

A "Womyn's" Work is Never Done:
The Gendered Division of Labor and the Creation of
Southern Oregon Lesbian Separatist Communities

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Hawk Madrone knew the first time she saw the land that it was meant to be her home. Tucked away on one of the numerous forested hills of Southern Oregon, the land that she would come to call Fly Away Home would not have seemed like much to the average person. Forty acres of heavily forested land, inhabited only by an old henhouse, a falling down barn and the cement pad and underlying structure what would come to be a beautiful hexagonal home, Fly Away Home in the winter of 1976 was more vision than reality.¹ But Madrone had that vision, not just for the land but also for a new way of life for herself. She wanted a life full of quiet reflection and hard work that would pay off on a daily basis. This vision was not hers alone. Madrone was just one member of what would eventually be a community of a few hundred women who decided to make rural Southern Oregon home, beginning in the 1970's. These were women that one would not traditionally connect to rural Oregon. Driven by a need to live "woman identified"² lives, lesbian separatists gradually settled in Southern Oregon, in an attempt to manifest their utopian dreams.

The larger Southern Oregon women's lands community started out slowly in 1972 but eventually formed an extensive network that consisted of numerous women's lands.³ The first land to be set up was called "Cabbage Lane".⁴ Originally purchased and set up as a male and female homosexual commune, within two years the men were given a separate portion of the land and were asked to leave because the women wanted to create a separatist community. Another community was set up near Grants Pass the next year and called WomanShare Collective. Three women from eastern Canada created it, all of whom had come to lesbianism and separatism through a consciousness-raising group. Along with the Mountaingrove's Rootworks and Hawk Madrone's Fly Away Home, Cabbage Lane and WomanShare were

central to the ever-expanding group of independent lands that eventually created a very important support and social network. While they all chose to create isolated lives in the hills of Southern Oregon, the network gave them support through the hard realities that rural life entailed. Without the labor and knowledge of their lesbian neighbors, the individual lands would not have come to fruition and without the emotional and social support the women themselves may not have flourished.

Shedding various restrictions that the patriarchal society had placed on them was central to the woman centered utopian dreams of these lesbian separatists. In rejecting patriarchy and with backgrounds in feminist theory, lesbians who went to live in intentional communities, which became known as Women's Lands, were forced to dissect the dominant culture, under which they had been raised, and to identify inequalities within it. They identified, among others, class, race and gender inequalities in their own lives as well as in society as a whole. One of the first and most salient inequalities that they addressed was the gendered division of labor in American society. While a primary concern for many feminists at the time, the dissection of the gendered division of labor was especially relevant to separatists. In order to physically build and create a community in rural Oregon, that was the embodiment of their political ideals, these women were forced to come face to face with the ways they had been socialized to see their labor and the labor of women in general. Working by themselves to build homes and gardens was not the normal occupation of women at the time, even women who had grown up in rural locations. In order to live in isolation and as an extension of their belief that women could accomplish anything and everything without men, these women took on work that was considered traditionally male.

It was not enough to identify the skills their upbringing had denied them but they needed to find ways to learn traditionally male skills in an exclusively female society and they needed to scrutinize their relationships to the labor they had been taught to do, such as domestic and parental labor. While separatism created logistical challenges, women on lesbian separatist lands were able to physically build thriving sex segregated communities, from the ground up, through the sharing of knowledge and skills that had traditionally been the realm of men. Their new hold on traditionally male forms of labor did not, however, negate the need for traditional forms of female labor and the landdykes, a conveniently condensed and succinct name some used for fellow community members, were able to subvert some aspects of the female work tradition, while still performing the labor that was necessary. The outright rejection of all female work was obviously not possible in a functioning community. While some housework was done begrudgingly, the community belief that there were innately female characteristics, such as nurturing and caring, gave some traditionally female labor a deeper cultural meaning and thus a pride in that work.

The backbone of these new lesbian communities was the Women's Movement of the 1970's and in particular a politically based lesbianism, or lesbian-feminism.⁵ This was a homosexuality that was not seen as having its roots in birth, as is the dominant "explanation" for homosexuality today. Instead, it was homosexuality by choice, but a political choice that if one opposed the patriarchy and felt oneness with the female sex, then to live one's principles should include a romantic connection to women only. In the more simple words of Lesbian Nation author Jill Johnston, "Feminism is the theory and lesbianism the practice".⁶ While this definition by no means completely covers the ideals or experiences of all residents of Southern Oregon lesbian intentional communities, it did form the core of the belief system behind their separatism.

They were not looking for a formal equality within the existing patriarchal system but for true autonomy in labor, culture and spirituality. For the women joining lesbian intentional communities, autonomy could only come to fruition through the creation of a unique and separate female existence and culture.

The woman's land movement, while grounded in feminism, was also heavily connected to the back to the land movement that began in the 1960's, and thus the long history of American utopian movements in general.⁷ At its core, the back to the land movement set out to disconnect from urban life and connect more deeply with the natural world. Many of the eventual members of the Southern Oregon woman's land community had spent time on heterosexual communal land before coming to separatism. For example, central woman's land figures Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove had moved into a religious commune in Oregon in the early 1970's, then into a communal situation on land owned by a gay man, before eventually buying their own land, Rootworks, in 1978.⁸ There were several reasons why a number of communes ended up in Southern Oregon in the early 1970's. Early on in the 1970's land was relatively cheap and building codes were non-existent, as was the case in rural Douglas County, which did not have building codes until 1976.⁹ The lands were also located along Interstate 5, which gave members the ability to get to cities within a few hours but to live relatively isolated lives on a daily basis.

