

Historical treasures from our collections



The Meaning of Victorian Hairwork

"Hair is at once the most delicate and lasting of our materials and survives us, like love," author Leigh Hunt wrote in an 1850s *Godey's Lady's Book*.

The yellowing pages above prove that. They are from a small album created in the 1850s by Florida Collins. Florida traded locks of hair with friends and family and fastened them to the pages.

Florida was also learning to braid and weave longer strands of hair into modest examples of hairwork, a type of Victorian fancywork. Girls and women learned hairwork from each other or from women's magazines, which printed patterns and instructions and advertised the thin wire, wooden bobbins, and other supplies needed.

Hairwork was one way to remember those who

had moved away and memorialize those who had died. Civil War widows fashioned hairwork into brooches and lockets, rings and watch fobs. These were worn as mourning jewelry.

Those who excelled at hairwork created remarkably intricate wreaths. They wrapped long strands around wire and then shaped them into petals, leaves, and stems. Framed and preserved under glass domes, hairwreaths may seem a peculiar artform to us today, but to Victorians they represented great meaning and required considerable patience and skill. Although Florida Collins was a novice, her album, preserved in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa, bespeaks friendship, family, and memory, just as she intended 150 years ago. —The Editor