TUPPERWARE!

ENCORE PRESENTATION
MONDAY, MAY 10, 2004 AT 9PM ON PBS
(CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS)
PBS.ORG/AMEX/TUPPERWARE

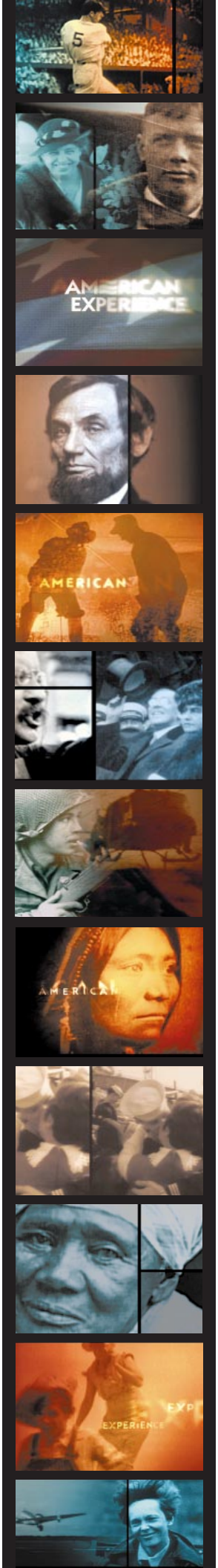
> Tupperware! *stands at the intersection of three great themes of the age—sales, science and sexual politics.* —LOS ANGELES TIMES

In the 1950s, American women discovered they could earn thousands—even millions—of dollars from bowls that burped. "Tupperware ladies" fanned out across the nation's living rooms, selling efficiency and convenience to their friends and neighbors through home parties. Bowl by bowl, they built an empire that now spans the globe.

On Monday, May 10, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE reprises *Tupperware!*, a documentary by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt (*A Midwife's Tale*) on PBS. Narrated by Kathy Bates, this funny, thought-provoking film reveals the secret behind Tupperware's success: the women of all shapes, sizes, and backgrounds who discovered they could move up in the world without leaving the house. *Tupperware!* charts the origins of the small plastics company that unpredictably became a cultural phenomenon.

It all began with the unlikely partnership of Earl Silas Tupper, a reclusive small-town inventor, and Brownie Wise, a self-taught marketing whiz. At a time when women, who had been celebrated for working in factories during World War II, were being pushed back to the kitchen, Wise showed them how to defy the limitations they faced by starting up their own businesses—based in their kitchens.

In *Tupperware!*, rare archival footage of Tupperware parties, annual Tupperware Jubilees, and home movies are interwoven with the thoughtful, often humorous recollections of Tupperware salespeople and executives who experienced firsthand the company's meteoric rise. A companion Web site at **pbs.org/amex/tupperware** features interviews with people who built their lives around Tupperware, Jubilee footage, pages from Earl Tupper's invention notebooks, an exploration of gender roles, and insights from a plastics expert.



AMERICAN EXPERIENCE
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Mark Samels,
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Tupperware seemed to be custom-made for a post-war America in love with modern conveniences. But it wasn't an instant success. Its creator, Earl Tupper, spent years doggedly tinkering with his machines in the heart of Massachusetts' plastics industry. Eventually, he figured out how to mold raw polyethelene, developed for use in weapons, into food containers. Inspired by a paint can, in 1945 he developed the watertight, airtight Tupper seal. But his Wonderbowl languished on store shelves.

In 1947 a young mother and divorcée named Brownie Wise was living in Detroit when she stumbled across Tupper's product. Wise was a self-taught saleswoman who never got past eighth grade growing up in rural Georgia, but she had an intuitive gift for marketing. In 1951, she traveled to Massachusetts to meet with Tupper. She argued that his products should be sold not in stores, but at home parties, where women would demonstrate the revolutionary unbreakable, unspillable bowls to their friends and neighbors.

Tupper not only bought her reasoning, he hired her on the spot to head up his entire sales operation, Tupperware Home Parties. From the company's lush new headquarters just outside Orlando, Florida, Wise began to train an army of Tupperware ladies to put on parties and recruit new women into the business. She inspired and motivated her sales force, rewarding them with minks, appliances, and European vacations. Wise developed exuberant annual Jubilees—filmed by the company, and excerpted in this documentary—that were equal parts costume party, business training, cheerleading, and Hollywood glitz. "It was like a fairy tale," remembers dealer Li Walker. "Like you're in a wonderland."

Wise transformed the stereotype of the suede-shoed door-to-door salesman into a woman—in heels, no less. Women who had worked in factories or five-and-tens or on farms were now dressed in white gloves and hats, self-assured, able to speak publicly with confidence. "It was a very privileged job...Tupperware moved us up to being a lady," says dealer Clairie Brooks. Perhaps most importantly, Wise encouraged these women to believe in themselves and dream big. "Brownie had the ability to talk to your dreams. You could suddenly see yourself being something you hadn't thought about before," recalls salesperson Sylvia Boyd.

A successful female executive in a man's world was news. In a carefully crafted publicity strategy, Wise was positioned as Tupperware's public face, despite Tupper's objections. As the company grew, she appeared on talk shows, was quoted by newspapers, and was featured in dozens of well-known magazines, including *Business Week*—the first woman ever to grace their cover.

Tupper grew annoyed when the press implied that his plastic products owed their success entirely to Brownie Wise's marketing know-how. Relations between Tupper and Wise, once cozy, became contentious as they tussled for control. On January 28, 1958, as projected sales reached $100 million, Tupper fired Wise with next to no warning, cutting her off with a $35,000 settlement. Before the year was out, he sold the company for $16 million and later bought an island in Central America, where he continued to invent gadgets and gizmos. Stunned by her dismissal, Brownie attempted to get back on her feet. She launched Cinderella, a home-party cosmetics company. It folded within a year.

"The story of Earl Tupper, Brownie Wise, and her Tupperware ladies takes us into the heart of twentieth-century America," says Kahn-Leavitt. "*Tupperware!* reveals the lives of women with very few options who remade themselves and built an empire based on plastic dishes. Their funny, straightforward, often poignant stories tell us a lot about the history of selling, the changes in expectations for women, and the importance of recognition and applause in all of our lives."

CREDITS

A Filmmakers Collaborative/Blueberry Hill Productions film for American Experience.
Produced, written and directed by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt
Co-producer: Robin Hessman
Editor: William A. Anderson
Director of photography: Peter Stein
Narrator: Kathy Bates
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American Experience is a production of WGBH Boston.
Executive producer: Mark Samels

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Accessibility

American Experience is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs and VCRs.

About American Experience

American Experience, television's most-watched history series, is a leading producer of historical documentaries, related web sites, and DVDs. The pioneer of quality historical programming for public television audiences, American Experience has won every prestigious broadcast award and enjoys consistent widespread support from television critics and viewers alike.

About WGBH Boston

WGBH Boston is America's preeminent public broadcasting producer. One-third of PBS's prime-time lineup and companion Web content as well as many public radio favorites are produced by WGBH. The station also is a pioneer in educational multimedia and in access technologies for people with disabilities.

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Tupperware!
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