

# Texas

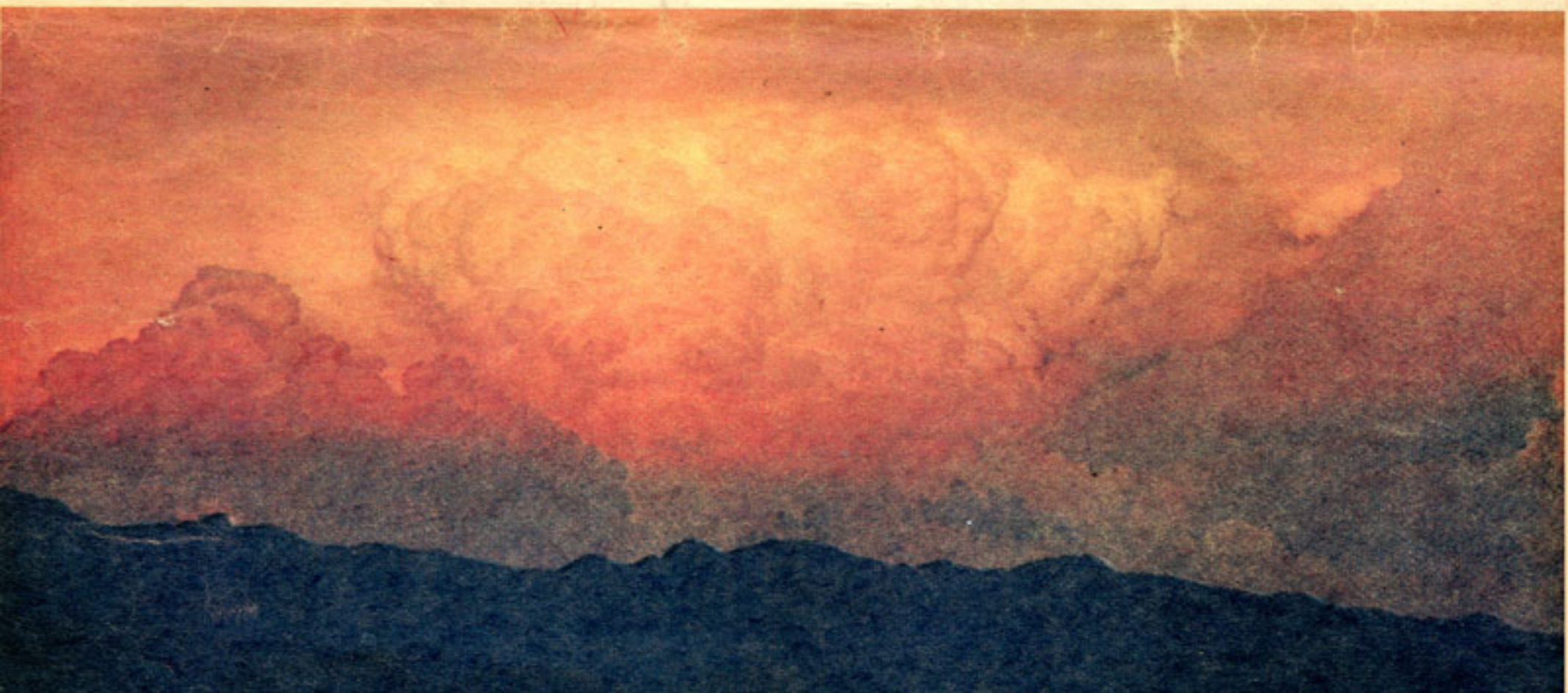
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A school  
with one room,  
11 students  
and one teacher  
who chucked  
a city job  
for the grandeur  
of the Big Bend









A playground of purple mountains and cactus flowers swallows the one-room Terlingua School in the Big Bend. Trent Jones, teacher, scrapped a good job in San Antonio for the desert's awesome mysteries, 11 students and a goat that went dry.