The Mountaingroves themselves and their magazine WomanSpirit were key to the ever-expanding number of women's lands in Southern Oregon. They were central figures in the extended women's lands of Southern Oregon and their magazine was the first about female land centered spirituality. Published between 1974 and 1984, WomanSpirit featured articles by the Mountaingroves and other women living rural separatist lives. Eventually sold all over the country, WomanSpirit was widely read and drew women to its vision of the possibilities of

separatism. The first issue outlined an ambitious vision, "When we realize the political implications of all our struggles, we know that patriarchy cannot withstand our changes, something is going to happen. We are feeling stirrings inside us that tell us that what we are making is nothing less than a new culture."¹⁰ This promise of a new culture, one without patriarchy as its backbone, was enough to draw many to the Mountaingroves and Southern Oregon.¹¹

The women who set up these lands in Southern Oregon came from relatively similar backgrounds. They were predominantly white, from urban upbringings and college-educated, but were by no means identical in their personal histories.¹² Some had previously been married and came to lesbianism later in life while a few had never had romantic relationships with men at all. Some women had been active in the new left of the 1960's, such as resident Pelican Lee, who was active in the new left and was briefly involved in the Weathermen.¹³ A few had come to separatism from a background in the gay liberation movement but that was not the usual route to separatism.¹⁴ Instead most had been involved in some aspect of the Women's Liberation Movement before moving onto the land. No matter how they got there, they all had big dreams of a simple country life.

Coming from these relatively different personal histories both strengthened and weakened the southern Oregon women's land community. Women from different backgrounds gave the community a diversity of experience and an array of skills that were beneficial to survival in their new rural homes. However, different backgrounds also caused growing pains in the new communities. Most of the landdykes had an active background in feminism and consciousness-raising groups, which meant that they took a critical approach all community decisions. Community decision-making and open communication between women with

different life experiences, priorities and backgrounds lead to lengthy and excessive meetings that left some exhausted and frustrated.¹⁵ Group dialog about inequalities, both in the dominant society and the one they were creating, brought forth and intensified conflicts between community members in many cases.

Buying Land

The creation of lesbian separatist communities in rural Oregon required women to work outside of their traditional positions even before they settled on the land. Acquisition of the land itself was a new experience for many of the women in the larger community. In addition to the new legal and financial systems they had to understand, buying land also involved careful consideration of the class implications of owning property as well as the challenges to separatism that it posed. While trying to set up separatist spaces, they were forced to deal with male lawyers and local bureaucrats, as well as real estate agents across the region. They also began interacting with members of the local towns closest to the lands they were hoping to move into.

The money to buy lands came from many different sources. WomanShare collective was bought with money one member had been given by her father years earlier.¹⁶ The money to buy Rainbow's End was rumored to have come from the sale of marijuana.¹⁷ There were also several lands, Fly Away Home being one of them, which benefited from the divorce settlement of a Portland woman who divided the money she received between several women, "so that women might love themselves."¹⁸ Eventually, in 1976, after a group workshop entitled "Money, Class and Power", a group of women from several different lands took the first steps toward

creating a land trust that would provide space for poor women, who could not afford to buy their own land. This land trust was set up to reconcile the contradiction between an underlying belief that holding land privately, even if in a collective, was in opposition to egalitarian beliefs and the reality of wanting private separatist spaces. Created as "Open Women's Land", Owl Farm land was bought through extensive fundraising by many women in the larger community.¹⁹

Whatever the source of the money was, the actual process of buying land was new to the women involved. It involved knowledge and skills that most of them did not previously have. Many struggled with learning what was needed to buy a piece of land and how land owning fit into their political beliefs. Purchasing land was a large step for these women and it was made especially stressful and complex because many were either buying their land communally or with the intent to share ownership at a later date. The women of WomanShare Collective documented their group struggles during the process of buying their land. In the book they wrote two years after forming their collective, entitled Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective, they openly discussed the conflict land purchasing created in their group.²⁰ Central to their understanding of the conflict was one member's hesitance to put the legal ownership of the land into group hands. Dian, the member of the collective who had been gifted money from her father, not only had trouble telling her father that she wanted to buy her own land but she also had difficulty giving in to the collective vision that had been agreed upon.²¹ Through many angry meetings and much social pressure, she eventually came to the decision to put all of the members of the collective on the deed. To explain her decision she stated, "I couldn't live here and work on the land and believe the things that I believed about cooperation and collectivity and continue to privately own the land. It was a living contradiction. I had to unite my beliefs and my actions."²² While the dominant culture held

personal accumulation of wealth as a central goal, these women were trying to reject that standard. The contradiction between how they had been raised to view wealth and what their new communities expected made for a sometimes-complicated transaction.

“Men’s” Work

There is a tremendous amount of manual labor that goes into creating rural homes and maintaining them. For the landdykes in Southern Oregon there was a steep learning curve that added tremendously to the work. Many of them spoke openly of their frustrations that stemmed from not having any background in skills such as carpentry. Jeanne Tetrault wrote of all the things she had missed out on because she was not allowed to take shop class in high school and Nelly from Womanshare wrote about how her biggest obstacle was, “learning to tell the difference between what is real danger and what is fear – fear due to the conditioned intimidation women have been taught to feel around dangerous tools...”²³ This additional learning made for a greater hurdle in the creation of thriving homes.

At the inception of these communities homes had to be built, water had to be found and piped in, bathroom facilities had to be created, fences built, firewood cut and stored, roads had to be improved and gardens had to be cleared and planted. An exasperated Nelly wrote of the numerous tasks that the women of Cabbage Lane had to perform,

There was a lot of other land work in addition to building. A bulldozer had dug a barely adequate road to the property line, as well as a reservoir a thousand feet up the steep hillside. Patti, Willie, and I hauled white PVC pipe to the reservoir and

developed the water system to the garden site, though we still had to haul water to our camping and building area. There was no time now to bury the water line!²⁴

As communities grew the women erected new buildings or spaces such as vans or chicken coops were made into living spaces. On a daily basis women had to care for their gardens and animals, make repairs, and still find some way of making a living. Women were forced to become experts, mostly through trial and error, on necessities like the repair of car engines.²⁵ Some residents, such as the Mountaingroves, tried to do as much of the labor as possible without the aid of power tools while others quickly tired of such extreme manual labor and reluctantly used power tools like weed-wackers and chain saws.^{26 27} Hand tools were not as loud and intrusive to the quiet and calm of the forest around them as power tools were and the noise of handsaws was not the same as the noise of chainsaws clearing the public forests around their lands, but when faced with a need to pile up wood for the winter, the chainsaw usually won out over the quiet that the hand saw provided.

