

# Donation of the Month

## B.F. Gleason Cooling Table

1975.78.15

Donor: Virginia Rose



Caption: One popular maker of cooling tables was B.F. Gleason of Brockport N.Y. He patterned the holes to create his name and the patent dates of April 13, 1881 to Sept. 7, 1886.

Believing without the body the soul was unable to live on, the Ancient Egyptians began embalming their dead. They used resins to preserve the body and removed all organs except the heart. Dr. Thomas Holmes, working during the Civil War, has been called the father of modern embalming. Bodies of soldiers who died far from home were embalmed in order to preserve their bodies for transportation to their families. Today, we still embalm for preservation reasons, but also to present a pleasant view at open casket viewings. While ancient embalming techniques have allowed the pharaohs of Egypt to seemingly live forever they will eventually become dust. Even modern techniques will not keep a body whole indefinitely.

In the Victorian era, upon the death of a loved one, neighbors gathered to wash and clean the body. The local carpenter was asked to make a coffin. The family draped the house in black crepe on the doors and mirrors, while clocks were stopped and women clothed themselves in black crepe dresses. Family and friends stopped by to pay final respects, a service was held and the body carried by wagon to the cemetery. The burial was not the end as the family remained in mourning for several months or longer.

As the era progressed and with the advent of embalming techniques washing and cleaning of the body was no longer done by family members. Embalming was done by an undertaker, the forerunner of today's funeral home directors. Many of the undertakers made house calls; however, there was a slow transition toward the removal of the body to the undertaker's place of business. When the undertaker arrived he brought embalming tools, an embalming table and a cooling table. If embalming was not chosen undertakers used ice caskets often called "corpse coolers" to keep the body cool in order to slow decay. The undertaker made several trips to the home to drain the casket and replenish the ice. Once taken out, the body would decay quite fast. For presentation, cooling boards were used to keep the body cool and to help circulate air around the body. The holes punched through the wooden surface allowed cool air provided by a block of ice to keep the body cool and slow decomposition.

Today, cooling boards are no longer used as the body is whisked away as soon as possible. Embalming fluid replaces the natural liquids in the body and all organs are removed, cleaned and packed with preservatives before being replaced. The process of mourning has vastly changed as services are almost completely orchestrated by the funeral home director and takes place at the funeral home; and the

Victorian views of death and the process of mourning for several months almost seems selfish to us today. Science has allowed us to preserve the bodies of our loved ones without offending our sensitive noses; however, it has also caused a disconnect. We no longer spend much time mourning or remembering those who have passed. Yet embalming insures they will be around for quite some time.