

VANITY FAIR

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GIRL, RAILROADED

A GONZO VIEW OF LISL AUMAN'S FELONY-MURDER TRIAL 182

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198 COWBOY SCHOLARS Each year, 13 young men are admitted to Deep Springs, a two-year college on the California-Nevada border whose eccentric founder decreed in 1917 that students couldn't drink, do drugs, or leave their isolated valley, then gave them control over everything from admissions to faculty. Hanging out with the guys on Deep Springs' 2,500-acre cattle-ranch campus, Evgenia Peretz discovers why the alumni of this wilderness experiment are some of the most successful, and loyal, in the country. Photographs by Kurt Markus.

FANFAIR

67 30 DAYS IN THE LIFE OF THE CULTURE

On the Road—Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman kick off a multi-continent motorcycle trip. Richard Wofford tours Savannah's sweet spots. The (detachable) Hot Reels pocket guide to summer movies. Elissa Schappell's Hot Type. Helen Schulman on 50 years of Serendipity; Katie Sharer checks out the Rug Company's new digs; Dany Levy previews SoHo's Thai temple Kittichai. Michael Hogan on the indie-pop band Rilo Kiley; On the Download—Tony O's Top 10; Edward Helmore on Tony Hendra's memoir, *Father Joe*. Fanfair's spa guide.

COLUMNS

102 JOYCE IN BLOOM *Ulysses*, James Joyce's unexpurgated day in the mind of Leopold Bloom, changed literature forever, despite the best efforts of the censors. As Dublin and the world celebrate the centenary of Bloomsday, Christopher Hitchens explores the endless rewards, high and low, of Joyce's masterpiece.

108 TO CATCH A LEGEND Despite Hollywood's penchant for heralding "the new Cary Grant," no leading man, before or since, has balanced such glossy, debonair charm with an equally powerful undercurrent of mayhem. On the hundredth anniversary of Grant's birth, a new documentary prompts James Wolcott to revisit the most impeccable paradox in movie history.

116 RUNAWAY JURORS Could Martha Stewart have cried herself to acquittal? Maybe so, writes Dominick Dunne in this month's diary, which also includes questions about the Vero Beach death of Michael Skakel's ex-mother-in-law and an encounter with a longtime nemesis, Menendez brothers (and now Phil Spector) defense attorney Leslie Abramson. Photograph by Roxanne Lowit.

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Cowboy

Imagine an academically elite college whose 26 male students work a 2,500-acre cattle ranch, aren't allowed to drink, do drugs, or leave their isolated desert valley, but control admissions, discipline, and faculty hiring and firing. That's the Utopian legacy of maverick electric-power tycoon Lucien Lucius Nunn, who founded Deep Springs on the California-Nevada border in 1917.

Visiting a campus that has hovered on the brink of lunacy and collapse, EVGENIA PERETZ learns why Deep Springs is the most successful experiment in higher education in U.S. history



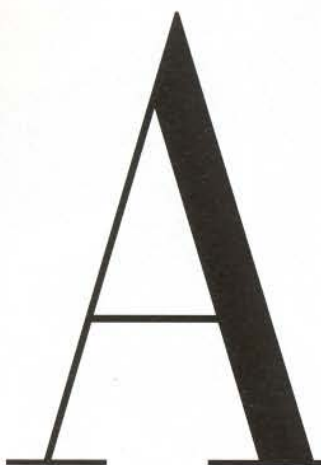
OUT OF THE SADDLE

Junior Cowboy Philippus Kiep and Senior Cowboy Alex Blasdel on the porch of the Cowboy House at Deep Springs College, in Deep Springs, California, July 2003. The cowboy, one per class, is the most coveted student-labor position. During the summers they tend to 300 head of cattle 10,000 feet up in the White Mountains.

Scholars



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KURT MARKUS



As Josh Hudelson prepares to leave Deep Springs College and head to Columbia University as an anthropology major, there are a few things he is taking care of—among them, slaughtering a cow and spending the night with the corpse in a 40-degree meat locker. “I was worried it was airtight and I was going to suffocate, so I had people check on me throughout the night,” he says cheerily. “It was kind of enjoyable.” Good-looking and fit, Josh is a young man of supreme confidence, able to play the guitar and sing out, campfire-style, unembarrassed. A golden boy, you might think at first glance, the kind who’d make any mother proud. But he is also, he admits, a tad possessed, driven by passions most Ivy League-bound 19-year-old guys from upstate New York would not be able to wrap their heads around. At first, it was socialism, and now, after two years at Deep Springs, the campus of which is a 2,500-acre ranch 35 miles from Death Valley, it appears to be dead animals. In addition to sleeping with the slaughtered, frozen cows, he has been tanning sheepskin, for what purpose he doesn’t know yet. But there are scraps of sheep flesh lying all over the living quarters and in the shower, the way most college dorm rooms are littered with pizza crusts. “This place smells because I’ve got some rotting materials,” he says, breezing through the dorm. He has no plans to clean it up.

Hudelson might seem like an oddball, but Lucien Lucius Nunn, the eccentric electric-power magnate who founded Deep Springs in 1917, would have considered him a future world leader, which he believed could be anyone from a great preacher to a civic-minded carpenter. Nunn considered the material world “an evil system,” rife with “sensual pleasure,” such as “girls” and “kid excitement,” and felt that the masses, “dull-witted, sluggish, [and] incapable,” needed leadership from an elite few. These few, like Jesus, Moses, and Theodore Roosevelt before them, would be able to hear “the voice of the desert.”

With that in mind, Nunn set up his Utopia in an uninhabited desert valley, a mile up in the White Mountains on the California-Nevada border, where the climate vacillates between bone-dry scorching and arctic. The desert floor is perfectly flat. At its edges, the mountains—dappled with sage and loose rocks—rise up like 3,000-foot fortress walls. It’s a landscape intended, one senses, for existential thought. The nearest “towns” are an hour away—Big Pine, California, population 1,350, and Lida Junction, Nevada, whose only permanent inhabitants live in a brothel.

Nunn’s 26 select students were forbidden to leave the valley or take drugs or alcohol. Beyond that, all other decisions would be left to them. They would be given the power over admissions, discipline, and the hiring and firing of faculty. Tuition would be free. The students, who attend for two years, would support themselves by working on the college’s cattle ranch and by doing the administrative and maintenance tasks of the college themselves.

By all rights it should have ended in a sex cult or mass murder—*Lord of the Flies* come to life. Indeed, as Isaac Ericson, the 20-year-old head of admissions, reports, “I keep getting e-mails from parents wanting assurance that this isn’t some cult.” Instead, as other Utopias founded at the same time have withered and died, Deep Springs, while it seems perpetually to teeter on the brink of implosion and sometimes even lunacy, has become the most successful experiment in higher education in U.S. history. Deep Springers—and there are only 13 a class—include ambassador to the United Nations William J. vanden Heuvel, now the co-chairman of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute; famed CBS newsman Charles Collingwood; Virginia congressman Jim Olin; top Internet entrepreneurs; edgy novelists William Vollmann and Peter Rock; Tim Oslovich, a Lutheran pastor to native Alaskans; and Norton Dodge, an economist who through spycraft and smuggling single-handedly saved underground Russian art from total oblivion during the Cold War. Roughly 80 percent go on as juniors to colleges such as Harvard, Yale, Brown, Columbia, Chicago, Cornell, and Oxford, while the remainder typically embark on a year of service first. For the fifth time in three years, a Deep Springer has won a Truman scholarship, a highly prestigious fellowship for students embarking on careers in public service.