The use of collective sharing to overcome deficits in the skills and knowledge necessary to survive in the country was one of the biggest strengths of the Southern Oregon Women's Land. This skill sharing occurred on several different levels. On the most basic level it occurred between friends. With separate lands spread out over an area of more than a hundred miles, the women would sometimes visit those close to them or occasionally call long distance to the lands that actually had phones.²⁸ More often however, they would send letters back and forth between the separate lands, asking for advice on jobs as simple as when to pick certain vegetables, to complicated projects such as setting up solar power or how to build entire buildings.²⁹ The sharing included not only skills, but also the use of tools or extra seeds that could be used by other individual lands. In a letter to Ruth Mountaingrove from a resident of Cabbage Lane that

mainly included updates on the happenings of the women on the land, at the end it is asked if Mountaingrove had several kinds of extra seeds. On the chance that she did the author included was a self-addressed stamped envelope in which Mountaingrove could send them to her.³⁰ This request was not out of the ordinary. The women on these interconnected lands depended on the goodwill of their larger community members and it was expected that everyone would give if they could.

Community based sharing was also evident in the newsletters that were sporadically printed on the lands. Printed in a newsletter published by the community at Cabbage Lane, Jean Mountaingrove wrote a list of items she needed to know about, in hopes that someone else had the skills or knowledge that she required, "Things we need to know: how to make a spring box; low cost reservoirs; water systems for a garden & trees; solar or water-powered electrical systems to charge 12v batteries;... simple plumbing for kitchen and darkroom; re-cycling human waste; ... experience dealing with BLM bureaucracy about water rights & timber sales..."³¹ This was a convenient way for Mountaingrove to get the word out that she needed advice.

There were broader ways of skill sharing as well, which included publishing magazines and books that contained helpful information for women in the country. One of the earliest examples of self-publishing to share skills and knowledge was the magazine "Country Women".³² Actually published from communal land in Northern California, Country Women had extensive ties to Southern Oregon women's lands, especially to the Mountaingroves, who contributed to the magazine on a regular basis. Country Women was a resource on several levels. It gave concrete advise on topics such as gardening, raising animals and building. It also became a sounding board for the personal issues that women in the country faced. While the

magazine was not created exclusively by or for lesbians, the magazine dealt with many of the foundations of feminism and consciousness-raising.³³

Another published resource that women from Southern Oregon women's lands contributed to and benefited from was The Woman's Carpentry Book: Building Your Home from the Ground Up. Published in 1976, this book was an effort to pass on the knowledge that a number of women had gained about efficient and cost effective building. The Woman's Carpentry Book covered every single phase of the building process; from what each tool was and how it is used, to the way one could size headers for the roof of a house. The strength of this book, and its value to the newly rural women it was sold to, was that it included information that would probably have been assumed to be general knowledge in a book aimed at men. The authors of The Woman's Carpentry Book did not assume that someone taking on the task of building a whole house would know how to use a claw hammer, instead they told the stories of women learning these things by trial and error, in an effort to convince women that they too could do it themselves.

Shared labor was another asset the members of these communities used to build and maintain their communities. Without the help of other women, the houses and various buildings that were built on each separate land could not have been built. At Cabbage Lane the main house had to be physically moved when they discovered it was actually on a neighboring property.³⁴ With the help of women from the larger community the building was dismantled piece by piece and moved to a new location.³⁵ At Fly Away Home, with only two full time residents for the majority of its existence, the help of other women was especially key in large construction jobs, like the building of the large hexagonal house. Residents would send invitations to women on all the different lands, saying there was going to be a work party to raise

a barn or build a shed and they would bill it as a potluck or entice women to come for a nice meal. Showing up to help your neighbor raise a barn is and always has been a practical, as well as kind, thing to do and an integral part of country life. These women viewed their lesbian neighbors as their support system and thus when they needed help, they assumed that someone would come to help and that they would, of course, return the favor.

Even with all the skills these women learned from each other and the group effort they used to accomplish larger scale building projects, there were still skills that were learned from men outside of the collectives. In Country Lesbians, resident Nelly discussed how she was eventually forced to go into town to learn how to use a chainsaw safely. She said,

Over the past two years I have struggled to steal the knowledge of chain sawing from the male culture and to share it with my sisters. I called the forestry department and the chain saw stores for information many times without results. I went to the library and found there were no helpful books. Because I am a lesbian separatist I couldn't get first hand information from male friends. Indeed it had been a struggle! Finally I spoke to a logging teacher at the local community college and he offered to set up a course to address the needs of a person like myself wishing to learn the basics of chain sawing.³⁶

For Nelly, and other women trying to live separatist lives, this decision was not taken lightly but instead came down to survival over ideology. Once Nelly had learned the skill she made sure to teach other women in her community the skills, so they in turn did not have to be taught by men.

The skills these women learned did not mean that they could build the same kind of buildings that existed in the city. Even if they could have built completely modern homes in the country, many of the community residents would not have. The way in which the women on

women's lands built was a reflection of their environmental concerns, their creative focus, their relatively basic skill set (especially in the early years) and their small budgets. They never intended to have all the amenities they had taken for granted in the city—instead they created homes with only the most rudimentary services. Most individual houses did not have electricity, running water or indoor toilets. Instead they relied on lanterns, wood stoves and bedpans in the cold winter months.³⁷ So called “green building techniques” of our current time, such as the reclamation of old parts and lumber, the use of natural stains and finishes, and hesitation about the chemicals in insulation, came early to woman's land.

Part of the reason for material reclamation was ideological and the other part was monetary. These countrywomen were working on very limited budgets and the reuse of all materials was necessary for financial survival. In Weeding at Dawn, Hawk Madrone recounts the re-use of every part of an old building that had fallen down.³⁸ Part of the pride she felt in building herself a new root cellar was based on the creative reuse of materials in the process. The Woman's Carpentry Book is filled with stories of women finding inexpensive and recycled materials to create their homes. Writer Susun Weed recounted seeing old power poles on the side of the road one day and coming back to get them, for use as the base of the house she wanted to build.³⁹ In another story Marga Waldech recounted how she took an old church apart, piece by piece, in order to build herself a round house.⁴⁰ This resourcefulness served the builders on women's lands well when money was scarce.

