

Iroquois

The Five Nations (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk, and later joined by the Tuscarora in the early 18th century) of upper New York State were the most famous of the northern Iroquoian branch because of their involvement in the imperial fortunes of France and Britain in the seventeenth century.

Men were responsible for the hunt, war and trade. Hunting was important both economically and psychologically, and the status of women probably increased when men became more involved in wars and trade (and less so in hunting due to their long absences) throughout the seventeenth century. The prophet Handsome Lake in the early nineteenth century preached a reconciliation between older egalitarian Iroquoian values and new male-oriented domestic groups/nuclear families based on household agriculture (Wallace 1971). His creed developed into the Longhouse Religion, which still has an important role in many Iroquois Reserves.

The Iroquois, however, are perhaps best-known for their matrilineal social structure and the important role women played in political life. Senior women ('clan mothers') were responsible for keeping track of clan names not in use. Both in the past and today in Iroquois villages that follow Longhouse traditions, women 'dehorn' the chief by taking his chiefly name away from him and therefore effectively remove him from office if his conduct is not satisfactory. Among contemporary Iroquois, the senior woman in the clan -- the "clan mother" -- keeps track of chiefly names in use and names a successor to office when a political chief dies. The choice is approved by other (male) chiefs and the candidate is "raised" up in a special rite called the Condolence ceremony, held as occasion demands (Tooker 1978:437). Female work is sometimes the subject of ritual in the Green Corn and Harvest Festivals (Tooker 1970); both likely originated as solstice ceremonies, following the ripening of the corn in autumn and the time following the fall hunt in winter, respectively. Both

festivals last about three days and appear to have been found in other northeastern, non-Iroquoian-speaking groups.

Traditionally, perhaps the most important ritual in which women played a significant role was the Death Feast, which was held whenever a village was moved every twelve years or so in response to the requirements of soil fertility and lack of firewood. Traditionally, the bones of village dead would be disinterred and placed in a common ossuary; the women were responsible for stripping any remaining flesh off the bones. Today the feast is held annually among the Seneca (Tooker 1978:462), and the participants are not limited to women. This ritual is better-known among the Iroquoian-speaking Huron (among whom early Jesuit missionaries were able to record a few details), and the Iroquois version appears to have been less elaborate. Among the Huron, at least, the timing and place were determined by the council of chiefs (Heidenreich 1978:374). The feast lasted ten days, eight of which were spent preparing the bodies and assembling the participants (Trigger 1987:87); two days of feasting, mourning and gift exchange followed. Among all Iroquoian-speakers, it was believed that only one of two souls was released at death to be reborn. The other was released only with the holding of the Feast of the Dead and departed along a path that followed the Milky Way. Today the feast is found in only some conservative communities; it is marked by dancing clockwise rather than counter-clockwise as in other ceremonies, for the dead are believed to dance with the living and some elements of the world of the dead are inversions of the world of the living. Today the ceremony is usually held ten days after death, at which time the main soul is released and travels along the Milky Way (Tooker 1978:462), the ghost spirit stays in the community. Today the feast is led by women, one from each moiety, while the female officials number about fifteen; they are seconded by male 'helpers' (Fenton and Kurath 1951:145-156). The date of the ceremony is governed by the availability of the food required. The ceremony consists of songs and the distribution of food and gifts; the bones of the dead are not handled.

The Midwinter ceremonial, "... the longest and most complex of [modern] Iroquois rituals" (Tooker 1970:vii) aims at a sacred renewal of the group (traditionally, all fires were extinguished and rekindled; this seems to have survived until the nineteenth century in some Iroquois villages) and reviews the year in order to give thanks for blessings. It includes two Women's Dances that are accompanied by chants, one sacred (forming part of the Four Ceremonies [the Feather Dance, Thanksgiving Dance, Personal Chant, and the Bowl Game], rituals that were added to the Iroquois ceremonial calendar of the Green Corn and Midwinter festivals by the reforms of Handsome Lake), the other social -- sometimes called New Women's Dance to distinguish it from the first (Tooker 1970:26). The time of the Midwinter ceremonial was originally determined by observation of the Pleiades and the moon (Tooker 1970:147) and associated with the return from the Fall hunt, and in the last two centuries has come to be associated with the winter solstice. It is now generally held in January.