With the rare exception, only students who score in the top 1 percentile on the S.A.T.’s have a shot at getting in. They write nine essays, the equivalent, basically, of an average high-schooler’s entire output for a year. (A typical “essay” might be a 30-page paean to Ayn Rand or a hermeneutic analysis of *Where the Wild Things Are*.) Applicants sit before a committee of nine 19-year-olds who, after asking about books and goals, might throw out, “If a shark and a polar bear got into a fight in a neutral, jellylike medium, who would win and why?” Naturally, most high-school seniors have better things to do than go about such vigorous mental journeying for the privilege of two years of celibacy, dishwashing, and animal blood. But then there is the tiny remainder who think, This place sounds so fucking crazy it just might be for me. (Full disclosure: my husband, Deep Springs class of ’86—class year refers to date of entry—was one such person.)

This morning, they are in the boardinghouse (called the “BH”), sitting below a portrait of Nunn, which hangs next to one of Marilyn Monroe. Over a breakfast of pancakes, ice cream, and milk that just hours ago was inside a cow named Ayesha, they are ripping into one another over some hot-button Deep Springs issues.

“I think consensus is evil,” announces Alex Blasdel, the oldest and most feared of the bunch.

“Yeah, I think consensus is evil, also,” says Dave Mahfouda, the soft-spoken irrigator who has taken to sleeping outside near his alfalfa.

“Consensus is evil because of you!” Alex snaps before turning the conversation to the Deep Springs “isolation policy,” another subject he is passionate about. “I don’t want anyone to leave unless it’s on serious college business. I think isolation is a means to an end.”

“Ah, rhetoric,” says Nathan Leamy, a tall, happy-go-lucky blond, who looks as if he should be selling bread on Martha’s Vineyard. “Oh, look how macho we are. We don’t go anywhere,” he says, mocking.

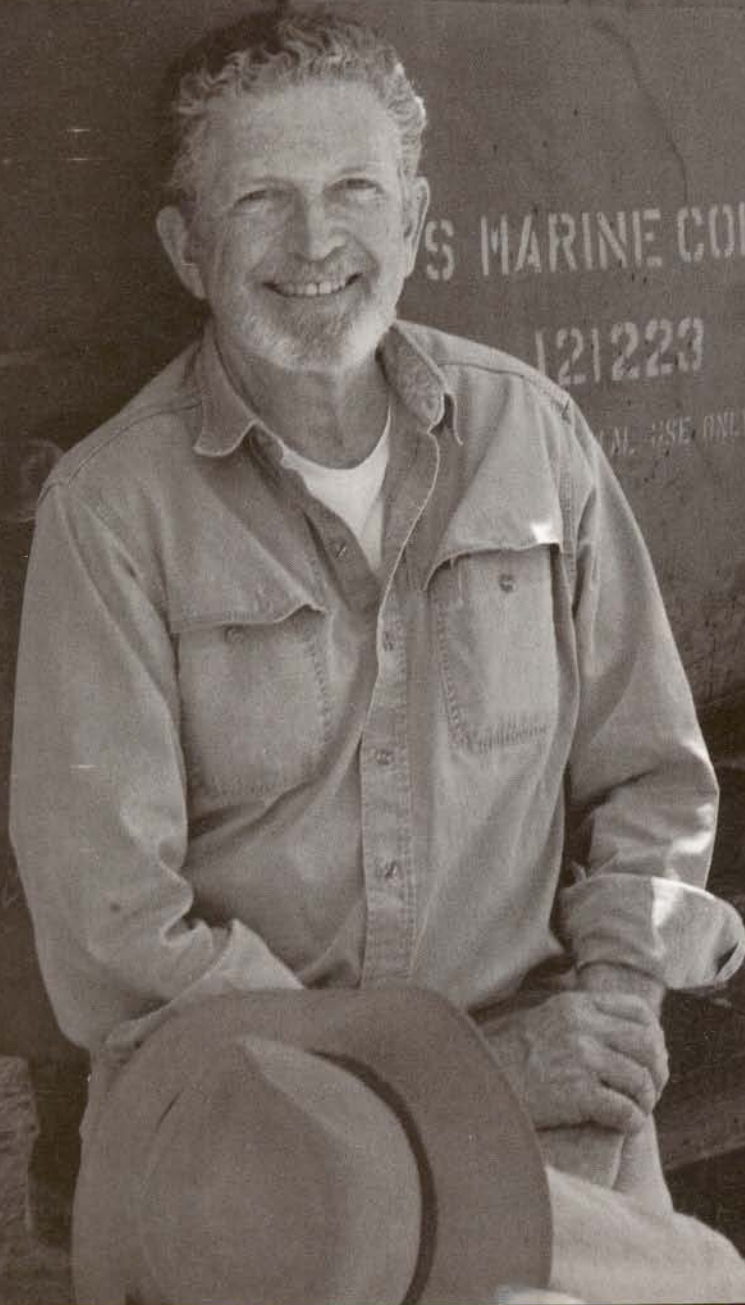

“How do you know that,” says Alex. “You’ve never engaged in the experiment of isolation.”

“I like having friends visit out here. I like having random people out here.”

“You’re a sissy,” says Alex.

Alex is what’s known in Deep Springs argot as the quintessential “nasty-meanie.” He is also the sort that Nunn would have deemed a model young man. Raised in

"The tiny size
and the isolation and
the power of this
ideal, that you're given
something truly
unusual ... that's just
a compelling idea."



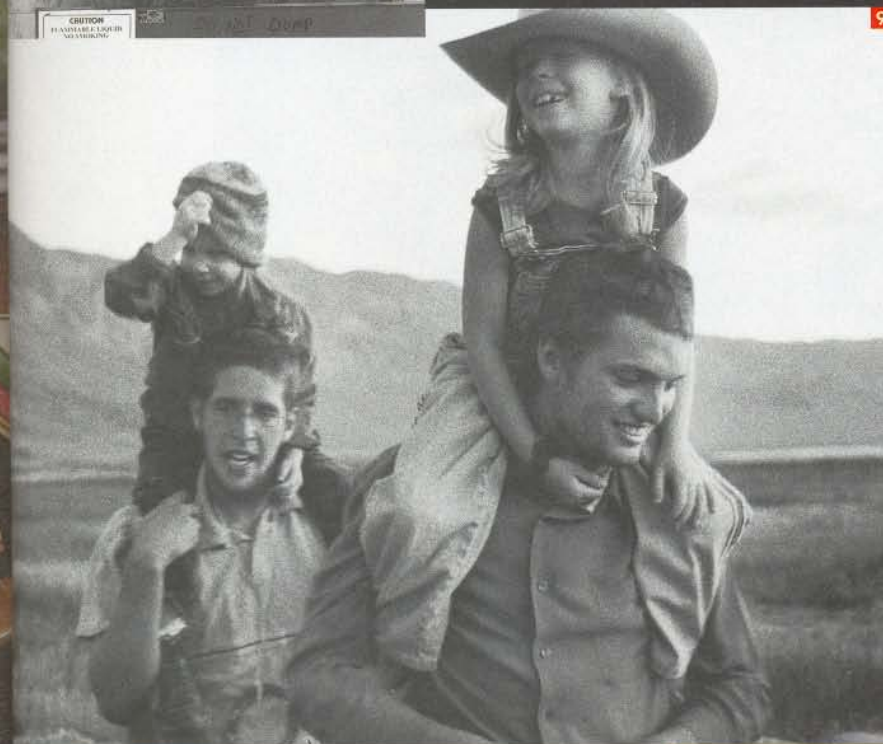
TRUE GRIT

Deep Springs president Jack Newell and his wife, Linda. He was a student at the school in the 1950s, taught American and European history there in the mid-1960s, and has served as president for nine years. He shepherded the school through its darkest hour, in 1999, when a student was killed in a tractor accident.