The buildings on woman's land were also an extension of the creativity that was nurtured there. These were not the fancy new houses that could be found in the city. Instead, they came in a variety of shapes and sizes, with only the budget and imagination regulating the design. In her manuscript, “The Little Houses on Woman's Land”, Tee Corinne tried to document the

aesthetic beauty and creativity of the buildings on the land.⁴¹ These were not large or expensive homes, but instead, “They represented a negation of traditional womanly roles. They were not built to accommodate childrearing or large-scale entertaining. Often lovers lived in separate buildings thus reinforcing the autonomy and independence which were the cornerstones of this community.”⁴² She goes on to say, “What could better symbolize the separation from patriarchy than tiny buildings where women crafted individual lives?”⁴³ Because they were building their homes themselves, many landdykes felt free to make them artistic, as well as a necessary, endeavors.

The pride these women took in their manual labor, especially in the creation of buildings, is especially visible in photographs the women took on the land. Photo after photo in the Ruth Mountaingrove Photography Collection depict women, usually topless, performing manual labor. There are numerous photos of every phase of building, from the initial framing to the finish work inside new homes.⁴⁴ Women are pictured working in collaboration to build walls and floors, dig ditches and plant gardens. The major themes throughout these photographs are unquestionably the possibilities that come with female cooperation and the inherent strength of women’s bodies.

Work for Pay

All the physical work these women did on their lands was in addition to the work they had to do to make a living. It has never been easy to make a living in the country and active separatism did not make that endeavor easier for the lesbians on women’s lands. Indeed, many times the need for money overshadowed the ability to lead a separatist life. Many women had to work in the closest town or in cities in addition to all the other hours spent working on their

homes. Some lived part of the year in town or commuted long distance, while others were only peripherally in the community because of full time residence in cities such as Eugene, Medford or Grants Pass.⁴⁵ These women did not have the ability to survive rurally without outside paid labor, even if a portion of them would have preferred it.

Farming the land, a traditional way of surviving and making money in rural communities, was not a viable option for most of the women on Southern Oregon women's lands. Early on at Fly Away Home they dreamed of creating a self-sustaining farm but that "plan died in the seventies".⁴⁶ They eventually created a thriving garden, but only to feed themselves. The main reason for the inability to rely on a farming income was the innate nature of the land. Heavily forested, it would have been extremely difficult, and counter to their ecological ideals, to clear large portions of their land for crop production.

For some residents, creative endeavors became their means of income. The Mountaingroves, in particular, were able to support themselves, while not luxuriously so, on the money generated from sales of WomanSpirt magazine, from "ovulars" in which they taught photography to women, and from a magazine created at the ovulars, titled "The Blatant Image".⁴⁷ The Mountaingroves did not produce the magazines alone and saw its production as helpful to other women hoping to make a living off self-publication. They said, "Also important was what women learned by producing a magazine. It demystified the process, showing that if this was interesting to them, they could do it as a career. Many women who got their start at Womanspirit went on to successful careers as writers, editors, artists, and publishers."⁴⁸

In addition to creative and artistic jobs, some women in the community were able to turn their construction skills into paid employment. In her dissertation about Southern Oregon women's lands, Catherine Kleiner tells of former resident Rena Klein,

...An architect based in Seattle, was a former resident of various lesbian lands in Oregon. She remembered her first building projects on lesbian land. At Rainbow's End, she designed and built a small post-and-beam house with a gabled roof and a front porch. At another lesbian land called Fly Away Home, Klein also built a wooden yurt with a circular floor, approximately 10 feet in diameter that serves as private workspace for one woman. At Rootworks, she designed, but did not build Natalie Barney (a barn).^{49 50}

Other women learned specialized trades and then were hired on separatist lands for their specialized skills. At Fly Away Home, residents Hawk Madrone and Bethroot Gwenn hired a woman to help them fell a tree that was too big for them to cut themselves and Bethroot hired local women workers to help her build her a new house.⁵¹ Whether they went on to other locations with their skills or stayed in the Southern Oregon Community, many women got their start with their trades in the woods of Southern Oregon.

In the creation of their new communities the issue of money and who could survive on the land were hot button issues. Downward mobility, in other words the choice to be poor, was frustrating for landdykes who had come from working class or poor backgrounds. The ability to choose the downward mobility associated with living on the land full-time was an affront to poor women who had no choice but to work to maintain basic necessities. For some, class privilege allowed greater fulfillment of their separatist ambitions.

Many women on the land who qualified for welfare or food stamps collected it willingly. In an extensive article about welfare in Country Women magazine the welfare system was referred to as "paternalistic" but it went on to say that, "... even with that reality, welfare money can be a good tool to use as we begin to build our new lives – if we remember who we are and

what we want.”⁵² Working outside the land and collecting welfare and food stamps seems to be outside of a separatist model but were necessary for many women’s financial survival. While many wanted a distinct separate existence away from the patriarchal system of dominant society, they could not always afford to make a complete break from its systems. A poem in Country Women magazine, titled “Home Economics”, summed up the complicated relationship many of these women had with money,

Money is not/ just a system of exchange/ a question of economics/ a way of
 distributing/ goods and services/ Money is/ a potent force in our lives. It/ affects
 how we feel about ourselves/ how we live/ our relationships with one another./ the
 deeper we go with this issue,/ the more we discover that we need to challenge/ our
 ideas about money./ we need to challenge some basic assumptions/ about women
 and work./ and then we can begin to devalue the dollar⁵³

“Women’s Work”

The women who lived on Southern Oregon women’s lands rejected that a domain of work should be exclusively male but that did not mean the outright rejection of all traditionally female labor in response. The reality on woman’s land was that whatever the work was, it had to get done and it was going to get done by women. In ideal situations there were open discussions about work that needed to be done and group decision of how it would be divided. In the worst of situations, certain members carried the workload, while others did not contribute equally. This inequality of effort was especially true on lands that had a lot of turnover in members.