Women sponsor one of the most important of the men's Medicine Societies, the False Face ritual (Kurath 1976:123), in which participants wear carved wooden masks that depict beings seen in the forest or in dreams. Women are in charge of the final distribution of food. Traditionally, the head of the society was a woman, called the 'Keeper of the False Faces'. She was in charge of the regalia of the band and was the only means of communication between members, for they otherwise remained incognito to one another and to outsiders (Loeb 1929:279). The ceremony is held in conjunction with the Midwinter ceremonial (Tooker 1978:460).

Women also have their own medicine chants. The two women's curing rites specialize in curing lassitude, lame joints and respiratory ailments. The origin of the healing dance is attributed to a bachelor who married a supernatural frog-woman who later tired of him (Kurath 1976:128). Inconstancy here is a clear reference to female social and political power. There is only one specifically female women's society, the Otter Society. It has no special songs but does have a distinctive water-sprinkling rite

(Tooker 1978:460); the tutelary being that gives its name to the ceremony is imitated. The other societies are open to both men and women. In rituals each sex dances according to a prescribed order; women are separate and form their own line, dancing in a counter-clockwise direction. Most dances use a shuffle step, and women have their own special shuffle dance, the Eskänye (Kurath 1976:124).

Women have their own personal chants (Towisas), just as the men do. These were usually performed during the Planting celebration.

The Four Nights Dance is a pantomime performance of collecting strawberries, winnowing corn, etc. performed by women; the ceremony is today rarely performed, and appears to have been introduced from non-Iroquoian sources. It is sometimes included with the Green Corn festival and was performed in August in at least one of the Iroquois villages (Kurath 1976:127).

Not surprisingly in a culture that fought aggressive wars of survival for a century and a half, the esoteric component of feminine rituals is somewhat limited because Iroquois society has always acknowledged the importance of women in economic, social and political life. Today women participate in the Longhouse but most Iroquois groups segregate the two sexes except when seating is by moiety.

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Tsimshian and Tlingit

The Tsimshian of the Nass and Skeena river valleys and adjacent coasts in British Columbia, Canada, are village dwellers, like their neighbours the Tlingit. In the last century, villages were politically and economically autonomous, and in summer people moved inland from coastal winter villages to trade, hunt and gather berries. Inland groups would also aggregate in large numbers at certain coastal villages during fish runs. They possessed (even today) dispersed, exogamous matrilineal clans and phratries (Miller 1982 -- four for the Tsimshian, two for the Tlingit, although one of the phratries has three totemic crests attached to it). The house group (its Tsimshian name means "being together with one another" -- Sapir 1915:4) was the most important grouping. Both the Tsimshian and Tlingit had four named social classes, though inherited social status was validated by large gift-giving feasts (the potlatch).

In these northern Northwest Coast groups the constant oscillation between peace and war seems to be reflected in a dichotomy between 'here' and 'there' in residential terms -- the Tlingit and Tsimshian live in incorporating and autonomous villages that claim their semi-vacant hinterlands, and yet attempt to conjoin these two locales by means of clans and phratries that are simultaneously 'here' (in the village) and 'everywhere' (in neighbouring villages). Matrilineality -- assigning a person an unvarying identity by virtue of being the son or daughter of a particular mother -- seems to be a secondary phenomenon in Tsimshian life. The Tsimshian have a rule that 'controls' marriage: by marrying the mother's brother's child -- who has a separate clan identity from one's own -- and living with father's people -- who have a clan identity that is different from one's own and one's mother's brother's and one's spouse -- each clan is linked to two others. At the same time one's clan identity is invariable regardless of village affiliation or who one marries (Lanoue 1993). Tlingit matrilineality has similar implications.

Though these were not matriarchal societies, Tlingit and Tsimshian women occupied an important role in political and social affairs, especially since the marriages of high-ranking women were always important to political alliances and village stability. Women rarely held high political office, although there is evidence that women could become chiefs; however, participation in the fur trade in the nineteenth century enhanced the importance of Tsimshian men (Fiske 1991:509), while war and trade played the same role for Tlingit men. The Tsimshian practice of capturing women for wives also hints at status inequality between men and women, though women were admitted to leadership councils. And Tsimshian women, like men, gave feasts (the potlatch) to establish their daughters' prestige and standing vis-a-vis resources (Garfield 1939:228). On the whole, women played an important role within the traditional social system of both the Tlingit and especially the Tsimshian; as Garfield states (1950:28), "perhaps more than their neighbours, the Tsimshian recognized the importance of women in the maintenance of class and rank." Though there is evidence of secret women's rituals, their very prominent social and political contributions probably diminished the significance of such rituals.

