School of hard knocks

The students at Deep Springs College in California must excel academically; but they also have to learn to lasso cows and slaughter pigs. Adam Higginbotham visits the academy which turns boys into men

It's about ten o'clock in the morning when the second cow panics. After being driven down the narrow channel for inoculation and pregnancy testing, most of the 300 cattle have gone quietly. But this one – a wild-eyed brangus crossbreed – throws its head and 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 and 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 reels back and disappears, its hooves scrabbling down the timber wall. It's a startling spectacle.

Is that, I ask, what you' re supposed to do? 'I guess so,' Bensberg shrugs. He is in his second year here at Deep Springs College, an elite – and somewhat idiosyncratic – boys-only academy on a ranch in California. A devotee of Homeric Greek, Bensberg plans to go to Oxford this year; he's 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 floor, Ian talks about the *Iliad* and Hector's death scene; how Andromache draws a bath for her husband, unaware that his body is already 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 whorehouse – are an hour away. When winter snowfall is especially heavy, the valley is cut off for days at a time.

But it was here in spring 1917 that Lucien Lucius Nunn discovered a place called the Swinging T ranch and

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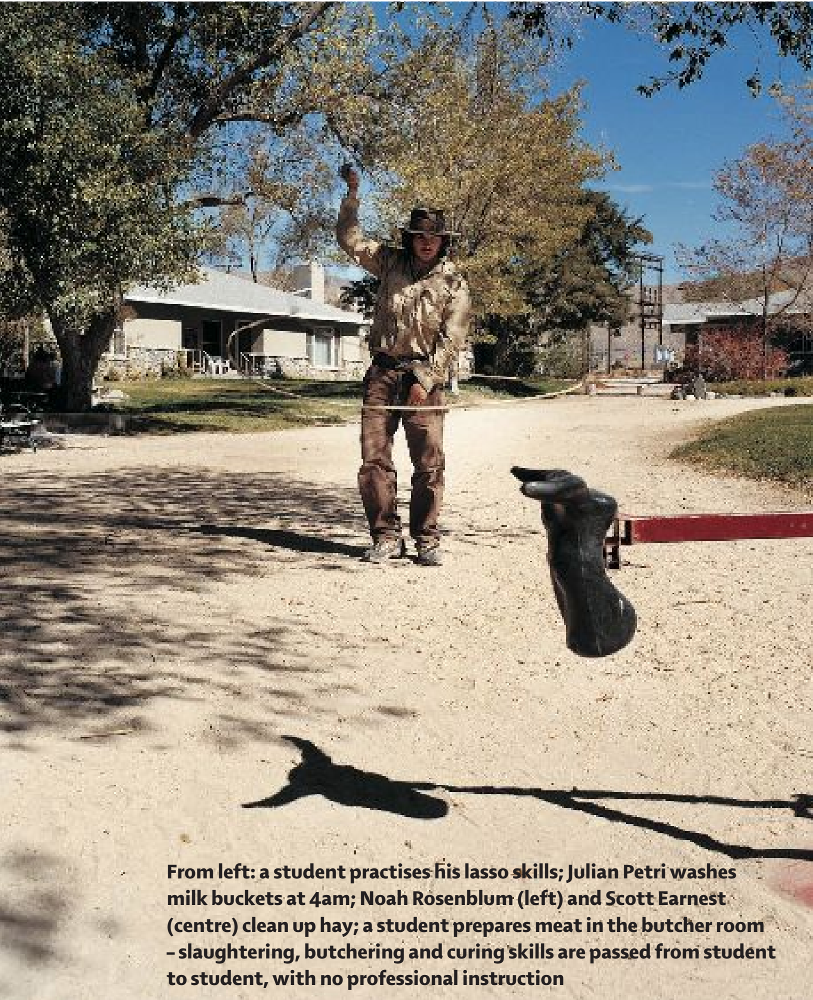
Clockwise from top left: a student does some research in the Deep Springs library; holding back cattle during pregnancy testing on the college's 32,000-acre ranch; a quantum mechanics class; cattle being herded



From left: a student practises his lasso skills; Julian Petri washes milk buckets at 4am; Noah Rosenblum (left) and Scott Earnest (centre) clean up hay; a student prepares meat in the butcher room – slaughtering, butchering and curing skills are passed from student to student, with no professional instruction

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 professional ambition – and too often distracted by dancing, drinking and womanising – he wanted to return society to purer principles.