Women who just came to live in a community for the summer tended not to exert themselves in the day-to-day domestic upkeep the way that permanent members did.⁵⁴

For the founding members of WomanShare there were deep conflicts while trying to figure out the division of domestic labor.⁵⁵ Without the unspoken gendered division of labor they had all grown up with to fall back on, the domestic work was initially and unintentionally divided along class lines. Carol, a member that came from a solidly middle class background initially resisted doing any domestic labor, and thus the other members found themselves doing her dishes and cleaning up after her. This did not sit well with the other women living in her community. In Country Lesbians Carol recalled, "I had been fighting to maintain a privileged place within our women's commune... a middle-class woman with servants. My sisters had lost their patience. Especially Billie and Dian who had been struggling with my kitchen phobia for two years."⁵⁶ Years later the solution they came up with is still in effect: "Sign-up sheets for weekly chores ... such as garbage and recycling runs, wood-cutting, gardening chores, cleaning the main house, grocery shopping, and meal preparation are still tacked to the community bulletin board in the kitchen."⁵⁷ It was only through introspection and extensive group consciousness-raising that the women of WomanShare Collective were able to come to a suitable division of work.

The women's general belief in innate female characteristics such as warmth and nurturing lead to more than just acceptance of some traditionally female labor. Instead of rejecting or degrading many traditionally female roles, such as mothering, they were infused into a newly created woman's spirituality. Nurturing and mothering took on spiritual aspects for many women and this spirituality was in turn tied to the land. While they were actively trying to

subvert the historical position of women in society, by doing work that was traditionally in the male domain, they nonetheless reinforced a core inherent difference between men and women.

The inherent nature of women as nurturers was reinforced in their daily lives by the female centered, land-based spiritual beliefs that evolved in the communities. This spirituality centered on the connection between women as mothers, both figuratively and literally, and the earth, as a mother. Women participated in circles and group practice, which in many ways mirrored previous consciousness raising practices, as well as doing individual rituals.⁵⁸ The focus was to personally create a new type of spirituality that connected the individual to nature and to women in general. It was tied to their political beliefs in the superiority of women as well. In the inaugural issue of *WomanSpirit*, a magazine that was the reflection of the spirituality that was being produced on these lands, the Mountaingroves wrote, "As we continue to tear down the institutions and relationships that oppress us, we are also building, making, creating. Because this process of taking and leaving, making a new culture, is so deep, profound, and all-inclusive we are calling it spiritual."⁵⁹

While this spirituality reflected that they valued the maternal spirit of women, whether or not they were the mothers of children, many of the women living in woman's land were actual mothers too. Most of these mothers had raised children to adulthood before they came to woman's land, or their children lived with the fathers for most of the year. This was the case of the Mountaingroves who had not moved to lesbian separatist life until their forties.⁶⁰ There were some women who did choose to have children on separatist lands and this was both welcomed and the cause of strife in communities. OWL Farm resident Ni Aodagain found it, "difficult surviving on the land with women who are not parents", as hers was the only child living at OWL at the time.⁶¹ The two most nagging issues surrounding children on the land were whether

or not they would be raised communally and whether or not male children should be allowed. The answers to these conflicts varied amongst the lands. OWL Farm residents, who lived completely communally, never felt the need to restrict male children from the land while other lands did their best to discourage it.⁶² As for communal child rearing, it seems to have made both childless community members and mothers uncomfortable. While mothers did call for group childcare in some cases, the reaches of the role all members should have in the day to day rearing of the child were vague and uncomfortable at best.⁶³

The reaffirmed connection between these women and some of the traditional roles of women did not mean that they accepted all traditionally female labor roles whole-heartedly. These roles were connected to remnants of the social system that these women had been trying to escape. It was a slow process to figure out what role they truly wanted versus what they had been ingrained to value. Some twenty years after moving to woman's land, Jean Mountaingrove wrote of her continuing struggle to fight the feeling that clutter in her home reflected poorly on her character.⁶⁴ A former housewife, Jean connected this to the values of housework and cleanliness that were instilled in her early on in life. Through self reflection, over many years, she came to realize that not only were the expectations she was putting on herself unrealistic, they also reflected a value system that she had long ago abandoned. While cleanliness to keep away disease and chaos was necessary, an uncluttered home in the country was an impossibility.

Conclusions

From the establishment of their lands, the goals of landdykes were based on an idealism that was difficult to bring to fruition and even harder to sustain. A few of these lesbian separatist

lands still exist today, with one or two inhabitants living on each, but none exist that embody the communal vision that was present at their inception. While these women were able to make strides toward a new social order, interpersonal conflict and the difficulties of living off the grid made a long lasting country lesbian communal community unsustainable. In an article written by long time woman's land resident Pelican Lee, she summed up the downfall of the one time thriving extended community when she wrote,

We were very hard on ourselves with our idealistic politics. We could not emotionally handle living the ways we believed in politically. Our endless meetings trying to deal with everything in a politically correct way caused too much trauma and upheaval, and eventually burned us out. We were trying to change too much too fast, and were not realistic about our weaknesses.

Sisterhood was not enough, and even working hard to work things out was not enough. Growing up in capitalistic patriarchal America had not prepared us for living the kind of life we desired.⁶⁵

The decline of women's lands in southern Oregon can also be traced more broadly to the decline in the general idealism that fostered their growth in the first place. The decline of lesbian separatism and back-to-the-land romanticism coincided, not coincidentally, with the rise of conservatism in the 1980's and 1990's and the weakening of broad liberal coalitions that had opened the way for radicalism. By the late 80's women were no longer coming in large numbers to test themselves and their feminist personal politics in the woods. In comparison to other movements that flourished in the so-called liberal 1960's, such as the student movement, the lesbian land movement actually outlasted many of its counterparts.

The end of the larger vision of the community does not however negate the strides they made toward a vision of egalitarian female community. The broader communities added immensely to the growth, productivity and support that women members received. They also expanded, for themselves and others, what female identity could contain. Women in these communities were able to explore the activities that they were naturally drawn to, instead of what they were told to enjoy. The lesbian separatists who built a community in southern Oregon in the 1970's were overall very successful in making the reforms they desired, especially in the sexual division of labor. Without the gendered division of labor in the dominant society, landdykes took up the task of creating a new system for dividing their work. Domestic labor that would have been the work of one solitary married woman in suburbia was instead divided up as equally as possible. New ways of dividing up the work did not come about organically, but instead the women had to actively form new systems for that division. Issues of class inequality had to be overcome in order for the women to build truly cooperative communities.