DESERT FRAT

(1) Student Josh Hudelson, the butcher.
 (2) Geoff Pope, who has been the ranch manager for more than 20 years.
 (3) The dormitory on campus. (4) Cooks Myer Nore, Phil Shaw, and Cyrus St. Armand-Poliakoff in the school kitchen. Nore is also a pianist and St. Armand-Poliakoff plays stand-up bass and composes music. (5) Student Johan Ugander. (6) A sign in the kitchen.
 (7) The entrance to the college.
 (8) A student desk. (9) Class president Etay Zwick and Philippus Kiep with daughters of Ken Mitchell, the school's farmer. The girls are homeschooled, often by Deep Springers.



privilege in San Francisco, he's headed for Oxford next year to become a poet, because, as he explains, both ironically and seriously, "I'm driven by elitism." He reeks of testosterone. He is usually dressed in a trucker hat and Western shirt, and his jeans are encrusted with mud. His hands are nicked and cut up, and feel like old baseball mitts. One of the notes in his application file reads, "I definitely would not let this kid date my sister." And though he sounds tortured beyond his 21 years, his low, gravelly voice is so saturated with conviction that he never loses an argument. "Alex is the Devil," says Dave, the irrigator. "Alex is the person you don't want to be against your motion [in a meeting]."

So formidable is Alex, in fact, that he almost revels in exposing his innermost feelings. "I mean, yes, we're assholes, and we're macho part of the time. But in my experience we are forced into mothering roles.

Chris and I were as close as two people could be without having sex." He's talking about Chris Jennings (the son of ABC anchorman Peter Jennings), his best friend at Deep Springs, now attending Wesleyan University. As Chris tells it, on the night of their first meeting, while hanging out on "the smoking porch," Alex told him that he was a "romantic" in the classical—he means nonsexual—sense of the word and the two just started rapping. "We slept outside that night," says Chris. "We were immediately bonded."

Part of Alex's mystical powers comes from the fact that he is the Deep Springs Senior Cowboy, who, after being out in the world for one year, returns for the summer and roughs it in the mountains at "cow camp" with just one other man, the Junior Cowboy, and a herd of cattle. The first thing to understand about cowboy is that it's the most sought-after job at the college. ("Don't want to talk about it," says Josh, the butcher, only half-jokingly.)

The second thing to understand about the cowboy is that he has been carefully selected by Geoff Pope, 56, the ranch manager for more than 20 years. Lanky, lean, perfectly mustachioed, and exceptionally well read, Pope is the embodiment of the poet-cowboy-educator, "a combination of intellect and yet down-to-earth pragmatism—'We're up to our ankles in cow shit,'" explains former cowboy Dave Hitz ('80), who went on to found Network Appliance, a software company now worth \$7.7 billion. Pope's hands-off educational approach—by which he might, say, knock

on a student's door at four A.M. in the dead of winter and flatly announce, "Dairy's flooded," and then walk away with no further instruction—has defined one of the main things Deep Springs is all about: dealing when you haven't got a clue.

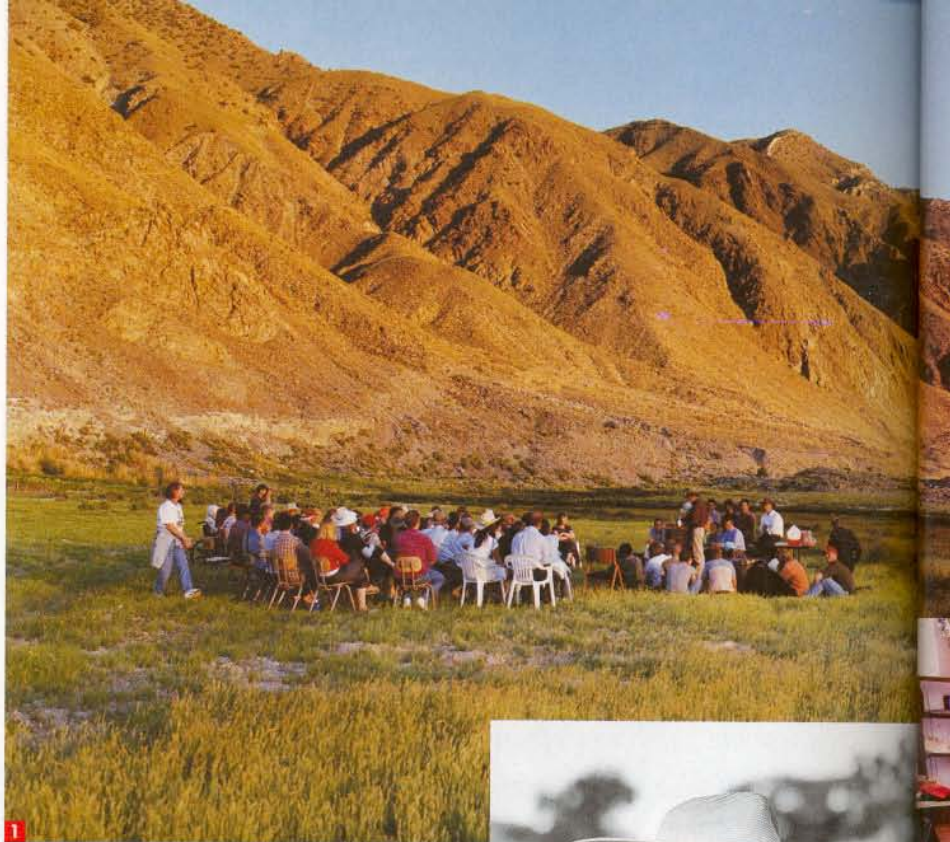
Pope selects the cowboy not by his ability to ride horses but by such things as how he washes dishes in the boarding-house. "Alex distinguished himself as a first-year guy, by being so hard-core on BH that half the student body thought he was completely nuts," says Pope, kicking back, boots propped up on the coffee table, in the ranch house he shares with his wife, Iris.

"Geoff says, 'I can train anybody to ride a horse,'" says Iris, an irrepressible straight shooter, loved and feared in equal parts. "'Any darn fool can ride a horse! You have to have heart.'"

The history of Deep Springs is full of cowboy legends, such as Adam Nyborg ('97), who could run to "the druid," an oddly shaped rock formation a mile and a half up in the mountains, and be back in 15 minutes; John Dewis ('94), "the sexiest guy I've ever met," says Alex; and Kevin West ('88), now the European editor of the high-society fashion magazine *W*. The best-dressed cowboy in Deep Springs history, West was a connoisseur even 10,000 feet up in the White Mountain wilderness. "I remember Kevin up at cow camp," says Iris. "He would have this wooden bowl, and he'd wipe the wooden bowl with buttered garlic.... Geoff and I get tickled about *W* magazine, him rubbin' shoulders with royalty!"