With his spartan new college, Nunn hoped to create a new elite – leaders of tomorrow motivated by altruism. Education would be free and built on 'three pillars': labour, academics and self-government. Students would learn the value of hard 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-time. Then he issued them with tents; the first task they had to accomplish was to finish constructing the campus buildings in which they would sleep, eat and learn.

Since then the existence of the college has been threatened many times – by bankruptcy and political extremism, by unsuccessful experiments with co-education, and by the death of a student in a tractor accident. But, nearly 90 years later, those buildings in the desert 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 one per cent of American high-schools' Standardised Aptitude Tests are usually considered. Each year between 11 and 16 high-school graduates are accepted on the two-year course (each on a scholarship worth $50,000); most then go on to university.

The application process is lengthy and exacting. There are two rounds of essays – seven in total, equivalent to a year's coursework for a high-school student. The first round is straightforward – they must describe themselves, explain why they're interested in Deep Springs, and critique an artwork or solve a problem. But the second round calls upon them to consider questions such as 'What is evil?' On the basis of this material, 40 candidates are invited to spend four days in January visiting the college, where they have an hour-long admission interview before a panel of ten students and staff. For the rest of the time the applicants work on the ranch. Even at this stage, the experience of labouring in the desert in midwinter is enough to put many of them off Deep Springs for good. 'It's often 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 right before they leave, "I don't think I can be here."'

'In the brochure for Deep Springs it says we discuss Heidegger over the hiss of milk pails at 4.30am,' says one student. 'But that's a lie'

Thursday. 1.55pm. It's a blazingly hot afternoon, and out in a field beside the pig-pen the General Labour crew 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. Both his father and his uncle attended Deep Springs. 'I know a lot of lawyers,' he says, by way of explaining his background. Scott, 18, is a first year. Big and ruddy-faced, he's from Chebeague, a tiny island off the coast of Maine, and did his high-school education at home, taking courses over the internet. He came to Deep Springs, he says, because he wanted an education with an ethical dimension. At the start of term he drove across the country to the college in his pick-up truck; he'd converted it himself, so that the engine runs on used cooking-oil. Every few hundred miles he stopped at a fast-food restaurant to fill up with fat left over from the deep-fat fryers. '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 at least 20 hours of labour a week, but in reality there's a lot more than that to do. The small school staff includes a cook, a farm manager and the 57-year-old ranch manager, Geoff Pope, who 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, and keeps a light plane at the school, which he lands on the valley highway. But the daily work – from cleaning the lavatories and preparing meals to tending, slaughtering and butchering the cattle – is done by the students.

The 32,000 acre ranch is run as a business – the work is real enough and the number of students small enough that any individual's failure to muck in has immediate and potentially drastic consequences. At best, failure to get out of bed in time to milk the cows means that there will be nothing to put in the coffee; at worst, failure to close a gate could result in the death of an animal. The work ensures the students gain a new perspective on a world they have grown up taking for granted. 'A breakfast table looks different,' wrote the Deep Springs alumnus and former college president 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. 'And the balance between doing something with your hands, and playing with some of the most difficult ideas to wrap your mind around. It seemed like the right way to go about living. 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. Pushing a cart carrying empty churns, they trundle off into the inky blackness towards the dairy. 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.'

Today, it's 5.15am before the Dairy Boys' 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 press on with reading *As I Lay Dying* for his next literature class. And over 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'. Shortly he plans to join some others for a ride down the valley. Outside, it's still pitch dark.

Of Deep Springs's many idiosyncrasies, it's the self-government element of Nunn's 'three pillars' that makes the place truly stand out. The students themselves make almost all of the most important decisions about not only their education and the environment in which they live but also the future of the school itself. The student body votes on everything, choosing the subjects they study and helping hire the staff who teach them. They oversee the applications process and pick the students who will succeed them the following year. They also vote on – and then must enforce – Nunn's original isolation policy.

At an age when many of their peers are preoccupied with alcohol and girls, the students' decision to abstain from both is a remarkable feat. Even so, the policy doesn't stem from principled asceticism or belief in absolute temperance. Many Deep Springers drink during the holidays, and one 1990s alumnus tells me how the second that term came to an end he would apply himself vigorously to the wine and blotter acid he had stashed in the boarding-house fridge.