The women took on traditionally male work enthusiastically and with a great sense of interest and pride. While these women were not raised to have skills and knowledge of manual labor, through community sharing and collaboration, they were able to achieve the community infrastructures that they desired. Women would learn how to build a house and then pass that knowledge on to the next woman through personal interaction or through the numerous publications that were produced on women's lands. In taking manual labor and combining it with their newly created spirituality, landdykes created new and artistic ways of building and laboring. They did not accept the traditional ways of building automatically, but instead made environmental and spiritual concerns of the paramount importance. When they impacted the lands because of their needs, such as when they needed to cut down a tree for firewood, the way

they went about it combined their newly attained labor skills as well as their concerns for what they saw as the mother earth.

The utopian ideal that these women were trying to create had both internal and external challenges. Internally, they had brought with them many of the vestiges of patriarchy when they entered the land. In trying to rid themselves of these views, the landdykes used the tools they had learned through consciousness-raising and the women's movement, to try and make an egalitarian society. They embraced some traditionally female roles by infusing them into their spirituality, but they also critiqued many of the demands traditionally made on women. They could not insulate themselves from interacting with the larger society in various ways. They were forced to interact with men, first to obtain their lands, and then later because of the various demands of country living. In some cases, the landdykes in Southern Oregon went outside the land to gain skills and earn a living, choosing survival needs over separatism. Overall, the lesbian separatists in southern Oregon were able to reform the way work had been traditionally done in order to create a community that reflected their idealistic views. Their movement toward a new vision of what family and community life could be places them as a relevant example of the long history of utopian communities in this country, a part of the back to the land movement that flourished in the 1970's and as a group of women who put their lesbian feminist ideology into practice. They were not without conflict and struggle but for many of them, the utopian dream was realized for a time.

¹ Hawk Madrone, *Weeding at Dawn: a Lesbian Country Life* (New York: Alice Street Editions, 2000), 5.

² Radicalesbians. *The Woman Identified Woman*. Pittsburgh: Know, Inc, 1971.

³ An actual number of women's lands cannot be easily determined and would have to include many private lands as well as communal ones. For this project, the histories of the lands I became somewhat

familiar with totaled 10: Rootworks, Cabbage Lane, WomanShare, Golden, Fly Away Home, OWL Farm, Rainbow's End, Groundworks, WHO Farm, and Copperland. These lands were all heavily referenced in the SOCLAP Collection and the Tee Corinne Papers at the University of Oregon. They do not constitute the entirety of the lands, but were all central to the greater Southern Oregon women's lands community. In her paper "Lesbian Communes, Communities and Cultural Institutions in 3 Rural Counties" author Tee Corinne lists 39 different lands that have existed in the region between 1972 and 1995.

⁴ Barbara Summerhawk and La Verne Gagehabib. *Circles of Power: Shifting Dynamics in a Lesbian-Centered Community* (Norwich, Vt: New Victoria Publishers, 2000), 52.

⁵ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 211- 241.

⁶ While I could not find the source of the quote, "Feminism is the theory and lesbianism the practice" was attributed to Jill Johnston on page 52 of Catherine Kleiner's dissertation about women's lands, titled "Doin' it for Themselves: Lesbian Land Communities in Southern Oregon, 1970-1995."

⁷ James J. Kopp, *Eden Within Eden: Oregon's Utopian Heritage* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2009), 149.

⁸ Joyce Cheney. *Lesbian Land* (Minneapolis, Minn: Word Weavers, 1985), 125.

⁹ Tee Corinne, "Lesbian Communes, Communities and Cultural Institutions in 3 Rural Oregon Counties", Tee A. Corinne Papers, Coll. 263, Series III: Literary Manuscripts, Box 3, folder 34. Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Or.

¹⁰ *Womanspirt*, Vol. 1, No. 5, Fall Equinox, 1.

¹¹ Kopp, *Eden Within Eden*, 151.

¹² Barbara Summerhawk and LaVerne Gagehabib addressed the overwhelming whiteness of southern Oregon woman's land in their book Circles of Power. They saw it as a product of both internal and external factors. Author Gagehabib, herself a former resident of woman's land and a woman of color, cites separatism as forcing an undesirable choice for women of color between their communities of color and lesbians. She also cites the whiteness of the surrounding population in Southern Oregon as a hindrance to women of color feeling at home in the region.

¹³ Catherine Kleiner, "Doin' it for Themselves: Lesbian Land Communities in Southern Oregon, 1970-1995." (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 2003). 63-67.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 61.

¹⁵ Pelican Lee, "Nozoma Tribe" in *Lesbian Land*, ed. Joyce Cheney (Minneapolis, Minn: Word Weavers, 1985), 161.

¹⁶ Sue, et all. *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective* (Grants Pass, Or: WomanShare Books, 1976), 65.

¹⁷ Kliener, "Doin' it for Themselves", 115.

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- ¹⁸ Madrone, *Weeding at Dawn*, 1.
- ¹⁹ Corinne, "Lesbian Communes, Communities and Cultural Institutions", 1.
- ²⁰ Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 65.
- ²¹ Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 65.
- ²² Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 72.
- ²³ Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 109.
- ²⁴ Nelly, "Moving the 'Big House'" in *The Woman's Carpentry Book: Building Your Home From the Ground Up*. Ed. Jeanne Tetrault (Garden City, N.Y. : Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), 242.
- ²⁵ Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 111.
- ²⁶ Jean Mountaingrove commemorated the use of woman-powered tools in a song she wrote entitled "The Two-woman Saw".
- ²⁷ Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 108.
- ²⁸ See map in Appendix
- ²⁹ Correspondence, Series III Cabbage Lane, box 11, folder 1, SO-CLAP! Collection, Coll. 266, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.
- ³⁰ Ibid, box 11, folder 1.
- ³¹ ibid, folder 7.
- ³² *Country Women*, Albion, CA; Vol. I, No. 1-Vol. I, No. 31, ca. October 1972-November 1978, Feminist and lesbian periodical collection, Coll. 257, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Or.
- ³³ ibid, vol. 1.
- ³⁴ Tetrault, *The Woman's Carpentry Book*, , 242.
- ³⁵ Tetrault, *The Woman's Carpentry Book*, 241.
- ³⁶ Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 109.
- ³⁷ Tetrault, *The Woman's Carpentry Book*, 23.
- ³⁸ Madrone, *Weeding at Dawn*, 131-150.
- ³⁹ Tetrault, *The Woman's Carpentry Book*, 13.
- ⁴⁰ ibid, 68.