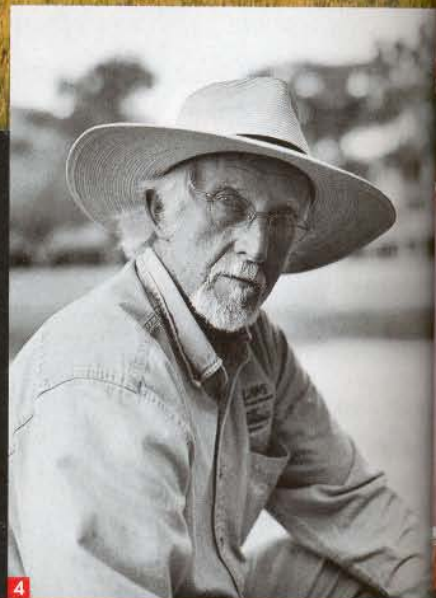
Being cowboy is its own head trip. It must be said that Deep Springs can encourage the cowboy to spout off like a latter-day Ralph Waldo Emerson. "I think participating in the life cycle of the cattle is wonderful," Alex says, his voice intense and raspy, "but you're also, both symbolically and practically, participating in your own life cycle in a very intimate way. You're providing your own food.... A big part of being a cowboy is you take a level of responsibility over your own life, and I think it makes you freer in a lot of ways."

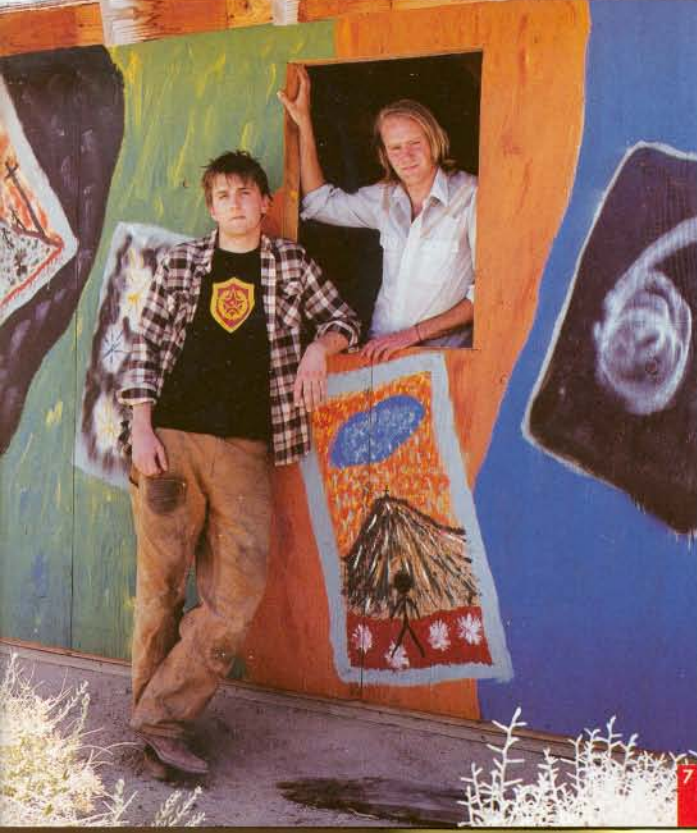
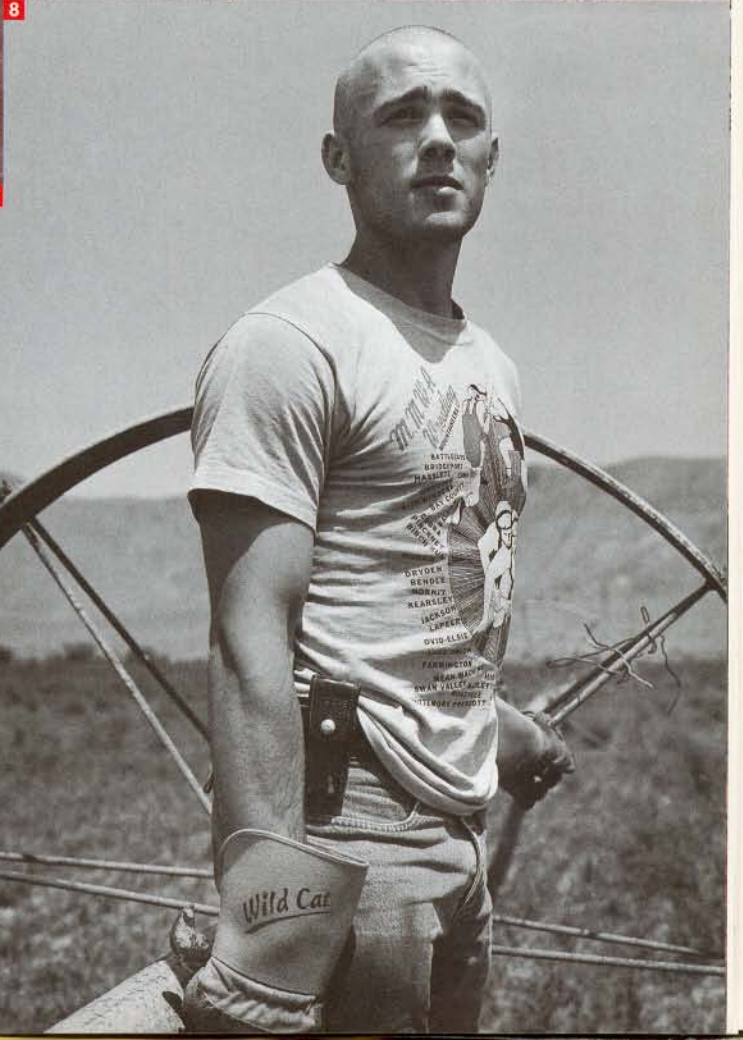
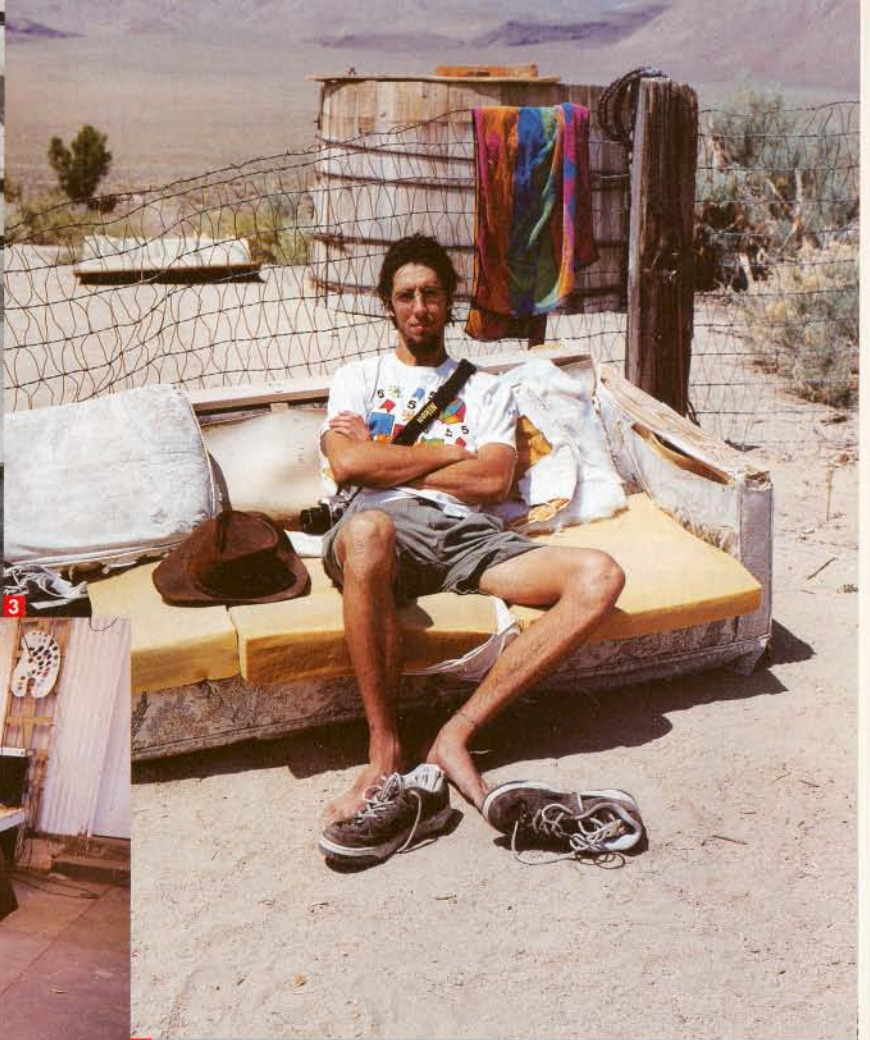
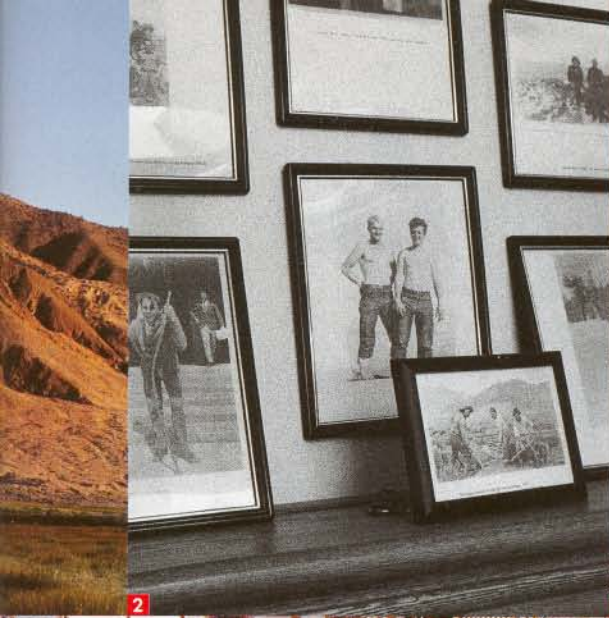
A bit pretentious, maybe, but it's not just spouting off. In addition to feeding himself (sometimes, it's just a single side of dried beef for the whole summer, stashed under his bed), the cowboy has to raise 300 wild animals as if they were his children. It can be harrowing, as Dave Hitz and his Junior Cowboy, Joe Gibson, dis-



