

The cowboy college that turns scholars into men

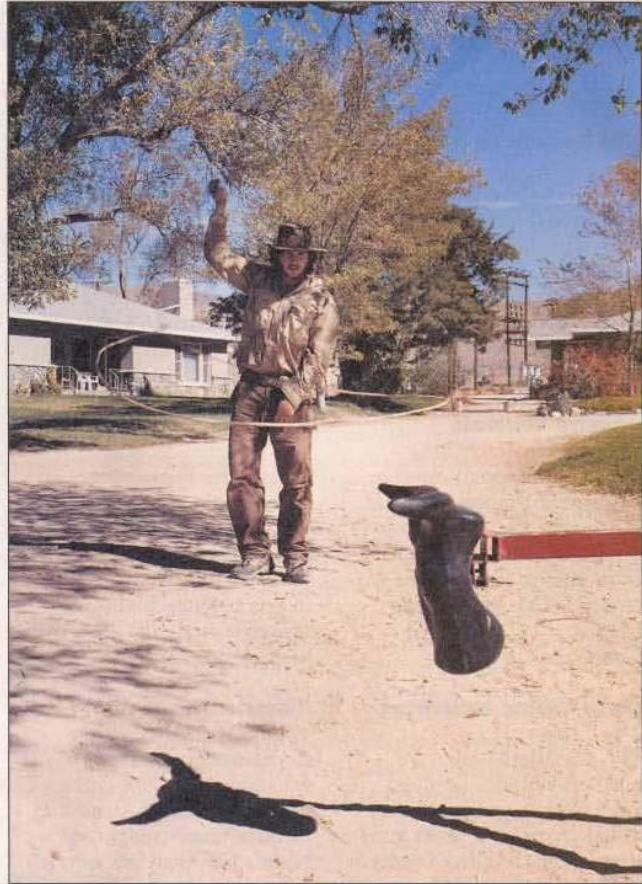
At Deep Springs, students are expected to slay cows, churn their own butter and discuss Heidegger. Adam Higginbotham reports from America's most eccentric college

It's about ten o'clock in the morning when the cow panics. After being driven down the narrow channel for inoculation, most of the 300 cattle have gone quietly. But this one – a wild-eyed brangus crossbreed – throws its forelegs up and over the 6ft wall of the corral. It's trying, impossibly, to escape. Ian Bensberg, a thick-set, bearded 19-year-old, sprints across the yard, plants his feet in the dirt beside the fence and draws back his right fist. With all his strength, he punches the cow in the face. The huge animal is checked for a second. He hits it again; a pause. Then he throws a final punch – a determined left hook. The cow disappears, its hooves scrabbling down the timber wall. It's a startling spectacle.

Bensberg is in his second year here at Deep Springs College, an elite boys-only academy on a ranch in California. A devotee of Homeric Greek, he plans to go to Oxford this year; he has applied to read classics at Corpus Christi. "Greek really runs to my taste," he says. "And intellectually speaking it's silly that people read Heidegger but not Aristotle, Tom Stoppard but not Sophocles." Later, as the sun begins to warm the frigid desert, Bensberg talks about the *Iliad* and Hector's death scene; how Andromache draws a bath for her husband, unaware that his body is being dragged around the walls of Troy behind a chariot. "I almost," he says, "felt physically sick when I read that."

Almost a mile up in the Inyo Mountains of eastern California, four hours' drive from Las Vegas and accessible only by a single precipitous road, the Deep Springs Valley is a long way from anywhere. The nearest towns – Big Pine, population 1,350, and Lida Junction, a group of ramshackle buildings at a fork in the road that's home to a warehouse – are an hour away. It was here, in 1917, that Lucien Lucius Nunn discovered a place called the Swinging T ranch and realised he had found the location for the school of his dreams, where he hoped to "develop men of fixed purpose and character, who will dedicate themselves to the higher cause of service". Nunn, a diminutive man who in 1889 was president of the first bank robbed by Butch Cassidy, made a fortune developing America's first AC power grid, but later became interested in the education of young men. Convinced that conventional universities produced students too driven by materialism and too often distracted by drinking and womanising, he wanted to return society to purer principles.