□ The school teacher shows films on drug abuse and divorce, mothers pass around the book, "The Exorcist," and the price of ethyl gasoline is 66 cents a gallon.

Somehow, the facts of life don't fit here.

Folks aren't sure what to call Study Butte, just outside the Big Bend National Park. A town? Village? One person says, "It's just an area." Study Butte is next to the old mining town Terlingua, ghost town and chili capital of the world.

With about 16 families, there is no car pool, school taxes on 40 acres run \$1.50 a year and the nearest doctor is 60 miles away.

Two things are plentiful here: Cactus and beer.

It's probably the only place in the world where a P-TA project was to clean a ghost town after a chili cookoff.

There is one school and one teacher, Trent (Melvyn) Jones.

Jones, 25, left a better paying teaching job and conveniences like water to come here 10 months ago from San Antonio.

His reason for changing life styles was perfectly rational: "I came because, well, the mountains turn

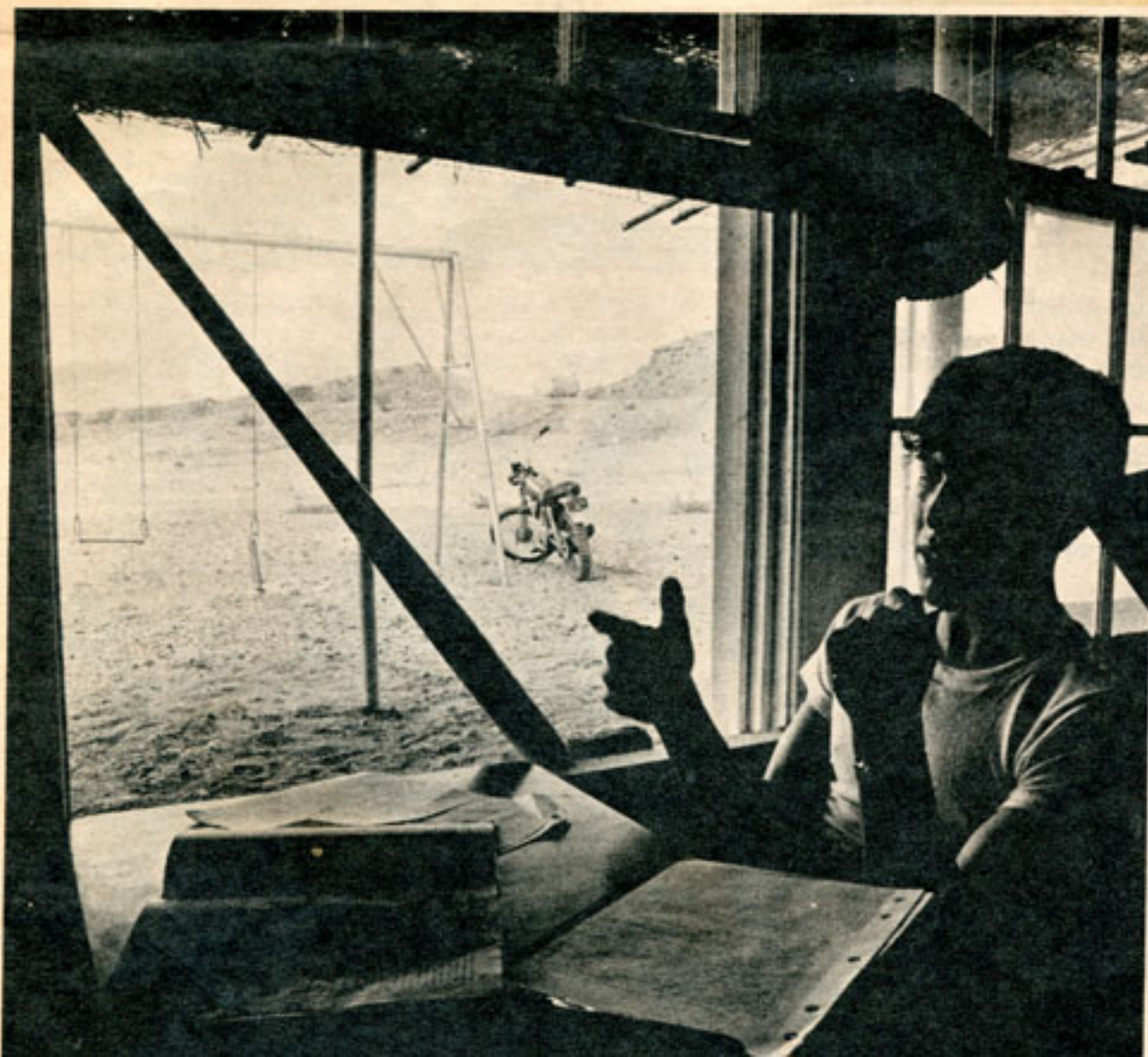




Olga Jones, below, gives Rocky Hierro, 13, some extra help after putting baby Anna Marie in playpen. Students like Larry Acosta are encouraged to work hard, but their eyes are easily distracted by the beauty of the desert.



He knew life would be rough in the desert



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colors." As the sun fades, the mountains, hunks of wrinkled earth, turn purple, then coral, deep violet and orange. The desert is as capricious as a 5-year-old.

When the morning sun bites into this West Texas desert, the terrain is hard and unrestrained. But in twilight, it is suddenly impotent, willing to please. There is only the sound of a dry wind licking cactus flowers like a mother cat.

There is something spiritual about this place.

The one-room Terlingua School, microscopic in craggy desert fields, has 11 students in grades one, two, four, seven and eight.

One student is retarded and has learned to read first-grade books and do simple math problems.

Some students say Jones is the sixth teacher they've had at Terlingua School, built in 1955.

"I came out here with a different attitude than some of the other teachers," Jones says. "I wanted the job. Most who have taught here were asked or begged to come."