FIELD STUDIES

(1) Deep Springs' 2003 graduation ceremony. The first-year students each give a speech honoring a second-year student. (2) The museum. (3) Student Roo Dulles-Coelho lounging near a swimming hole, called the "Upper Res." (4) Academic dean Gary Gossen. His wife, Ellie, is the librarian, and his son, Nicholas, is a graduate. (5) The art studio. (6) Junior Cowboy Kiep and Senior Cowboy Blasdel. (7) Students Isaac Ericson and Nathan Leamy at the cabin built in memory of Michael Pihos. (8) Ryan Erickson, working in the field.



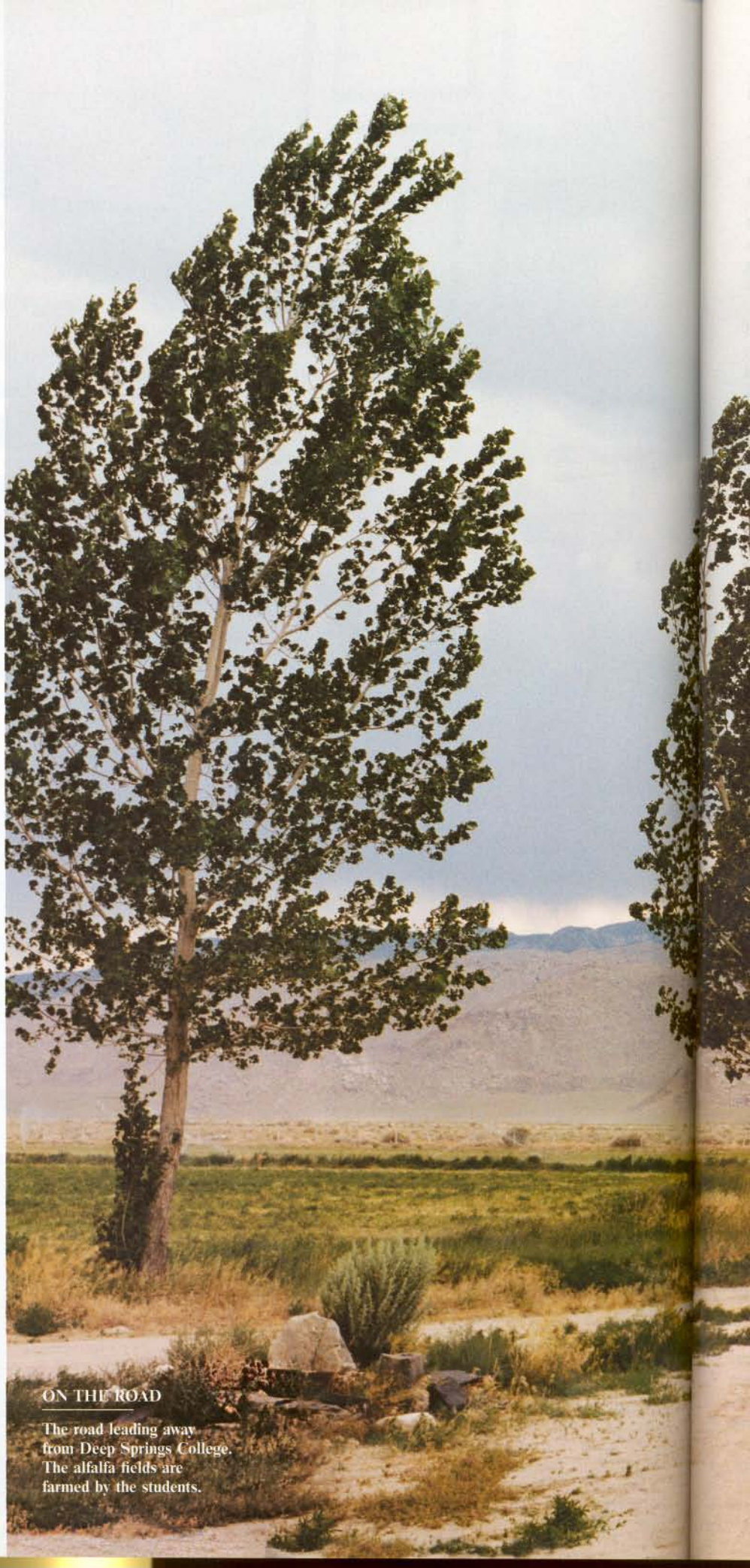


covered. Four cows had gotten into some clover, which causes “bloat” that will kill them unless the proper stomach chamber is stabbed with a knife and the gas let out. Joe had the right knife but the wrong chamber. Desperately poking into their flesh, he watched them asphyxiate and die. “He was traumatized,” recalls Hitz. “Not only was he not poking them in the right place to save them. He’d been torturing them while they were dying.” Alex, too, has stood by helplessly—as Angel, one of his favorite cows, was stuck in the mud, half devoured by coyotes and still breathing. “We got there 12 to 24 hours too late and we had to put her down,” Alex says. “She was still alive. It was totally upsetting.” At random moments, he’ll get a faraway look and say, “I miss Angel.”

