

An American ICON

How Carl Swanson's frozen foods company revolutionized the way America eats

BY CHRIS COUGHLAN-SMITH

It's a humble little thing, as icons go. But the distinctive light blue box, maybe an inch thick and weighing less than a pound, encompasses so many modern trends that one could argue it is one of the most appropriate symbols of late 20th-century Western civilization

The Swanson TV Dinner arose from television and the need for convenience in a fast-moving life; it is processed food, mass produced, and now it is enshrined in concrete outside Mann's Chinese Theater in Hollywood.

The frozen dinner was introduced 45 years ago, created by an Omaha company named for its Swedish immigrant founder. It was a sharp idea with perfect timing, and it became an overnight sensation. The Swanson company sold 10 million of the prepackaged dinners in the first year.

"It's the classic example of necessity being the mother of invention," says Gerry Thomas, the product's inventor. "It was after Thanksgiving, and we had undersold. Needless to say, we had a surplus of turkeys."

At the time, Swanson was one of the nation's leading frozen foods companies. A miscalculation in Thanksgiving demand added up to more than one-half-million pounds in frozen turkeys. To make matters worse, limited freezer warehouse space meant the turkeys had to be kept in refrigerated railroad boxcars. A quick solution was needed.

Thomas was Swanson's vice-president for marketing in 1954. At a distributor's office in Pittsburgh, he saw metal trays being tested for airline food. Taking one as a sample, he sketched out the concept for a tray with separate compartments for a heat-and-serve dinner.



The idea was well-received at company headquarters, and the company went to work figuring out how to cook and freeze turkey, cornbread dressing, gravy, buttered peas, and sweet potatoes in a manner that allowed them to be reheated properly and still be appealing.

But why link the product with television at a time when only 20 percent of homes had one? "At the time, the word 'TV' meant you were cool and modern," explains Thomas, who recognized that the new medium was catching on. "Research suggested that our dinner was likely [to be] consumed by mom and the kids when dad wasn't home, and often in front of the television."

The early 1950s signalled the beginning of the fast-paced American life so commonplace today. The country's population was booming, white-collar jobs demanded long hours (mostly of men), and industry relied increasingly on women laborers. Eighteen million of the women who went to work during World War II continued working after the war was over and the soldiers had returned home.

According to legend, Carl Swanson arrived at Ellis Island in 1896 wearing a tag that read: "Carl Swanson, Swedish. Please send me to Omaha. I speak no English."

"The TV dinner was invented to meet an increasing need for high-quality, convenient meals for a value," says Murray Kessler, current president of the Swanson frozen foods division.

In 1954, Swanson executives recognized the product's potential and saluted the concept, ordering a trial run of 5,000 dinners, and pricing them at 98 cents each. They were overwhelmed by the response. Even the aluminum trays were a popular item for saving and reusing. The company added fried chicken and Salisbury steak to the line, which it still offers today, along with vegetables and a brownie or cobbler dessert.

Swanson Foods is named after Carl Anton Swanson, who was born in 1879 in Karlsborg, Sweden. Like many members of his generation, Swanson emigrated to America as a young man. According to legend, he arrived at Ellis Island in 1896 wearing a tag that read: "Carl Swanson, Swedish. Please send me to Omaha. I speak no English."

In Omaha he found a large Swedish community and eventually began working for the Jerpe Commission Company. That food company survived the Depression years and emerged as a strong national player in eggs, poultry, and butter under the leadership of Swanson and his sons, Gilbert and Clark, who had worked for the firm since their teens. Renamed C. A. Swanson and Sons in 1940, the company expanded into canned and dried foods to serve far-away markets, while the war led to large demand for items like canned chicken and powdered eggs. As women entered the work force in record numbers, the Swanson company responded to their need for frozen convenience foods to feed their families in a hurry.

An outstanding businessman, Swanson also served as a volunteer leader in Omaha. He was given the Knights of Vasa Medal by the king of Sweden in 1946. He died in 1949, still running the firm at age 70. He never got to see the product that would make his surname a household word.

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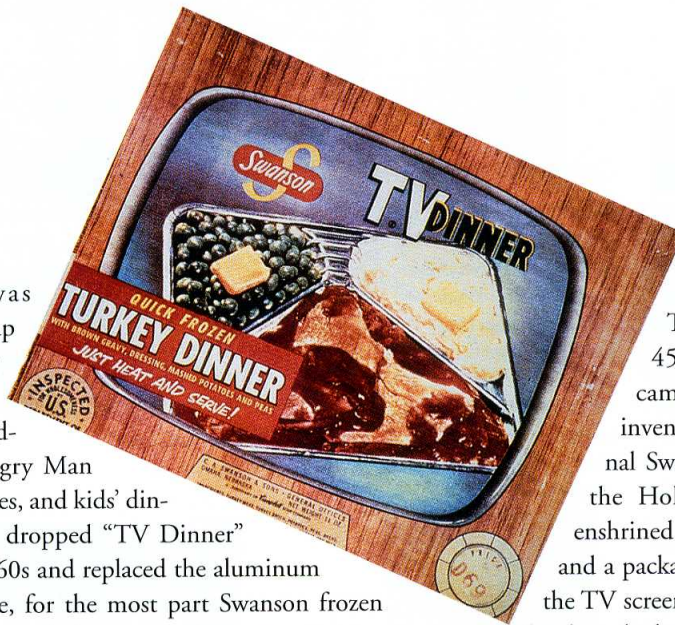
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Swanson and Sons was bought by the Campbell Soup Company in 1955, just after TV dinners hit the market. Over the years, the line expanded to include pot pies, Hungry Man dinners, frozen breakfast entrees, and kids' dinners. Although the company dropped "TV Dinner" from the package in the mid-60s and replaced the aluminum tray with a microwavable one, for the most part Swanson frozen dinners have remained true to their meat-and-potatoes origin. Despite little attention to marketing, sales continued to grow until about five years ago.

When Vlastic International Foods acquired the Swanson frozen foods line in 1998, its executives devised a new strategy for marketing the dinners: nostalgia.



Hoping to create a new generation of TV dinner fans, the company has created a 45th Anniversary Celebration marketing campaign. Thomas, the dinner's 77-year-old inventor, is being touted as a celebrity. An original Swanson tray and Thomas's name now grace the Hollywood "Walk of Fame," having been enshrined in March 1999. The words "TV Dinner" and a package that matches the original right down to the TV screen graphic have returned. The company also has launched an instant-win sweepstakes. You're a winner if you find an aluminum tray inside the box. The grand prize? What else? A big-screen television. **S&A**

A St. Paul-based freelance writer, Chris Coughlan-Smith is a frequent contributor to Sweden & America.



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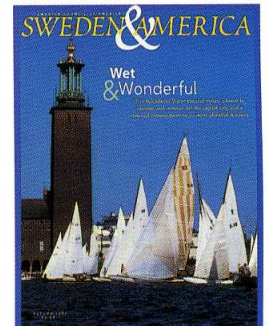
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