He knew life would be rough in the desert, but he didn't expect his goat to go dry, his water tank to

blow away if not full or his water pipes to freeze in winter and melt in summer.

Jones, born and reared in New Jersey, taught fourth grade at San Antonio's Booker T. Washington Elementary School, where he was nominated as one of the nation's most outstanding elementary school teachers.

His pay was \$7200 a year. Now it's \$6300. Take home pay is \$490 a month, which includes \$50 for being the janitor.

The teacher lives with his Greek wife Olga, 23, and 10-month-old Anna Marie in a 30-foot trailer. It's 80 miles from Alpine, where they shop once a month.

At first, Olga was without a washing machine and drove to Alpine to wash diapers. There is nothing ineffectual about the teacher's long-haired wife: "Frankly, life was horrible then." Now, with a washing machine and wild grape leaves in the area, she never wants to leave.

She graduated last year from San Antonio's Trinity University with a speech and drama degree.

In the afternoons, she catches a ride to the school, puts her baby in a playpen near the math and music sections of the library, and helps children with their assignments.

School hours are 8:45 a.m. to 1:30 for younger students and 3:45 for the others.

Trent Jones sits on a stool, his legs crossed, back slumped. Soft features hide under skin as brown as mountain dirt. It's hot, 112 degrees. His jeans are baggy, his shirt damp with sweat and mud clings to his shoes.

The teacher is grateful for small favors because he doesn't smell bad; there's no humidity here.

The Big Bend, he says, is the "freest place I've ever lived," but freedom has its limits, he found.

"I don't like to spank students, but I had to. I just had to. I found one of my students urinating in a field in front of a bunch of girls. He said he just couldn't wait, but I was unsympathetic."

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*Jim Jones, seventh-grader, thinks he'd like to go to a bigger school so he can play football. Below, he plays soccer with Larry Acosta.*



Jones is introspective, with inquiring hazel eyes, the sort of a man who waters his wife's vegetable garden and writes children's stories at night.

He also graduated from Trinity University in 1971 with degrees in speech and drama and elementary education.

