

## “Footloose” debuts next week

Cast, crew and members of the pit band posed for a pre-show photo ahead of the NLS Theatre Department’s upcoming production of “Footloose.” The musical is set to run Nov. 18-20 in the NLS Performing Arts Center, with tickets available on the district’s website and at the Community Education Office.



Photo by Paula Prill

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try born around hair work, and in part, this is because ladies could do their own crafting at home and had a ready supply of their own hair,” Reier-son said. Just as she, herself, exchanged friendship bracelets with her classmates, so too, would women of this era gift one another their tresses, plucking strands from combs, placing them in tiny vessels called “receivers” and, ultimately, weaving them into or- nate patterns.

According to “Godey’s Lady’s Book,” equipment nec- essary for creating hair art was modest, requiring little more than a frame, scissors, knit- ting needles, thread and a firm object, or mold, around which the strands could be fixed.

“Hair wreaths took vast amounts of time and an in- credible degree of patience,” according to a document provided by the Minnesota Historical Society summariz- ing the book. But generally, simple adornments were easy enough.

“Basic steps for just about all hair art sound essentially similar. The cut hair was fas- tened into a bundle (if neces- sary, it was washed first with soda to remove grease), from which groups of hairs of ten, or twenty, or whatever the pat- tern called for, were drawn to form strands. The strands were tied to bobbins – metal weights or weighted bags – to prevent tangling and to help keep the strands in balance on the frame as they were worked. Almost all hair work was made around some firm object – a wire, a tube, a pencil – which kept the hair in place until it was fixed in that form by being boiled. After it was boiled it was care- fully removed from the mold. When the plaiting was dried, the completed hair work was taken to a jeweler who affixed the beats, tips, clasps, or what- ever was needed to finish the piece.”

Designs varied, of course, with at least 276 pages of op- tions, but always, the goal remained: preserving the ephemeral.

“There’s so much to our death and mourning rituals, so many cultures doing so many different things,” said Reier-son. “But when I think about how hair work became popular, one thing that comes to mind is that the Civil War was the first time we began us- ing chemicals to preserve the dead. And the idea there was to preserve bodies long enough for families to say goodbye – transporting them all the way across the country. So I think what seems really strange in retrospect probably made a lot of sense when people thought about how to grieve.

“It used to be an entirely common thing for families to wash and dry the bodies of their deceased relatives, and that really switched after the

Civil War. There was a whole industry of morticians pop- ping up, making people more lifelike in death.. so it was really an interesting time pe- riod for death and mourning in general.”

With the advent of pho- tography and new methods of

chemical embalming, mourn- ing culture declined in the late 1800s and with it, hair art, which all but fell out of fash- ion by the 20th century.

“There are still some active artists out there today,” Reier-son said, like Victorian Hair Workers International, “so it’s

not entirely dead. But it has lost its mass appeal... We talk about hair work as this senti- mental thing that then evolved into an artform, almost like folk art. And as it evolved into an artform, it became separat- ed from its sentimental roots, and lost its intrinsic value.”

Like Wohnoutka and the descendants of the Horsley family, Reier-son said her ini- tial gut response to hair work was one of revulsion, but has since come to appreciate the artistry and historical value of these works – though she notes there is an irony in the

pieces’ reception.

“Most people’s reaction to it is, ‘oh, gross,’ which is ba- sically the opposite of what Victorians were going for. It’s about sentimentality and remembering through hair, so it’s kind of funny now we think of this as weird or strange.”



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