But you don’t have to slaughter, rassle, or horse-whisper to be a Deep Springer. There are some students, often referred to as “touchy-feelies,” who are about as ranchero as Hugh Grant. This year, they are the cooks—Nathan, Phil, Jody, Myer, and Cyrus. You can spot them by their dyed hair—pink, blue, canary yellow—and they can be seen huddled together clipping artichoke leaves or peeling hazelnuts. But the word “cook” does not do them justice. They are aspiring Escoffiers, living and breathing haute cuisine, forming their own food clubs. “We got my mom to ship us cheese from the local grocer, because we don’t get nice cheese here,” explains cheese-club president Cyrus St. Armand-Poliakoff, a sprightly first-year student, whose clipped speech sometimes makes him sound like he’s in a snit. “And Theodore [a visiting professor] went to Paris, so he brought back some cheese, and we’re going to have a little picnic tonight. We’re making up some baguettes.”

Although they are at least five hours from anywhere they could buy such delicacies as Meyer lemons, they are nonetheless lovingly attempting to prepare for their fellow Deep Springers dishes like pea soup with crème fraîche, mint risotto, and apricots marinated in chamomile flowers. But the random herbs that happen to sprout in the desert do not add up to Chez Panisse. The flavors aren’t working and the portions are so damned nouvelle that stomachs are growling nonstop.

“The cooks are idiots,” says Josh, ripping the throat out of a rooster. “The whole thing with the beef broth and ‘appetizers’ at lunch today. I think Phil probably stayed up all night to cook. I mean, it’s kind of cool that he stayed up all



ON THE ROAD

The road leading away from Deep Springs College. The alfalfa fields are farmed by the students.

By all rights Deep Springs
should have ended in a sex cult or mass
murder—*Lord of the Flies* come to life.



night. But it's not the most thoughtful thing when you have a community of people who need to eat a hearty meal before they go out for the next five hours."

This is the other thing that Deep Springs is all about: understanding that one's particular role—be it cook, dairy boy, mechanic, "feed man," librarian—is critical to the well-being of the community. That if you can't fix the tractor, no one eats. And while the cooks think everybody's being unappreciative, rude, not to mention conforming to a very Lacanian power structure, they may be starting to get it. They have to admit that tonight's coq au vin—made with Josh's scraggly old roosters—wasn't all they'd hoped it would be.

There are a million episodes like this at Deep Springs. The guy who didn't chop enough wood to keep the BH warm is the same guy who's deciding whether you can come back next year. "It's like the army," as one Deep Springer puts it. "The guys you hate, the guys you officially hate, are still fucking close to you." Occasionally students deal with this by wandering off and trying to find the voice of the desert that Nunn talked about. They may even decide to live out there for a while, by killing and eating rabbits and sleeping under boulders. In Cyrus's case, he vents his anger by dancing his head off at the occasional "boojies," the free-for-all, all-male dances out in the desert. "It feels so good to dance," he says, with emotion. The last boogie—entitled "Questions Concerning Technology" after a Heidegger essay—was accompanied by some of Cyrus's impressive avant-garde synthesizer compositions. For good measure, he also performed some improvisation with a robot he and Josh built which has a cannon for a penis.

But fully erect robots don't do it for everyone. Deep Springs basically throbs with free-floating sexual energy—"a stench," says one Deep Springer—with nowhere to go. The straight guys valiantly do everything they can not to lose it: hoard magazines such as *Maxim* and *Cosmopolitan*, watch cute-girl movies over and over and over. (Currently in heavy rotation is the 1994 Gen X hit *Reality Bites*, which has spawned a raging debate over who's hotter—Natalie Portman or Winona Ryder—and a disturbing realization: "We hate Ethan Hawke," says Josh. "He's kind of a Deep Springer.") The rare presence of any youngish female visitor to the college will have the men spontaneously wrestling in the dirt.

It's not just the students who can't control themselves, but also the female teachers who should know better. Lonely, surrounded by young men who have been fully empowered and who don't necessarily wear

shirts, female teachers have sometimes been unable to resist. "It's a custom-made trap for young female faculty members in their 20s," says Geoff Pope, "if they're having any kind of disruption in their own lives, or any sense of not having achieved something they want. . . . Some of these women knew exactly what they were doing, and they were really wielding that power that came with being older." Over the years, there have been serial offenders who slept with so many students the idea of sexual relations between students and the older women on campus ceased to shock. Eventually, it fostered such a sense of mistrust that one student was throttled by the husband of a faculty member who believed him, wrongly, to be sleeping with his wife.

It is a measure of Deep Springers' unique logic that some choose to attend the all-male school because they think it will help them get laid. It's true, however, that Deep Springs groupies do exist. They are smaller in number than Bon Jovi groupies, to be sure, but they are just as devoted (as Alex has discovered in his time out in the world). Still, the isolation manages to make itself apparent. A recent date Josh went on while on break is torturing his mind like a Vietnam flashback. "I was absolutely insane," he says, still cringing. "I talked about . . . 'dealing with text on its own terms,' things like that. 'Oh, let's talk about Hemingway.' I'm talking this poor girl's ear off. I'm watching it happen. I know that I'm not talking about normal things."

Most love affairs at Deep Springs, fortunately, are with learning. William J. vanden Heuvel's pronouncement that Deep Springs was "the most important educational experience of my life" is not unusual. He waxes nostalgic about his education there as if he were talking about his first romance: the trips up into the mountains with Beethoven and opera played on a hand-wound gramophone; the German-Jewish refugee faculty couple, Alice and Kurt Bergel, who would have musical games at their home, humming bars of music for the students, who'd have to guess the piece. Even falling into the vat of boiling water that was reserved for a pig was an event he considers a crucial learning experience.

Deep Springers, in recent years, have used pencils that bear a Wallace Stevens passage, "One must have a mind of winter," and worn T-shirts that say WITTGENSTEIN PARTY BUS, to celebrate a philosophy seminar. (This particular one was courtesy of Pete Rock, author of *The Ambidextrist* and the forthcoming *The Bewildered*.) When the scheduled time for class is finished, enthusiastic students (there are about four to a class) often invite their teachers to continue the discussion on the lawn. Sometimes they lobby for more classes per week, to get more

in. For professors, who come for a few years from schools such as Berkeley and Yale and get paid in the \$30,000-to-\$40,000 range, there is no comparison. Humanities professor Dave Arndt, who studied at Yale, assigns 4,000 pages of such heavy reading as Heidegger and hundreds more of literary criticism each eight-week term. "I don't think there's any college in the United States where you can assign that kind of reading and have the students respond as enthusiastically as they do," he says.