Nunn hoped to create a new elite – leaders of tomorrow motivated by altruism. Education at his spartan college would be free and built on "three pillars": labour, academia and self-government. Students would learn the value of physical work, the enlightenment of the liberal arts, and the responsibilities of setting the rules for their own community. Nunn picked the first 20 students, brought them to the valley in October 1917, and explained the "isolation policy": drugs, alcohol and tobacco were forbidden, and no student was to leave the valley during term-



Learning to use a lasso is part of the curriculum at Deep Springs

time. Then he issued them with tents; their first task was to finish constructing the campus buildings in which they would sleep, eat and learn. Nearly 90 years later, those buildings remain at the centre of a small campus for 26 young men aged between 17 and 21, and are still governed according to Nunn's eccentric beliefs. Deep Springs College is one of the most enduring and successful educational experiments in American history.

Even for the brightest students, Deep Springs is fearsomely hard to get into. For a start, only men need apply. And only those who score in the top 1% of American high-schools' Standardised

Aptitude Tests are usually considered. Each year up to 16 high-school graduates are accepted on the two-year course (on a scholarship worth \$50,000); most then go on to university. The application

process is exacting. There are two rounds of essays – seven in total, on questions such as "What is evil?" On the basis of this material, 40 candidates are invited to spend four days at the college, to be interviewed by a panel of ten students and staff, and to work on the ranch. The experience of labouring in the desert in midwinter is enough to put many off. "It's fairly forbidding – cold wind, grey sky, no moisture and they're out working in the fields," says the college president, Ross Peterson. "A lot of them will tell you before they leave, 'I don't think I can be here.'"

Thursday. 1.55pm. It's a blazingly hot afternoon, and out in a field beside the pig-pen the students are supposed to be forking alfalfa on to the back of a truck. Instead, Noah Rosenblum, a skinny 19-year-old in glasses and bib overalls, is taking on Scott Earnest in a wrestling match. Noah, in his second and final year at Deep Springs, is the current student president. He grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of Harvard. Scott, 18, is a first year. Big and ruddy-faced, he's from Chebeague, a tiny island off

"A breakfast table looks different to someone who has milked cows, churned butter, slaughtered hogs and dug potatoes"

the coast of Maine, and did his high-school education at home, taking courses over the internet. He drove across the country to college in his pick-up truck; he'd converted it himself, so that the engine runs on used cooking-oil. "I'm more labour-inclined than a lot of the guys here," he says. "Some of them are going straight off to Oxford. I'd rather be on a horse any day."

Officially, each student at Deep Springs must put in 20 hours of labour a week, but in reality there's a lot more than that to do. The small staff includes a cook, a farm manager and the 57-year-old ranch manager, Geoff Pope, whom generations of Deep Springers regard as the model of the "cowboy intellectual", a graduate in Russian literature who has spent 40 years working with cattle. But the daily work – from cleaning the lavatories and preparing meals to tending, slaughtering and butchering the cattle – is done by the students. The work gives the students a new perspective on a world they have grown up taking for granted. "A breakfast table looks different," wrote the Deep Springs alumnus Jack Newell in an essay in 1993, "to someone who has milked cows, churned butter, slaughtered hogs and dug potatoes."

Friday. 4.20am. Julian Petri, dazed by lack of sleep, waits silently outside the boarding house. It is clear and cold and perfectly dark. The stars overhead glint with the brightness and clarity of a planetarium display. Ben Israel is late. "I guess his alarm clock didn't work," says Julian, who goes off to look for him. Julian is a keen, nervy first year with curly hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Offered places at both Harvard and Yale, he gave them up to come to Deep Springs. He liked the landscape here, and the isolation. "It seemed like here I would gain some seriousness – a sense of purpose." Eventually, Julian finds Ben, a dreadlocked second year in a cycling jersey, in the kitchen warming a batch of fermenting yogurt. This term Julian and Ben are the Dairy Boys, and this morning, as usual, they start milking the cows before dawn. They go about their work without a word. "In the brochure," says Julian, "it says we discuss Heidegger over the hiss of the pails at 4.30am. But that's a lie." It's 5.15am before their job is finished. Julian goes back to bed. Ben returns to the boarding house to let his dog out. But then there is more work – he has to read *As I Lay Dying* for his next literature class. In the library Noah Rosenblum is sitting at a computer, wearing a white stetson and completing the essay portion of his Ucas application to Magdalen College, Oxford, about "the limitations of a narrative understanding of the self". Outside, it's still pitch dark.

