

## **INVENTOR OF TV DINNER DIES AT AGE 83**

*Gerry Thomas turned surplus turkey into a frozen tray-table feast*

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*Reuters & The Associated Press* contributed to report.

PHOENIX — Gerry Thomas, the former poultry company executive who helped marry American television with mealtime as inventor of the TV dinner, has died at age 83, his family said Wednesday.

Thomas, honored in Hollywood in 1999 by having his handprints placed in cement outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre, died of cancer at a Phoenix hospice facility Monday after a long illness, according to his wife, Susan Mills Thomas.

A retired marketing executive of Swanson, now a unit of Pinnacle Foods Corp., Thomas recalled during the 1999 ceremony that his innovation arose as a solution to the company's post-Thanksgiving surplus inventory of turkeys in the 1950s.

"It was a case of necessity being the mother invention," Thomas said then.

The idea of packaging the surplus as an entree for a frozen meal dawned on Thomas, then 30, during a business trip to Pittsburgh, where he saw a box of single-compartment metal trays that were being tested by an airline as a way of serving heated meals.

Thomas coined the term "TV Dinner" as a marketing gimmick aimed at tapping into public excitement over the then-new broadcast medium.

"It's a pleasure being identified as the person who did this because it changed the way people live," he said in a 1999 Associated Press interview. "It's part of the fabric of our society."

Swanson, already encouraged by the success of pot pies, which had been introduced in 1951, seized on Thomas' idea, and the TV Dinner debuted nationally in 1954. Since interest in television was booming, he noted: "I figured if you could borrow from that, maybe you could get some attention. I think the name made all the difference in the world."

Initially sold for 98 cents, the original TV Dinner featured turkey, corn-bread dressing and gravy, buttered peas and sweet potatoes, all packaged in a three-compartment tray. Ten million dinners were sold in the first year of national distribution.

As for the tray, he recalled that the inspiration came when he was visiting a distributor, spotted a metal tray and was told it was developed for an experiment in preparation of hot meals on airliners.

"It was just a single compartment tray with foil," he said. "I asked if I could borrow it and stuck it in the pocket of my overcoat."

**'If I'm the father ... who's the mother?'**

He said he came up with the three compartments because "I spent five years in the service so I knew what a mess kit was. You could never tell what you were eating because it was all mixed together."

The dinners drew "hate mail from men who wanted their wives to cook from scratch like their mothers did," but they got him a bump in pay to \$300 a month and a \$1,000 bonus.

"I didn't complain. A thousand dollars was a lot of money back then," he said.

However, he didn't want to call himself the father of the TV dinner.

"I really didn't invent the dinner. I innovated the tray on how it could be served, coined the name and developed some unique packaging," he said in the 1999 AP interview. "If I'm the father of the TV dinner, who's the mother? I think it's ludicrous."

After the Campbell Soup Co. acquired Swanson in 1955, Thomas became a sales manager, then marketing manager and director of marketing and sales. He left the company after a heart attack in 1970. He later directed an art gallery and did consulting work.