The question remains: What does all of this strangeness get you? A minority of Deep Springs alumni believe the very ideals that make the college unique make the graduates ill-prepared for our world. "The fact that you have a different sense of self-reliance and self-responsibility actually puts you out of step with the society we live in," says Byron Estep ('86), a guitarist who dresses up in Day-Glo yellow pajamas to perform in Manhattan with the Blue Man Group band and who manages its musicians around the world. "You add onto that missing out on some very critical years in relating with women, you wind up with a person who is pretty significantly out of step with the mainstream of society. . . . It's like people who go to the Peace Corps, and they come back and live for two years in their parents' basement drinking beer and watching TV."

Far more often, however, graduates regard it as the defining experience of their lives. They find meaning and inspiration particularly from its devotion to service. A typical Deep Springer is Nicholas Gossen ('99), who upon graduating deferred Harvard and went to Bosnia with the International Rescue Committee. He's now a Truman scholar working at the Department of Homeland Security. But Nunn's interpretation of service was expressly broad. "The L. L. Nunn phrase that is most resonant with me is 'the blacksmith with heart,'" says Zac Unger ('91), who went on to Brown before becoming a nice Jewish firefighter. "He wanted people to be of public service, but it didn't mean you had to be the head of an NGO. You could be of public service by doing what you do and being a servant to your small community." While at Yale, Estep led the successful effort to admit women to Skull and Bones. Dave Hitz, at the forefront of technology that stores the special effects from movies like *The Lord of the Rings*, has taken comfort in and is guided by that idea, too. "The point is, you don't have to go out and be like Mother Teresa. Maybe it's O.K. to go out and, whatever it is that you are, be a good one and a moral one and an ethical one." Though he lost a billion in the tech crash, Hitz understands that "I still have way more money than any person should have," and he has given several million dollars of it to Deep Springs.

With Hitz's millions, Deep Springs has come full circle. Eighty years ago, Telluride, Colorado, was like Silicon Valley and Nunn was as wealthy for his time as Hitz, having pioneered the transmission of electrical power long distances, which helped make Telluride one of the first electric cities and ushered in a gold rush. To keep the lines running, Nunn had to teach young men to run the switching stations between the power plant and Telluride's mines. Eventually, this new project—training young men—proved more inspiring to him than high-voltage electricity. After cashing out of his company, which sold power to other mines, he founded the Telluride Association, an intellectual fraternity at Cornell University that has since become a breeding ground for neocon thinkers. But Nunn soon found that the students of the Telluride Association had been “seduced by the bright lights of Ithaca.” Hence Deep Springs. Upon his death, in 1925, he left the school \$600,000.

While Deep Springs' endowment is now roughly \$9.5 million, the coffers haven't always been so healthy, and over the years the college has flirted with extinction many times. After a golden period in the 1930s and 40s, which saw Deep Springs graduate James Withrow help found the Office of Strategic Services, precursor to the C.I.A., the presidency of the college passed to William E. Fort, a professor of philosophy from Rollins College, who turned out to be a right-wing fanatic. According to current president Jack Newell, after Fort revealed that he was an F.B.I. agent, his first order of business was to have the students erect a giant satellite dish so he could communicate with the outside world. Then, when the students built a rifle range for recreational use, he became especially excited: he wanted it to be used to defend the school against potential enemies. Meantime, he went to all the students, privately, demanding that they turn in any classmates who were Communist.

Another dicey moment was the late 80s, when the occasional motorist desperate for gas would drive up to the college's main circle, take one look at the dilapidated buildings and the cluster of Charlie Mansons hovering at the end of the road, and turn right around in terror. Wind whistled through 60-year-old doorframes, heat and hot water were scarce, and the student body was, even by Deep Springs standards, eccentric. One student was training himself to be a vigilante. Another claimed to be the youngest currency counterfeiter ever to be brought down by the Secret Service. Another pulled a gun in the middle of a student-body meeting as a way of bringing up the issue of firearms. Another managed to run himself over with a truck. “He had tire marks on his back,” recalls Iris Pope. “Not the kind

of guy you want to tick off!” One, during an attempt to learn to hunt like Paleolithic man, stabbed himself in the foot with a homemade spear. “The inmates were running the town,” says Byron Estep, who, as the nasty-meanie labor commissioner, was considered, he says, “the Saddam of labor.”

By 1994, Deep Springs had hit rock bottom. The college was so strapped financially that buildings were on the brink of collapse. “Anybody who had a million dollars that they were thinking of giving to Deep Springs would have to ask themselves, ‘If the college is likely to close, my money has gone down the drain,’” says Newell, who attended Deep Springs in the 50s, taught there in the 60s, and was the head of the board of trustees in the early 90s.

More important, the faculty and staff were not on speaking terms, due largely to the issue of co-education, which had come to an ugly impasse among the trustees, who, as now, included two students. “It was appalling,” says Newell, who came down on the side of co-education. “Students and faculty members were shouting ‘asshole’ at one of the board members.... Anybody who had hopes for co-education was really bitter, and everybody else was bitter, because there had been so many dumb things said.”

It looked like the end. So Newell did what any good Deep Springer would when faced with disaster: he took a walk in the desert. Accompanying him was fellow board member Dick Cornelison, who held the opposing view, and they talked it through. “We said, ‘This place is about over. And unless we can find some way to put these two broken pieces back together and work for the future of the college, it's hopeless.’”

Newell and Cornelison agreed to abandon the issue of co-education, with the greater goal of saving the college. They brought their plea back to the trustees and students, telling them, “The one thing we've demonstrated by the ferocity of our debate is that we care an awful lot about Deep Springs.” “It was amazing and it worked,” says Newell. But the other problem—how to raise \$10 million—remained. And given that the issue of co-education would inevitably remain a hot topic in Deep Springs' future, it was expected that big donors would try to influence that policy.

Indeed, at that very meeting, Congressman Jim Olin, who'd attended in the 30s and held firmly to the strictest traditions, stood up and, according to Newell, said, “[My wife] Phyllis and I believe strongly in Deep Springs, and we want to be the first to stand up and to commit a major gift to help rebuild the endowment and start the building. But there is one issue that is desperately important. We will make

a commitment right now of half a million dollars to the project, with one condition.”

Newell braced himself...

“The condition,” Olin continued, “is that the board will commit itself absolutely to accepting no money to which conditions are attached.”

Newell breathed a sigh of relief. “It was a real act of moral leadership,” he says. Newell was named president a few months later and successfully raised the money.

But the episode doesn't answer the question of why, when other colleges with similar ideas, such as Black Mountain in North Carolina, fell apart, Deep Springs survived. In Newell's opinion, the answer lies at the very heart of Deep Springs' founding philosophy. “I think the tiny size and the isolation and the power of this ideal, that you're given something truly unusual, and you're responsible to go out and do something worthwhile with your life—that's just a compelling idea,” he says. Deep Springs is also a feeling—one that Deep Springers can't quite articulate but understand perfectly. When vanden Heuvel returned to lecture in the late 90s, 55 years after he'd attended, it crept up on him. “My wife was with me, and Jack Newell picked me up at Las Vegas and drove us to the ranch,” he recalls. “We got to the top of the canyon and looked down in the valley. Jack said to me, ‘There it is, Bill.’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ When we got down to the valley, my wife turned to me and said, ‘There what is?’ If you're a Deep Springer, you see a lot more than anyone who's never seen it before.”