Of Deep Springs's many idiosyncrasies, it's the self-government that makes the place truly stand out. The students themselves make almost all the important decisions about their education, the environment in which they live and the future of the school itself. The student body votes on everything, choosing the subjects they



Lucien Lucius Nunn: a kind of genius

study and helping hire the staff who teach them. They oversee the applications process and pick the students who will succeed them. They also vote on – and enforce – Nunn's isolation policy. At an age when many of their peers are preoccupied with alcohol and girls, their decision to abstain from both is remarkable. It does not stem from principled asceticism: many Deep Springers drink during the holidays, and one Nineties alumnus tells me that as soon as term came to an end he would apply himself vigorously to the wine and blotter acid he had stashed in the boarding house fridge.

Nunn died eight years after founding Deep Springs, without ever having quite explained what the point of it all was. He intended that Deep Springs should prepare students for a life of service to humanity, but never clarified exactly what he meant this to be. This vagueness was a kind of genius: the students' constant reinterpretation of his scant credo means that Deep Springs was, and continues to be, a radical experiment. When they leave, students are expected to repay their debt to the college by serving others – but the choice of how to do so is up to them. Nunn's education was not designed to lead to a specific career, but to a specific approach to whatever career its students chose. "If something goes wrong," writes Jack Newell, "instead of walking away from it, they're inclined to say, 'How can I fix this?'" The college has produced a remarkably disparate group of men. From 85 years' worth of graduates, there are very few famous alumni: the novelist William T. Vollmann is one; the Virginia Congressman Jim Olin another. But Deep Springs does turn out many activists, teachers and ecologists, farmers, writers and pastors. Many of them go on to Harvard. Half never marry.

During my stay at Deep Springs I ask the students what they think is the most important thing they've learnt since they arrived. None of them mentions Heidegger, Homer, cattle drives or alfalfa. Instead, almost all say the same thing: that living day in and day out with such a small group of people, they've learnt to get on with other human beings. "You're forced to confront people," says Ian Bensberg. "Intelligent people, whose judgements you respect, can disagree with you about what you think is a good book. In labour, if you do a bad job, they criticise your work." Standing out in the desert, smoking a Lucky Strike (the tobacco ban was repealed by the student body six years ago), Bensberg reflects on how his view of the world has changed since he left his home in Greenwood, Indiana. Here, he says, there's a purity to the landscape. Back in suburbia the sky is different. "It has this odd pinkish tinge to it which I never noticed before. The night sky here – you get used to seeing so many stars. In Greenwood you look up and there's, like, four stars and a pink cloud, and it's very disappointing. It looks," he says, "sickly."

This article first appeared in The Sunday Telegraph.

WEATHER

Driest:

No rain at all fell during the week at Bournemouth, Torquay, Falmouth, Barnstaple and Swansea.



Warmest:

21C (70F) at Lee-on-Solent (Hants) on Wednesday 4th

Coldest:

Minus 4C (25F) at Katesbridge (County Down) on Tuesday 10th

Sunniest:

14.5 hours at Ronaldsway airport (Isle of Man) on Tuesday 10th

Wettest:

20mm (0.79in) at Cromer (Norfolk) on Saturday 7th

For the week that was:

Last Wednesday was warm along the English Channel coast, but many eastern districts were sharply colder with a chill north wind and afternoon highs of 8-10C. After a brief recovery in temperature, it turned colder again over the weekend with widespread showers, locally heavy and accompanied by hail and thunder. There were overnight frosts from Sunday night onwards, but most parts of the country had long sunny periods on Monday and Tuesday.

A deep depression brought heavy rain and cold northerly winds to New England and the Canadian Maritimes, including a fall of 94mm in two days at Halifax, Nova Scotia. Meanwhile, severe thunderstorms and hailstorms hit the High Plains of the USA, with three reports of tornadoes. The pre-monsoon heat culminated in highs of 40-42C across Thailand at the end of last week, but the monsoon broke on Sunday with 158mm of rain at Phuket.