At first menses Tlingit girls were confined in a special hut made of branches (Krause 1979:152) or behind a screen or partition within the main house (Oberg 1973:22) for a period that varied from two to three months, up to two years (De Laguna 1990:217, Krause 1979:152, Oberg 1973:22, Swanton 1908:428) according to a girl's rank and her father's wealth (De Laguna 1990:217; Oberg 1973:22,53). Each hut could hold up to four girls (De Laguna 1972:501-502) and was used for giving birth as well as monthly seclusion of adult women. The pubescent girl was supervised by her father's sister, who taught her the traditions of her clan (De Laguna 1990:217). She avoided scratching herself directly. She wore a black feather cap allegedly to preserve her hair colour in old age (De Laguna 1990:217), or a hat with a broad brim or a hood to avoid contaminating the heavens if she were to look upwards (Krause 1979:153), nor could she gaze at men, tools, or the sea (Oberg 1973:33). The

girl fasted for the first eight days of her seclusion. She sipped water through a hollow eagle bone (Krause 1979:153) similar to the ones Tlingit shamans possessed to capture souls or suck illness from the sick (Drucker 1963:160) -- this suggests a parallel between women's innate power symbolized by menstrual blood and the supernatural. After the initial fast she could not eat fresh fish or shellfish for the rest of her seclusion; she could only eat from her own special bowls (De Laguna 1990:217). The girl's lip was pierced for a labret, either at the end of her seclusion (De Laguna 1990:27) or at the beginning (Krause 1979:153); the ear lobes and septum were also sometimes pierced at this time (Oberg 1973:83). The end of the period of seclusion was marked by bathing, a special potlatch feast, and the presentation of new clothes and ornaments. A recent study of Southern Tutchone and Northern Tlingit women suggests (Cruikshank 1990) that many of these customs survive only as oral traditions and are no longer followed by younger women.

Young Tsimshian women were secluded in special menstrual huts at menarche because their condition was regarded as offensive to the spirits of the salmon (Drucker 1963:174). They fasted and purified themselves, although no special supernatural power came of this; it was expected that by following a particular regime of work the young woman would become industrious, bear many children and live a long life. Unfortunately, there are few detailed accounts of the specific restrictions on young women at this time, although it is known that they bathed in the river during and at the termination of their isolation (Drucker 1963:175), and that they ought not to touch food dishes and should drink water through a tube (Cove 1987:257). While isolated they used strings leading from the menstrual hut to the main house to signal their needs (Beynon 1922, cited in Cove 1987:102) since direct contact with the menstruating girl was believed to threaten the survival of the girl's house. Women observed menstrual taboos throughout their lives because of the danger of spiritual contamination from blood. Girls, like boys, were given their names at puberty ceremonies.

Despite the happy endings of some myths that deal with the problematic powers of women (which in fact allude to their importance in social and political affairs), the theme of vagina dentata (cf. "The Glass-Nosed Being" in Cove and MacDonald 1987:107, in which a powerful spirit-being is 'tamed' when he inserts his nose into a woman's vagina) suggests ambiguity in male and female conceptions of power. For example, in order to increase their luck men sometimes slept with a 'lucky woman' who was paid for her services, but usually avoidance of intercourse was a condition for spiritual purity (Cove 1986:104). Tlingit also believed that spirits found all human odours repulsive, and menstruating women were extremely 'powerful' in this sense.

Northwest Coast ambiguity towards women is very likely the result of their concern with incorporating female 'outsiders' (high-ranking women born in another village) within the village and yet acknowledging ties, when convenient, to the outside through village-exogamous marriages by people of the class of chiefs. Significantly, the theme of women who are 'inside-outside' is mirrored in Tsimshian myth: the most important mediators between heaven and earth are the sons of the Chief of Heaven, who appear to young women, carry them to heaven, and conceive children who return to earth with special powers (Halpin 1984:300).