⁴¹ Tee Corinne, "The Little Houses on Women's Lands" Tee A. Corinne Papers, Coll. 263, Series III: Literary Manuscripts, box 9, folder 34,. Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Or.

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ Ruth Mountaingrove Papers, Coll. 309, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon. ***See appendix.

⁴⁵ Corrine, "The Little Houses on Women's Lands", appendix.

⁴⁶ Kleiner, "*Doin it for Themselves*", 117.

⁴⁷ "Ovular" was a term used on the Southern Oregon Women's Lands instead of "seminar". This is connected to the tradition among some feminists, separatists especially, to change words that have a male connotation into one with female connotation, i.e. women into "womyn".

⁴⁸ *Womanspirit*, vol. 1, fall equinox 1974, 48.

⁴⁹ Kleiner, "Doin it for Themselves", 116.

⁵⁰ "Natalie Barney" was the name for the barn at Rootworks and it was a play on the name of a famous lesbian playwright and author, Natalie Clifford Barney.

⁵¹ Madrone, *Weeding at Dawn*, 50-55.

⁵² *Country Women*, vol. 1, no. IV

⁵³ *Country Women*, Vol. 1, No. 4., 1.

⁵⁴ Cabbage Lane communal journal 1974-1978, Box 11, Folder 4, SO-CLAP! Collection, Coll. 266, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

⁵⁵ Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 17.

⁵⁶ Sue, et all, *Country Lesbians*, 18.

⁵⁷ Kleiner, "Doin it Themselves", 110.

⁵⁸ Madrone, *Weeding at Dawn*, 157-164.

⁵⁹ *Womanspirit*, vol. 1, Fall Equinox, 1974. 1.

⁶⁰ Summerhawk, *Circles of Power*, 31.

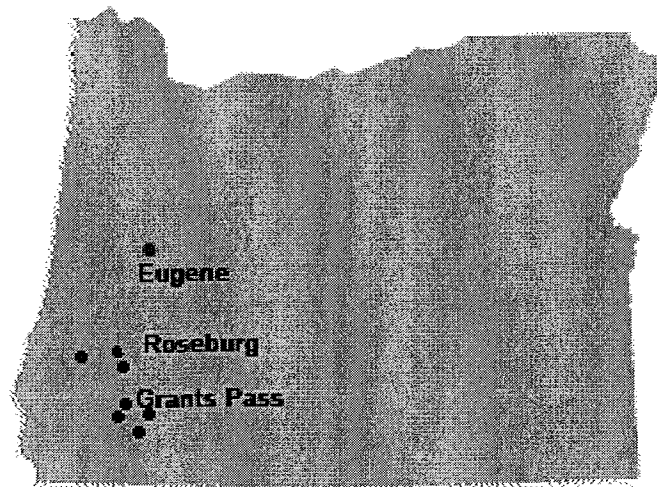
⁶¹ *Ibid*, 31.

⁶² Lee, "Setting Up Women's Land in the 1970s", 46-47.

⁶³ Ibid, 46.

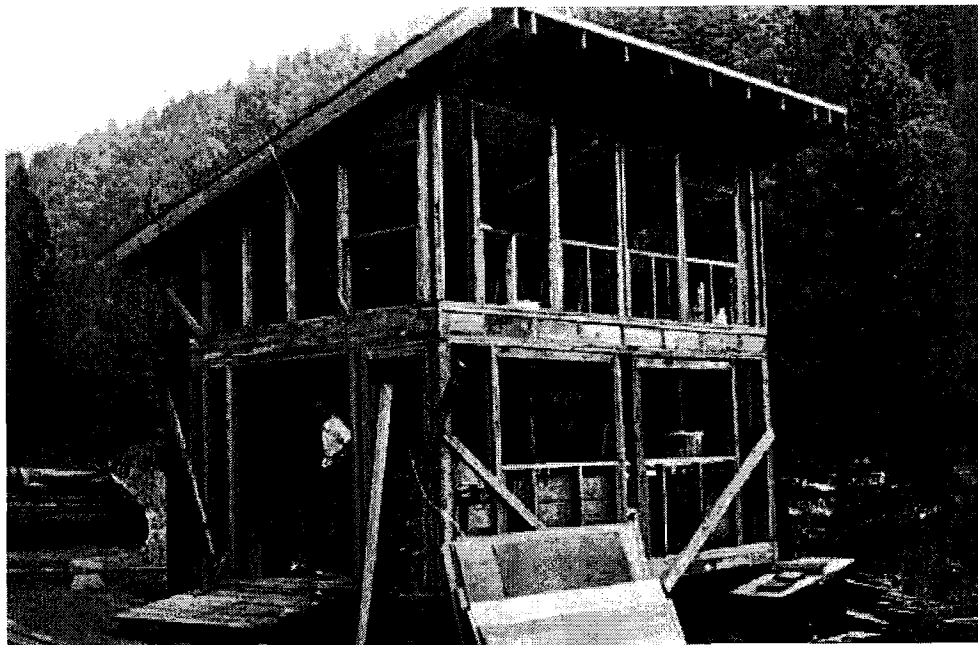
⁶⁴ *Maize*, Preston Hollow, N.Y.: Maize, summer 1994. 31.