Credit must be given to the men who made these abstract notions work, such as Newell himself, a Mormon originally from Ohio, who in his capacity as president has been living on the campus with his wife, Linda, for nine years. After saving the school from the brink of extinction, he later shepherded it through its darkest hour, following the death of student Michael Pihos, in 1999.

Pihos is not remembered for any labor position in particular, but by all accounts he was the leader of his Deep Springs class, a kid who lived for fixing things and seeing anything grow. With long curly hair, sometimes dreadlocked, sometimes blue, he was an exceptional guitarist. He spent his summers at a farm in Wisconsin and building schools in Guatemala. “He was just a ball of energy,” says Mark Kirby, his best friend at Deep Springs, who drove across the country with him in the summer prior to their second year at Deep Springs.

That September, Michael's brother, Peter, was visiting the college. They were returning a station wagon to a ranch friend who lived in the valley. A wrong turn took them down a steep embankment and they got the

Deep Springs

car stuck in a gorge. As you'd expect from a Deep Springer in a jam, Michael didn't consider calling the local mechanic. This was his own problem. He and Peter hiked around until they found a tractor they could borrow. But on their way back to the gorge, the slope proved too steep, and the tractor flipped. Peter managed to jump out in time, but Michael was crushed instantly.

"It was the most ungodly day of my life," says Newell, one of the first to hear what had happened from Peter. He and Linda went about breaking the news to the students. "I was washing pots in the kitchen and Linda came into the kitchen and announced what had happened," Kirby recalls. "I remember running out into the main circle and hugging her as if she were my mother. Then Iris got her pickup truck, and we all loaded in and drove to the site to see if there was anything we could do to help."

But there was nothing to be done. For the first time, Deep Springers came face-to-face with the fact they were not invincible. "A person would flip a truck over five times and walk away smiling. That was part of the culture of the place. It was blessed," says Kirby. "Once Michael's death happened, it just changed that. . . . Michael's death tore that apart."

Many parents in the situation would have sued. Not Michael's. Instead, recalls Newell, they urged the college to devote increased attention to safety but encouraged it not to alter anything beyond that. "They said,

'We hope that you will not redesign Deep Springs in such a way that would take dangerous experiences out of the hands of the students, because that's part of what the program is about.'"

Newell did indeed strengthen the college's safety precautions. He also persuaded a psychologist, Mel Lewin, who was familiar with Deep Springs, to come immediately and encourage the students to deal with the death in whatever way they felt was comfortable. For Michael's roommate Nicholas Gossen, that meant continuing to work on the ranch. "I thought that, for me, maybe the best tribute I could give him was to stay there and ride the tractor and irrigate the fields," says Gossen. He, Kirby, and other men from Michael's class get together every year and have a party where they tell Michael stories. At Deep Springs itself, a cabin has been built in his honor by a friend, who had the distinction of going through an entire year without showering. Painted on the walls, among big, colorful feet, a Pablo Neruda quote, and a Chinese character, is a poem: "I don't know about life. I don't know about love. I don't know about God. I don't know about art. All I know is I miss you."

Tonight will be the last student-body meeting for half of them, as the second-years are set to graduate in about five days. Listening to the bittersweet twangs of Lucinda Williams, lost in their private thoughts, they make their way in vans to Owens Lake. They gather in a circle and have the kind of moment L. L. Nunn talked about. The only sound is the trees blowing in the wind.

The smell of sage wafts through the dry air. The moon is providing all the light they need. Etay Zwick, the president of the student body, gently breaks the silence, telling them that they have become like brothers, that they have changed his life forever. He then opens the meeting to the floor, for the real Deep Springs stuff.

"I want to know why Josh hasn't cleaned up his sheepskin crap," says one.

The men break out in agreement, gang-ing up on him.

"I know, I know," Josh says, defensive and flustered. "It's been discussed and discussed, and"—he sighs, conceding—"it's disgusting."

Next up, Cyrus would like to bring his "mildly retarded" poodle, Brutus, to Deep Springs next year. "I will care for him like my own child," he says. "I'll use one of those toddler gates."

"I find those gates very psychologically taxing," says Myer, his fellow cook.

But Cyrus sticks to his guns. Brutus is hypoallergenic, he explains, delivering the dictionary meaning of the term. Cyrus will vacuum regularly. He will take Brutus on regular walks.

A vote is taken; the dog's coming.

Two hours later and meeting adjourned, the boys get to their feet, strip off their clothes, and jump into the lake. They howl as they hit the cold water, splash one another, and scream. Tonight, it's not about finding the voice in the desert, or even the voice in the lake. It's about a bunch of guys skinny-dipping together before they have to say good-bye. □

Brad Pitt

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 171 shows the emptiness of vengeance," Pitt maintains. "It's about one civilization trying to overthrow another civilization. What he's trying to say is, we can't be drawing these boundaries—us versus them. We've got to accept our common humanity. The hatred of men is born; it dies. The things that separate us—they die. The thing that's everlasting is our humanity."

After Achilles kills the Trojan prince Hector, his father, King Priam—played by Peter O'Toole—begs for the return of his son's body. "As walled up as Achilles is to any kind of emotion, Priam comes in and disarms this hardened warrior with the weapons of peace, which are words," Pitt says. "There's a line that brought me to my knees, that still gives me gooseflesh. Achilles says to Priam, 'If I do this for you, you're still my enemy in the morning.' Priam's response is 'You're still my enemy

now, but even enemies can show respect.'"

Pitt sighs. "That scene was one of the high points of my mini-career."

Even the august O'Toole approves of his younger co-star. "He came through," says O'Toole. "He was completely prepared for every scene we did. Not once did he ever lose one thread of authority. He's maturing. He's always had a frankness, a disarming sensitivity and vulnerability, and that's becoming stronger. He's a good actor, and he's going to be a fine actor."

By any reckoning, Pitt's career is now moving into its mature phase. He spent a year in training for *Troy* and currently has a body that could put any Greek statue to shame; when his breathtaking musculature is revealed in all its full-length (although not full-frontal) glory during Achilles' love scene with the vestal virgin Briseis, His Buff-ness will once again set female hearts to fluttering all over the world.

"This guy's supposed to be the greatest warrior of all time; I had to get my ass in

shape," Pitt says. "I changed my life completely. I quit smoking—and let me tell you, I was a professional smoker, and I still miss it. I know she was trying to kill me, but I really loved the bitch. But I wanted to see how far I could go with my body; by the time the movie was over, I'd been on this diet and workout plan for over a year. I wanted physical dominance; I wanted to have that ability and endurance in my arsenal. I wanted to have the strength to do this and not be dogging after a take or two. There was a tremendous amount of fighting with swords and spears, and everyone was at the top of their game."

Tall and limber, Pitt still looks boyish in his blue jeans and buzz cut. But he turned 40 last December, and a cynic might wonder whether he finally stopped avoiding heroic roles because the expiration date for their availability appeared on the horizon, distant though that may be.

"It's not that I was trying to avoid anything," he protests. "I only have something to offer if I'm interested in it. I am dead to