Among the Tsimshian there were two secret societies that were introduced from the Northern Kwakiutl to the south, probably in the early nineteenth century. These were essentially public and guided vision quests (Garfield 1950:45) in which women could participate as adults. Women, however, rarely reached the top positions (Guedon 1984:155). Entrance was obtained by paying an initiation fee. The aim of these secret societies was probably to put in evidence the wealth and power of the houses.

Among both Tsimshian and Tlingit women could and did become shamans after going out in search of a vision in the form of an animal entity, which made the woman sicken. While the relationship to the spirit-helpers is personal, it is not completely secret among the Tsimshian since male and female shamans must be

helped by other shamans to unlock and master the power within them after they become possessed by the tutelary spirit. The relationship to power was personal but after power had been mastered the female shaman's power was publicly acknowledged by allegorical means. Among the Tlingit male shamans were generally reputed to be more powerful than women. Many Tlingit beliefs and practices apparently came from the Tsimshian (De Laguna 1990:221). Significantly, some male Tsimshian chiefs who returned from heaven where they had been in search of divine power were so 'charged' that they were dangerous to anyone they encountered and could only be tamed by taking bites out of women (Halpin 1984:286). This, like the menstrual taboos, suggests that women are power while men must actively seek and tame it; possibly this is a trait imported from their Athapascan neighbours. In general, esoteric female rites are somewhat limited in matrilineal societies that, like the Tlingit, Tsimshian and the Iroquois, publicly acknowledge the important contribution women make to economic and political survival of the group.

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Kwakiutl

The Kwakiutl of Queen Charlotte Strait of British Columbia, Canada, consisted of about thirty 'tribes' or villages in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like the Tlingit and Tsimshian, they belong to the Northwest Coast culture complex: they depend heavily on seafood and sea mammals for subsistence, each village is politically autonomous and economically self-sufficient, and each 'tribe' had its main winter village and several subsidiary inland sites where its members went in the summer to hunt animals for their skins (most areas of the Northwest Coast had few animals that could supply skins for clothing) and trade with groups living in the interior; the Kwakiutl too had elaborate winter ceremonials, well-developed carved and painted art related to their system of social organization (Lévi-Strauss 1979; Lanoue and Korovkin 1988), clearly marked social ranking, and relations with other villages tended to be volatile until the 1850s. Unlike their northern cousins, however, the Kwakiutl have a different form of social organization: each village consists of 'houses', like the Tsimshian and Tlingit, but the houses (called numaym or numayma) do not have any exclusively matrilineal features, and membership in the numayma is reckoned bilaterally. This gave rise to dual membership for most individuals and subsequent competition for followers by ranking chiefs. And unlike the Tsimshian and Tlingit, inheritance of titles and crests was through marriage, from father-in-law to son-in-law (Codere 1990:367), rather than from mother's brother to sister's son. Kwakiutl political alliances and religious and social events are usually marked by the potlatch feast (a gift-giving ceremony that validates inherited social status), like most Northwest Coast groups. But unlike the northern Northwest Coast groups like the Tsimshian and Tlingit, there is no definite marriage rule among the Kwakiutl. The result was a much more volatile political situation compared to their matrilineal neighbours.

Like the Tsimshian and Tlingit, marriages of high ranking women tended to be with males of similar rank in neighbouring villages; lower-ranking women tended to

marry within the village (Rosman and Rubel 1971:148). Individuals owned the food they collected, so that women owned vegetable foods, berries and shellfish (Walens 1981:83); men were responsible for hunting sea mammals.

