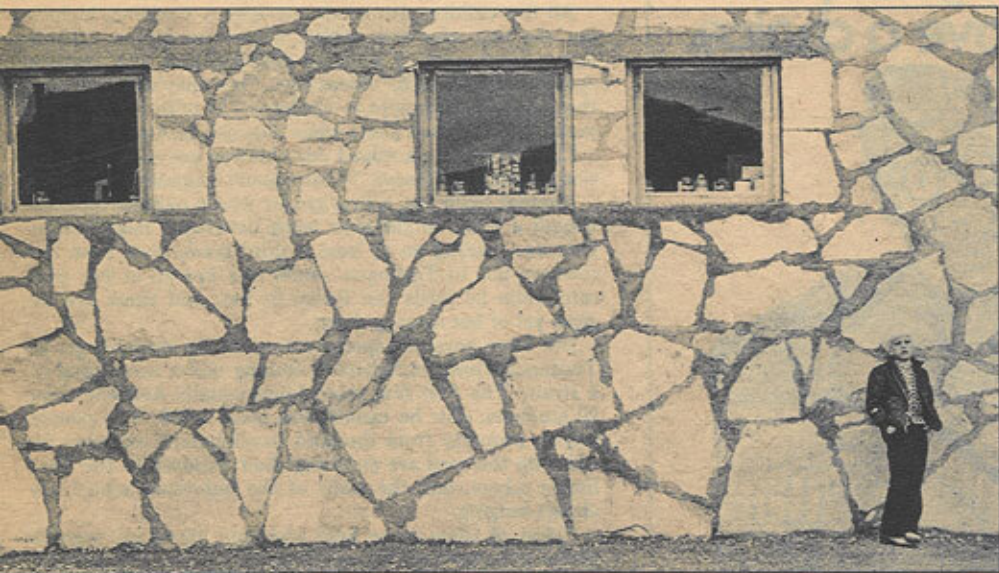
Sometimes Olga, a music and drama major at Trinity, joins the class for music lessons—that is if the babysitter isn't out looking for her cow as she was one day recently, although the two little Jones girls are in and out of the classroom all day anyway. Jones' students have also built a weather station complete with thermometer, wind gauge and barometer.

A day in the classroom with Trent Jones offers convincing evidence that he is a fine teacher. He had planned to be a lawyer like his father, but while still at Trinity he decided he'd rather work with children. Although friendly enough outside the classroom, he's reserved, perhaps even a bit shy, but in the classroom, he's enthusiastic, concerned about his students, firm and yet relaxed. In many ways he's like a big brother.

"I don't let my students fail," he says with a grin. "I just make them learn it. If a student isn't learning, that says something about me as a teacher so we just do the work over and over until they learn it."

And apparently they do learn it. When they finish the eighth grade at Terlingua, they transfer to Alpine. (Parents of the Terlingua youngsters meet the Alpine school bus 20 miles up Highway 118, and the retired Greyhound driver who now drives the school bus takes them the remaining 60 miles.) None of the Terlingua students have experienced difficulty meeting the academic requirements of the larger school.

The five Acosta children are perhaps typical. They live with their parents and grandmother in a house trailer atop a small hill not far from the school. The trailer is surrounded by pens and sheds for ducks, chickens, geese, cows, peacocks and assorted other creatures. "El rancho grande," the grandmother calls it. Mr. Acosta is hoping to get work with the national park.



Jones says his first two years at the school were the best because he had less than 20 students. Today with 30 students he can't give the special attention he'd like to give them. But even with the long hours and work load, Jones would never go back to the city school system.

All five children are nearly straight-A students, including the two who now attend school in Alpine. "Their father can't write a word of English, and Mrs. Acosta can't write too much," Jones says, "but they've made sure those kids are straight-A students. They're a couple of years ahead of their peers when they get to Alpine."

"In our one-room school our children get special attention," Mrs. Acosta says. "That doesn't happen at Alpine."

Another little girl, a first grader whose parents recently bought a home in the area being developed near Terlingua, was reading on at least a third-grade level even before she got to Terlingua. Jones lets her go at her own rate while he feeds the books to her, and there are no signs yet of her slowing down.

But these days, the special attention the students get at Terlingua Common School is coming under something of a strain. The first few years Jones usually had less than 20 students; now he usually has close to 30. The people buying property from the land development company 20 miles up the road are enrolling their children in the Terlingua school, and the walls of the one-room school are almost bulging.

"Most of them come here and stay about six months before their savings run out, then they leave," Jones says. "They have these dreams of getting out of the city, starting a new life, but there's no way to make a living out here. So they're just in and out."

"When we first came here, it was great. I could individualize instruction, I had individual lesson plans, but now I have to group, and I hate to do that. With 30 students, you almost have to teach from the textbook—which is a lousy way to teach. The best way to teach is to sit down with the students and talk about the lessons with them, and you can't do that with 30 students in a class. I would have to say my best years I've had out here were my first two years."

But overcrowding in this ghost-town school is not the biggest problem. The school's very existence is now being threatened by state accreditation requirements. The Texas Education Agency is in the process of examining the school, and at this point the prospects aren't too favorable—mainly because it's a one-room school. An examiner told Jones there was nothing on the books that specifically prohibited one-room schools, but that no one-room school ever had been accredited.

"We have to be accredited to get state funds," Jones says. "For small districts like us, districts without oil money, it's rough to try to operate without state funds. In fact, it's gonna put us out of the picture."

"It's really not the school board's fault, it's not the teacher's fault. It's not anybody's fault except the system's."

Hiring an additional teacher and expanding the building might help, but the district is hard-pressed even to pay Jones' salary which is only a little above minimum state requirements. "They were 10 days late paying me last month," he says, "and they had to go borrow the money from the bank to pay me when they did. We live from check to check."

If the school is not accredited—the decision is supposed to be made by September 10—then the students will transfer to Alpine, which would mean a 160-mile round trip daily for children as young as 6. Trent and Olga Jones don't know what they'll do; they're hoping, of course, the school is accredited, for like most people who stay in the Big Bend for any length of time, they love the quiet, wide open spaces, and they love their work. They also feel like their own children thrive on the hardy outdoor life.

"If we have to leave here, I'd like to build a one-room schoolhouse somewhere," Jones says, "with maybe 20 students and two or three teachers. I don't know where, maybe we could do it in Alpine. I just know we would never build it in a city." **H**