Donald Tyson, Poultry Patriarch, Dies At 80

Chuck Bartels, AP Business Writer

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — Former Tyson Foods Inc. chief executive Donald J. Tyson, who led his family's poultry company from being a regional producer to dominance in the industry while instilling a corporate culture that mixed hard work and enjoyment, died Thursday. He was 80.

Company spokesman Gary Mickelson said Tyson died from complications from cancer, and passed away at home with his family.

Tyson joined the business his father had founded and later became its president, then chief executive and chairman. He built up the company by acquiring other businesses through the 1970s and '80s, and it became the world's largest poultry producer when it bought Holly Farms in 1989.

"He was a true visionary who led Tyson Foods from a small regional chicken company to a multibillion dollar food-processing enterprise," John R. Tyson, his son, who is now chairman of the company, said in a statement. "He will be missed by everyone who knew him."

Don Tyson was recognized for his "no bad days" outlook and "was known by all to work hard, but also to play hard," the company said in its statement announcing Tyson's death.

Leland Tollett, a former Tyson Foods CEO who worked side-by-side with Don Tyson for decades, remembered his friend for the high-spiritedness he brought to the business.

"There was not a stranger," Tollett told the Associated Press. "He was comfortable going up and down the operations lines and the feed mill. Wherever he went he was comfortable and they were comfortable."

In a 2008 interview with the AP interview, Tyson was reluctant to discuss the impact he had on building the company.

"I had someone ask me that 30 years ago, and my answer was: 'My long-term plan is Friday's payroll," he said.

Tollett, though, said Tyson had special talent for motivating workers in a company where the culture is a blend of hard work and enjoyment

"He was unique in that he was an idea a minute, but once we set a course he let people do their jobs. He had that ability to delegate authority, responsibility, and that was very good for establishing our culture."

While the Springdale-based company went public in 1963, in practice it remained a family business with Tyson family members owning controlling shares.

Don Tyson, who retired as senior chairman in 2001, was fined $700,000 by the Securities and Exchange Commission in 2005 and Tyson Foods paid $1.5 million to settle an investigation into lavish spending of company money between 1997 and 2001.

The SEC found that he used $3 million in company funds to pay for vacation properties in England and Mexico, and items that ranged from jewelry and artwork to a horse and clothing, all improperly documented in company regulatory filings.

Don Tyson continued to work on behalf of the company after his retirement, helping as Tyson Foods expanded into international markets. He told the AP in 2008 that the company had to look beyond U.S. borders to continue to grow.

"We have done about as much in the United States as we can do," Tyson told the AP.

It was a long road to get there. Tyson's father, John W. Tyson, had founded the company in the early 1930s and became a leader in the industry by hauling live chickens to distant markets in the Midwest, at a time before refrigeration made for easy transport.

Tyson told the AP he started work at the company hatchery at age 12..

"When I was 14, of course, I could drive a truck. That made me more valuable."

The business grew to include feed mills. Don Tyson was the first manager of the company's first processingplant, built in Springdale under his supervision. He went on to branch into the hog business and develop prepared food lines, which helped widen the company's footprint.

Tyson added the titles of chairman and chief executive in 1967, the year his father was killed in a car-train accident. In addition to Holly Farms, the company's major pickups under his leadership included Val-Mack, Lane Poultry and, in 1998, Hudson Foods. Tyson left the daily operation of the company in 1995, when Tollett became CEO, but remained chairman.

Under Don's son, John R. Tyson, the company became the leading meat company with its purchase of IBP Inc. in 2001.

Until his death, Don Tyson was the managing general partner of the Tyson Limited Partnership, which owns 70 million shares of the company's Class B common stock, and 3 million shares of its Class A common stock. The partnership, consisting of Tyson family members and former executives, will retain control of the company, current Tyson President and CEO Donnie Smith said.

Visitation is set for Friday afternoon at Sisco Funeral Home in Springdale. A private

service for family and close friends is planned for Saturday. A public memorial will be scheduled later.

In addition to his son John, Tyson is survived by three daughters, Carla Tyson, Cheryl Tyson and Joslyn J. Caldwell-Tyson, two grandchildren and other relatives.

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