There is an excellent description of women's puberty rituals in Boas (1966:368-371). At first menses girls stayed inside the house for four days; they were then washed by a close female relative on the mornings of the fifth, ninth, thirteenth and seventeenth days, and then four times at intervals of eight days. The first ritual washing involved the girl stepping through a cedar-bark ring; the girl then moved from the main house to a special seclusion room at the back of the house. It was believed that all her actions in the period of seclusion had an effect on her later life: she wore a hat to protect her eyes from the sun or she would have red eyes as an adult (Boas 1966:369 -- it is more likely that the hat was to prevent the girl from 'polluting' the sun in her dangerous condition); the girl wore a band around her chest to prevent her breasts from becoming too full; she had a copper scratcher since she could not touch herself directly or her skin would become rough; and she sipped water through the hollow wing bone of an eagle (hollow bones, to suck illness from the sick and to capture souls, were part of Northwest Coast shamanic paraphernalia) to limit the amount she could ingest, otherwise she would have a stout belly in later life; secluded girls on the Northwest Coast were given special combs to brush their hair (just as male shamans used special combs and generally did not cut their hair for fear of losing their power); she could not paint her face, otherwise her skin would later turn red; she avoided eating shellfish and fresh fish (a trait shared with most Northwest Coast groups -- salmon were believed to be particularly sensitive to menstrual blood, and the harm done would not be to the girl but to the group as a whole since the salmon would cease to run up river) or she would develop bad teeth, and so on (Boas 1966:369-370).

The period of seclusion ended after four months. The girl's hair was trimmed front and back, her eyebrows were also plucked above the orbital rim, and the part of

her hair was painted red. Significantly, the red part line on her head that she wore after her period of seclusion mirrored the girl's newly-'adult' labia. Her father gave a potlatch feast in recognition of her adult status, and the main gift consisted of the boards of her father's house (these were moveable and separate from the frame such that they could be carried to the summer inland habitation), signifying that she has no house of her own and must now marry into another house. The girl received from her mother one of her clan's reserve of names at this time.

Women were secluded at menses though some earlier reports suggest that menstruating women were free to move even if they continued to observe the taboo on eating fresh fish and clams (Boas 1966:371). Menstrual blood was considered poisonous (when travelling, Kwakiutl women kept some menstrual blood in shredded cedar bark to poison monsters they might encounter -- Ford 1941:35), but also life-giving, since the fetus is believed to gorge on its mother's menstrual blood while in the womb (Walens 1981:15). Today, at least one report (Rohner 1967:99-100) suggests that young women are considered 'ladies' after their first period but that there are no rituals as such to mark the event; girls are said to be ignorant of menstruation before the event, and it is not discussed after.

The same power that made women dangerous during menses was the basis of their shamanic powers (seated "in the stomach" -- Boas 1966:130), though not many women sought such powers (through contact with tutelary beings); marriage seems to have nullified any shamanic powers they might have possessed (Boas 1966:132). Women participated in the important winter ceremonials (which lasted many days), though there do not appear to have been many roles limited to women; the most important seem to have been reserved for men (Holm 1990:380).

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Nootka

The Nootkans (Nuu-Chah-nulth) of western Vancouver Island are part of the Northwest Coast culture complex; some features of their social and political organization are similar to the Kwakiutl (with whom they maintained trade relations): they were organized into bilaterally-defined and resource-owning local groups (similar but not identical to the Kwakiutl numayma), possessed well-defined and inherited social ranks, had summer and winter villages, depended on sea mammals (including whales) and shellfish as their primary foods, and had highly developed carved and painted art forms, though music and dance were the predominant aesthetic forms (Arima and Dewhirst (1990:402). The Nootkans had a nominal patrilocal rule of post-marital residence, but in practice residence was no fixed marriage rule and flexible (Drucker 1951:278); like the Kwakiutl, bilateral descent allowed individuals to claim membership in more than one local group (Rosman and Rubel 1971:71-75), creating a competitive situation among local groups as chiefs competed for followers to augment village strength and autonomy and as individuals moved from group to suit their interests. The Nootkans, like all Northwest Coast peoples, were caught in the same cycle of seeking to maintain village independence and maximizing ties to other groups; like the Kwakiutl, their choices emphasized flexibility at the expense of long-term political stability.

Up till the 1940s girls' puberty was an important event marked by a period of seclusion (four to ten months) and by a major gift-giving ceremonial (the potlatch), though the main potlatch was held at the end of the girl's seclusion (Sapir 1913:79-80). The girl's mother called in a female shaman to massage the girls' abdomen at the onset of her first period (Drucker 1951:137). The main ceremony, held at the beginning of the girl's seclusion, was held at the potlatch house. One description of a ceremony held in 1910 suggests that men played an important role in the ceremony (Sapir 1913:68-77). The ceremony was held in the girl's father's house, and the paternal uncle took charge (Sapir 1913:68). Women sat along the right wall (with

respect to the entrance), and men on the left and along the back of the house (the seats of honour). The girl then sat in the house facing away from the central fire for a period of four days, and could only lie down at night after the others in the house had gone to sleep. The main symbols displayed (painted on vertical boards at the back of the house) were the thunderbird with a serpent-belt and holding a whale in its talons, and the wolf -- the most important of the Nootkan mythological beings (Sapir 1913:68).