"You know," he says, "I take my teaching seriously. I think about my kids at night and on weekends."

At least one student takes him seriously too.

"One boy couldn't read so I took him aside and told him the story of how Abraham Lincoln went out in the wilderness with a book and learned to read. So I gave the boy a book and told him we would master it this year. Next thing I knew he was missing for three days and the book was gone."

Most folks haul their water from Terlingua Creek, but Jones gets his from the school and stores it in an 1800-gallon tank on one side of his two-bedroom trailer.

He lives four miles from Terlingua School, which has a tin roof and two shovels and a hand pick at the door. The floor is cracked. There are eight windows and an air conditioner that keeps the temperature inside at 93 degrees.

The most popular features are a water cooler and a six-party-line phone.

Outside there is an adobe playhouse, which the children built, playground equipment, a flagpole and a cactus garden.

"We're really into the plant life here," says Jones. "We got real fired up about it so we bought us a little book about cactus. I'm learning and the kids are learning and I think that's good."

When Jones or his students have an urge to do something, like investigate one of Study Butte's old mercury mines, they do it.

"There's no red tape here. We don't need permission to do anything. All we do is say, 'Let's go,' and hop into my pickup."

Jones communicates now and then with Terlingua School's three-member board. One member is a painter who goes barefoot most of the time and wears her hair in a long braid, another is a

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bearded miner and another sells cactus for a living. The board gave Jones \$100 this year for school supplies, but he spent much more than that.

Members have threatened to confiscate his charge card at an Alpine hardware store.

"I can't help myself," Jones says. "I charge stuff we need at school and send the bills to the board. I traded our old mimeograph machine in on a new one, too, and paid the difference. I wasn't supposed to do that."

Immediate plans for the school: A greenhouse, science lab, oven and and sewing machine.

The school has some modern equipment, like baseball gloves.

"You should have seen those kids when I brought the gloves to school. They mobbed my truck when I drove up. We call our team the Terlingua Tigers."

When Jones came to the school, it had little equipment and the library was antiquated — some books were printed in 1890. Friends in San Antonio donated 1000 books for the library, he bought a projector and ordered film strips, bought a new blackboard and rebuilt the school's record player.

"The first day of school was scary," Jones recalls. "I looked at the kids and they looked at me and we sized each other up."

Most students say they like to come to school. "Trent tries hard to make these children want to learn," says his wife. Only two students say they would enjoy a bigger school.

"I like parties and dances," says Vicki Kempf, 13. "There aren't too many people in Study Butte, just adults."

Jim Jones, 13, says he wants to play football at Alpine High School, the nearest high school, an hour-and-a-half drive by bus.

"I like it here, though, because I get to look out

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'The first day of school was scary'



Terlingua School mother Donna Pepper gives the school teacher's wife a lift to school. The student at right plants a cactus in the school's garden.





*Trent, Olga and their daughter were city folks who traded the good life for "something better." Eighty miles from town and in the middle of the desert, they wouldn't trade their life style for all the water in the world.*

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## He wants them to be what they want to be

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the windows at all this good stuff and listen to the birds sing."

Jones works with 53 textbooks.

His students work hard because he makes them work hard.

His philosophy: "A good teacher is an organized one who doesn't forget what it's like being in the fourth grade. Each student gets all my attention. I don't believe in failing children, but in helping them. When they finally get something, like division, or after they take a test three times and make a good grade, they feel so good about themselves. And I can hardly stand it because I feel so good too."

One student told Jones: "Mr. Jones, I'm finally getting my mind back."

They say he's a good teacher, the best they've ever had.

"He's got more understanding. Yesterday he spent three hours with two kids until he got them to understand something," says Larry Acosta, 14, here seven years.

His brother George, 12, says, "Some teachers argue too much. They gripe. They don't got patience like Mr. Jones."

The children say they want to be FBI agents, policemen, nurses, teachers and secretaries.

Jones says he wants them to be whatever they want to be, but do it better than anyone else.