Even for those with the inclination, there's little time for fun: the pace of life is exhausting. There's a long-standing cult of sleep-deprivation, with many students getting only three or four hours a night. If they're

not working on the ranch, or in the kitchen, they're reading, or sitting around debating, or attending a class on, say, quantum mechanics.

Since Nunn's academic aim was to train his rugged elite to be articulate spokesmen and fluent writers, there are two compulsory classes: public speaking and composition. Beyond that, students can study whatever they like; recent courses have included calculus, international ethics, Spanish, molecular biology and creative writing – but also 'physics according to Feynman', first-amendment law, the geology of eastern California, ground school for private pilots, black-and-white photography and something known only as 'water resources'.

At the time of Nunn's death, eight years after founding Deep Springs, he had never been precisely clear about what the point of it all was. He had established his 'three pillars' and was clear about his intention that Deep Springs should prepare students for a life of service to humanity, but he never clarified exactly what he meant this to be, defining neither what kind of service, nor for whom specifically it should be performed.

The only written reference the college has to guide it is a 44-page pamphlet bound in soft buff-coloured covers, entitled 'The Constitution of Deep Springs and the Deed of Trust'. It contains a gnomic selection of letters written by Nunn to the student body, extracts from their meetings, unattributed definitions of the terms 'law' and 'freedom' and an essay entitled 'The Man Required for Deep Springs'. Every year the character of the students who run the school, the decisions they make – and therefore the way it turns out the following year and the year after – can change dramatically. In Nunn's vagueness was a kind of genius: the annual 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. In a final test of their responsibility, the choice of how to do so is entirely 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; Robert Sproull, the co-founder of the American government's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, came here, too. But Deep Springs does turn out activists, teachers and ecologists, farmers, writers and pastors. Many of them go on to attend Harvard. Half never marry.

Friday. 8.15pm. In the boarding-house Noah Rosenblum, in a green-checked dressing-gown and bare feet, and still wearing his stetson, is presiding over his last student-body meeting as president. Tonight an election will determine who will hold the post for the next two terms. They take their democracy enormously seriously here. Despite the long hours, the physical exhaustion and the demands of academic coursework, student-body meetings begin at eight every Friday night and often go on until three or four in the morning. Every decision is meticulously and remorselessly debated. The meeting to decide whether or not to install a Coke machine in the boarding-house took two full days. Once, when a Catholic student requested permission to leave the valley to take mass in a nearby town, he was asked, 'If we don't let you go, does that mean you'll go to hell?' His fellow students were only prepared to let him leave if the answer was yes.

'It's a duty,' says Noah. 'When you get to two in the morning you know you're not getting anything accomplished, but nobody will leave, on principle, because it's the student-body meeting.'

Tonight is no different. Before the election can begin the students must decide the system by which the 26-man electorate will be balloted.

Lucien Lucius Nunn, who founded Deep Springs in 1917

'A lot of the students have been told, "You're wonderful." When they come here they are humbled – fast'

The relative benefits of the different types of proportional representation are explained at length by a softly spoken first year with a laptop. Even if his recommended method of transferred voting is selected, he realises that some people may not be satisfied that their votes have been allocated fairly. But he's prepared to demonstrate how it works for any doubters. 'Hopefully it won't come to that, but if it does,' he says quietly, 'I've written a little programme that will run the algorithm.'

During my stay at Deep Springs I ask all the students I speak to what they think is the most important thing they've learnt since they arrived. None of them mentions Heidegger, Homer, cattle drives, or alfalfa, or how to mend an irrigation line in the dead of winter. Instead, almost all of them 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. It influences everything you do here – because it's a constant condition to be around other people.'

'For a lot of these students,' says the college president, Ross Peterson, 'all their lives it's all been about them – their parents, their schooling, everything has been, "You're wonderful, you're great." And they come here and they can be humbled so fast – by the labour, by each other. And it is really interesting how they become more concerned about what we can all do together, rather than it all being about them.'

Standing out in the desert, smoking a Lucky Strike (the tobacco ban was repealed by the student body six years ago) and watching the last of the 300 cattle file out of the corral, Ian Bensberg reflects on the way his view of the world has changed since he left his home in Greenwood, Indiana. Here, he says, there's a greatness and a purity to the landscape. Back in suburbia the sky is different. 'It has this odd pinkish tinge to it which I never really noticed before. The night sky here – you get used to seeing so many stars, to being able to see your shadow when the moon is full. 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.' ●