An even number of bundles of sticks tied together were lit at one end by being placed in the central fire, the bundles representing the length of the girl's seclusion. The ceremony then moved outside, with men carrying the lit bundles to the river (or the ocean -- most houses in the Northwest Coast faced outwards towards water) and the girl in their midst. The girl was surrounded by dancers masked as thunderbirds, while four other men, painted and daubed with eagle down in their hair, carried basins of water from the water to the girl; the water was poured at her feet, and the gesture was repeated four times (Sapir 1913:68). The ceremony then moved back inside the house where the bundles were distributed to ten of the guests in order to their rank, each torch representing a gift to be given at a future potlatch. A song belonging to the family of the girl was sung and a kind of stick game was played (guests tried to select the two sticks with opposite ends painted red from the bundles of bound sticks presented to them white end first -- winners received gifts), though other games of luck and skill may be played as well (Sapir 1913:73). Ironic and jesting songs with a strong sexual content were then sung; men's and women's songs in this part of the ceremony were different, and while the men might sing along with the women, the women rarely joined the men. More gifts and food were distributed during and after the singing (Sapir 1913:75,77), and the girl was given a new name. She remained secluded at the back of the house for four days after which time she was allowed to go out, though she still had to observe special taboos.

Like other Northwest Coast groups (Tlingit, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl) who believed in the harmful effects of menstruation on the supply of fish, secluded Nootkan girls were confined in cubicles in the house only during salmon and herring runs (Drucker 1951:138). This also occurred during subsequent menses (Drucker 1951:144). The young girl ate freshly cooked dried fish (Drucker 1951:138), not freshly caught (again, like other Northwest Coast groups) or she would grow old too quickly (Sapir 1913:79); this ban was enforced for subsequent menses. She drank water from a never-failing spring (so that her breast milk would never dry up) brought to her by a kinswoman. Unlike the Kwakiutl, Tsimshian and Tlingit, she did not use a bone drinking tube but drank from a cup (Drucker 1951:138); in common with other Northwest Coast groups, however, she used a scratching stick and a special comb during this period and during subsequent menses. When she was allowed to leave the house (twice a day, accompanied by female relatives) she wore a broad-brimmed hat (Drucker 1951:138) or a cedar bark cape (Sapir 1913:79) to protect others from her harmful gaze. At the end of her seclusion she was bathed by her mother and aunts, entering the stream accompanied by two small boys so she would have male offspring in the future (Drucker 1951:138-139). Her eyebrows were trimmed and she was given hair ornaments (Drucker 1951:139) which she wore for several months (daughters of high-ranking chiefs wore them for eight to ten months, others less; the higher the girl's rank the more elaborate the ornamentation -- Drucker 1951:141). At the end of this period of restrictions a potlatch feast was then given for the girl in which humorous or satirical songs were sung. The practice of holding a commemorative potlatch was still active in the 1970s among the northern Nootkans (Arima and Dewhirst 1990:410), though other aspects of the rite seem to have fallen from fashion.

Women could become shamans; male and female shamans usually specialized in the curing of particular diseases. Male shamans were believed to be more powerful than female (Drucker 1951:208), who, unlike men carried the tools of their trade in a

basket rather than in a small wooden box like the men (Drucker 1951:202). Shamans cured by sucking the disease out of the ailing body through a bone tube (perhaps the absence of a bone drinking tube for the secluded girls was meant to lessen female power). Female shamans assisted when high-ranking women gave birth (Drucker 1951:123). An elderly female relative also buried the afterbirth after four days, though without any special ceremony. The older woman then jumped four times over the infant lying on the floor (Drucker 1951:124). The meaning is not clear, but post-menopausal women were usually selected because they could not cause the harm that menstruating women would; throughout the Northwest Coast menstruating women had to avoid stepping over lying men or their guns and other tools.

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