Appendix

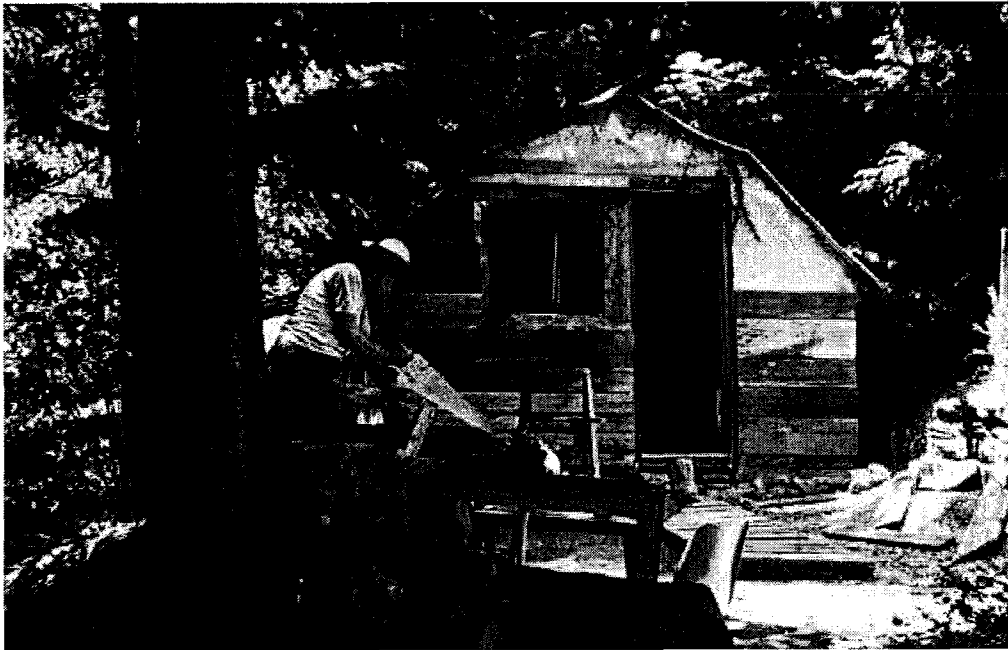


Approximate locations of Southern Oregon Women's Lands

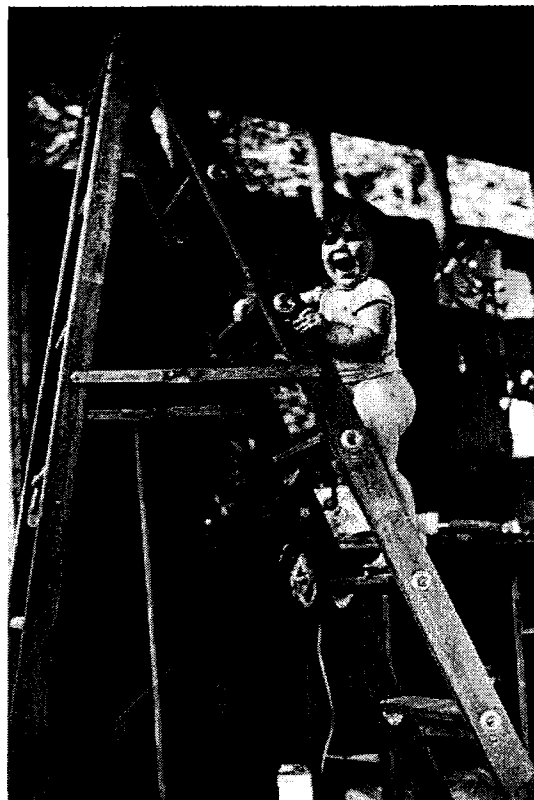
Photographs from the Ruth Mountaingrove Papers



“all purpose building construction” – 1982



"building a house"



"baby on ladder"



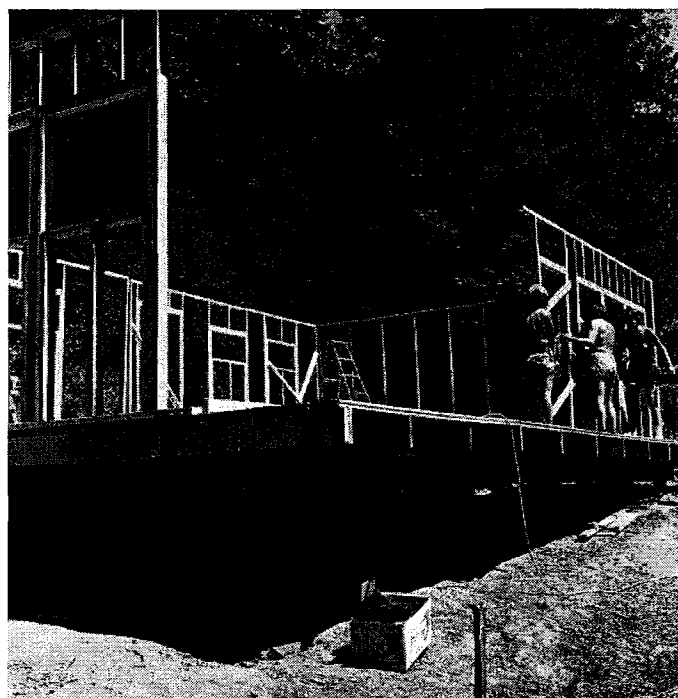
“building office floor at Golden”



“chopping wood”



“cutting up potatoes”



“framing the barn”



“installing electricity in the barn at Golden” – 1977



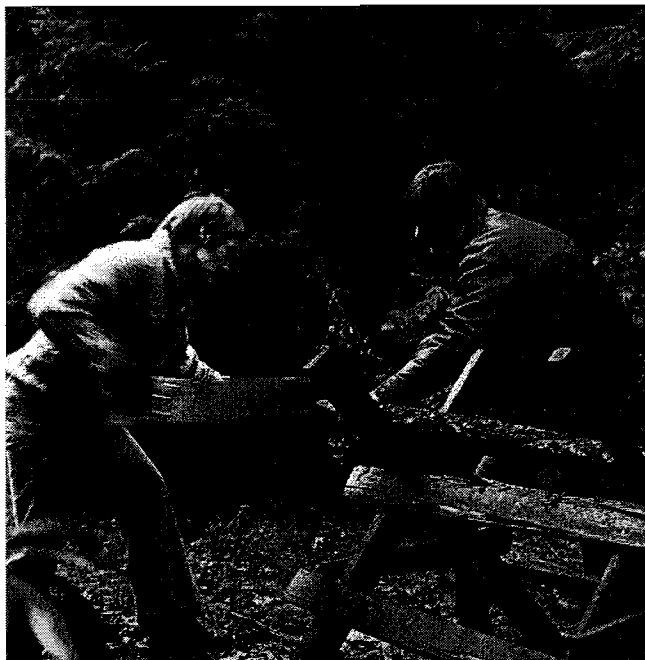
landdykes



moving the main house at Cabbage Lane



"ovular II"



“two woman sawing at Rootworks”



“woman and child, OWL gathering” – 1977



“woman geologist from county”



women on backhoe – 1983



making a toilet



jean hugging a tree



“jean grieving”



“women hugging”

Cover photo: "meditation circle at WomanShare"

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Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

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