

Scientist who developed CorningWare dies in NY (Update)

November 7 2014, by David Pitt



In this 1950 photo provided by Corning Inc., Dr. Don Stookey prepares to expose an image to ultraviolet light. Stookey, who forever changed cooking with the invention of CorningWare, died Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2014, at an assisted living center in Rochester, New York. He was 99.(AP Photo/Corning, Inc.)

S. Donald Stookey was a young scientist researching the properties of glass in 1952 when he put a glass plate into an oven to heat it. But the oven malfunctioned.

Instead of heating to about 1,100 degrees Fahrenheit (600 Celsius), the oven shot up to more than 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit (870 Celsius). Stookey expected to find a molten mess. Instead, he found an opaque, milky-white plate.

As he was removing it from the oven, his tongs slipped, and the plate fell to the floor. But instead of shattering, it bounced.

Stookey, who died Tuesday at 99, had just discovered glass ceramics—a breakthrough that soon led to the development of CorningWare, the durable, heat-resistant ceramic glass used to make millions upon millions of baked lasagnas, casseroles and other dinner dishes.

Although he was never a household name, Stookey's best-known invention found a home in most American kitchens in the form of white dishes decorated with small blue cornflowers.

The space-age material was so strong that the military used it in guided missile nose cones.

Stookey died at an assisted-living center in Rochester, New York, said his son Donald Stookey. He said his father broke a hip in a fall a few months ago and underwent surgery, but his health deteriorated.



In this undated photo provided by Corning Inc., shown are pieces of CorningWare dishes. Dr. Don Stookey, who forever changed cooking with the invention of CorningWare, died Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2014, at an assisted living center in Rochester, New York. He was 99. (AP Photo/Corning, Inc.)

"He was one of the great glass scientists in the history of the world," said Steve Feller, a physics professor at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where Stookey earned an undergraduate degree in chemistry and mathematics and remained active in alumni activities. "Virtually everyone has had CorningWare at some point in time, and there were all sorts of spinoff applications from his fantastic work."

CorningWare was celebrated for its versatility. It was strong enough to withstand minor kitchen mishaps, and it gave home cooks the ability to bake and serve food in the same dish. The dishes could go straight from the oven to the dinner table and then into the refrigerator or freezer.

You could also put them in a microwave, and some types could be heated atop a stove. For decades, they were a common sight at family gatherings, church dinners and holiday feasts.

Stookey joined Corning Glass Works in upstate New York in 1940, the same year he graduated with a doctorate in physical chemistry from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He immersed himself in research, studying the complex chemistry of oxidation and its effects on glass, according to a company biography.

Corning patented its glass ceramics as Pyroceram. By the end of the 1950s, CorningWare had become one of the company's most successful product lines.

In a 2011 interview, Stookey said he initially viewed glass research as a way to make money, but he became intrigued by glass' special characteristics.

"I thought this might be a field where I could find something new, invent things not seen before, and I was lucky to have that be the case," he said in a video project funded by the History Channel for the Corning Museum of Glass.

Stookey held the patent on CorningWare, according to his son, who believes his father made money on a percentage of the sales but did not get rich.

In the late 1960s, the elder Stookey felt burned-out and out of ideas, the son said. He offered to leave the company. The family that started Corning told him to take a year off with pay. He traveled the world and returned to spend another 20 years with the company.

CorningWare is still sold today, although it is now marketed by World

Kitchen LLC, a Rosemont, Illinois-based company formed after Corning Inc. spun off its consumer-products division in 1998.

Stookey earned 60 U.S. patents. His other innovations included developing photosensitive glass that helped lead to color television picture tubes.

He received the National Medal of Technology from President Ronald Reagan in 1987. In 2010, at age 94, he was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

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Citation: Scientist who developed CorningWare dies in NY (Update) (2014, November 7) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-11-scientist-corningware-dies-ny.html>

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