

## Chapter 6. Telluride House: Are We Home Yet?

Over my high school years my experience and intellectual engagement expanded outwardly as my ego inflated inwardly. Then Telluride invited me to a four-year room-and-board scholarship in their residence at Cornell (and Cornell accepted me with some tuition support, supplementing state-sponsored scholarships), where I imagined I would have exciting thoughts among those with whom I felt I belonged. My undergraduate years, liberating as they were, turned out to be a painful transition as I worked through personal issues and confronted a challenging environment—in both good and bad senses. I will elaborate some of the painfulness and difficulties in Chapter 10. Here I will discuss the largely positive parts of the experience, particularly as they influenced my writing development, though the relevance may only emerge in later chapters.

Cornell, from its founding just after the Civil War, mixed a private arts and sciences college with a public land grant agriculture school, later expanded to include state sponsored schools of hotel administration and industrial and labor relations. This mix and the “centrally isolated” rural setting created a more informal atmosphere than in the other Ivy League schools. It was over two hundred miles from the major cities in each direction, located between two gorges on the slopes leading down to the picturesque Lake Cayuga. The campus and region offered much natural beauty which I was able to enjoy daily walking to class and on outings. It also had many faculty who were or would be quite prominent in their professions. Even some of my TAs were eventually to become well-known. At the time, the campus wore its traditions, neo-gothic architecture, and academic excellence lightly, offering young people a place to find themselves and develop their talents. Although it was clearly a bastion of privilege, during my time when some other Ivies maintained quotas it had a reputation for admitting many academically achieving Jews from the New York metropolitan area.

Telluride House was founded in 1910 by L.L. Nunn, an electrical power industrialist from the Western US, to provide liberal intellectual development for his company’s engineers. It served as an instrument of cultural and influence mobility in his time, though initially only for a restricted group, racially, ethnically, and gendered. Nunn also founded Deep Springs College a few years later. Telluride House every year admitted a couple of students from that 2-year institution for them to finish their degrees at Cornell. Character and leadership, along with intellectual excellence, have been themes of both institutions; the goal was to produce young men who would enter the upper reaches of society and power. The house soon began to recruit more widely beyond engineers from Nunn’s companies, and eventually was comprised mostly of undergraduate and graduate students from arts and sciences. During the mid-sixties there were few engineers

or even scientists in the House. And it had been a while since any house member had come from Nunn's companies. Just before I entered Cornell the house began to include women, whose numbers gradually increased during my time. There was some racial diversity (which was to improve just as I was leaving). The majority of students, however, had come from professional or academic families. The summer program for high school juniors, however, had been more intentionally inclusive for a few years, and summer programs were starting to take place on HBCU campuses.

Initially the selection for the house and other scholarships that allowed me to attend Cornell confirmed my self-concept as entering an intellectual elite. In many respects over the next four years, the house provided a community of thoughtful, interesting people. The house included around thirty undergraduate and graduate students. Roommates were paired across generations. My freshman year my roommate for the fall term left little impression on me (though he was later to become a notorious architect of the second Iraq War), but my spring roommate Gabor Brogyanyi, a comparative literature graduate student, became a kindly older brother to me as he would talk to me about life and help me sort through some of my confused emotions. He also demystified many of the expectations of literary reading and essay writing, which prepared me for much of the writing described in the following chapters. He would talk me through my nascent ideas for papers and by questioning would help me address the expectations of writing assignments. I remember many times when he would make transparent poems I had found impenetrable. I have a vivid memory of him demonstrating with his cupped hands the precise imagery of water cascading down the tiered bowls of a fountain. Other older undergraduate and graduate members of the house provided me useful guidance and feedback on writing assignments. The influence of others, however, was more troubling, posing problems and choices that led me to define myself in resistance and opposition, as I will discuss in chapter 10.

The house also hosted faculty guests of some note for short- and longer-term stays, and many of the speakers who came to campus were invited for receptions. Among ourselves we had seminars and weekly public speeches. Over meals, late-night snacks in the kitchen, or long walks, we had endless discussions about ideas and issues that came up in our courses, our readings, and our musings. We pondered our own directions, choices, and goals. Further, the house was self-governing in conjunction with an association of upper division students and recent alums, so we had weekly business meetings, administrative committees, committees examining our endowment portfolio, and evaluation of applications for summer programs. I learned a sense of civic responsibility—as well as the politics of deliberative persuasion among a group of analytically sharp and academically successful people. I also learned details of non-academic practicalities from stock portfolio evaluation to purchasing kitchen equipment. One of my iconic memories capturing the heterogeneity of the Cornell Telluride experience was when I interviewed a professor of kitchen design at the Hotel School to become briefed

on the options for a new commercial meat slicer for the house kitchen. My newly gained knowledge made for an authoritative recommendation, adopted after some overly clever debate at the house meeting.

The summer program application process required us every year during the winter intersession to read hundreds of applications of academically successful high school juniors nationally, so I developed an eye for those who were original, smart, and motivated in ways that might lead them to unique contributions to society. The most damning (and often repeated) thing we could say about an application was that it was “competent but dull.” Each year we also needed to write our own applications for the continuation of our fellowship in the house and admittance to the governing association. These applications required us to reflect on our goals and experiences, as well as to what we valued in the reading we were doing and the projects we engaged in for our classes and the community. Consequently, we were recurrently reflective about our values, our choices, and our experiences. This habit of reflection has stayed with me in my professional choices, even when it had personal costs. I always felt I needed to be able to give a good account, a coherent account, of what I was doing, why, and what the moral and ethical grounds were for those choices. This is a very specific kind of integrity—in the forming and monitoring of a reasoned life project.



*Figure 6.2. Cornell Branch Telluride Association. Photo from Cornell University Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections: Lucien L. Nunn papers.*