Ordinary or odd, last meal can tell inmate's story

By Rachel Graves
April 6, 2003, 7:14PM

HUNTSVILLE -- The smell of fried food lingered in the Texas death house as Richard Head Williams was strapped to the gurney for his February execution.

Williams, a Houston murderer, requested a mammoth last meal of two chili cheese dogs, two cheeseburgers, two orders of onion rings, french fries, chocolate cake, apple pie, butter pecan ice cream, egg rolls, one peach, three Dr Peppers and jalapeno peppers. It was served two hours before he was killed.

Facing lethal injection, death row inmates make requests ranging from the strange (a jar of dill pickles) to the ethereal ("justice, equality and world peace").

But in the end, prison officials say, most simply want a cheeseburger.

Last meal requests -- windows into the thoughts of the rare people who know precisely how and when they will die -- fascinate the public.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice posts final meal requests dating back 21 years, and officials say the list is the most popular part of their Web site.

Brian Price, a former Texas prisoner who prepared 171 final meals in Huntsville, is publishing a cookbook called Meals to Die For. And a California man recently started a Web site documenting the last meal requests of prisoners across the country.

"We live in such a clean world," said Mike Randleman of Santa Monica, Calif., founder of deadmaneating.com. "We like to glimpse at the dark side from the safety of our home."

His Web site features a drawing of a hanging stick figure, a dripping ice cream cone in its hand.

Some notable last meal requests from recent executions:

- Ohio killer Robert A. Buell asked for a single unpitted olive for his final meal in September, apparently in hopes that an olive tree would grow from his body as a sign of peace.

- Amos Lee King, executed in Florida in February, was not allowed to choose a last meal. He had already gotten two, officials said, for previously scheduled executions that were halted at the last minute.

- Delbert Teague Jr., killed in Huntsville in 1998, did not want a final meal, then at the last minute "decided to eat a hamburger at his mother's request," according to the TDCJ Web site.

Condemned prisoners in Texas choose their final meal about two weeks before their execution. They are also allowed to select a spiritual adviser, as many as five personal witnesses to the execution and what color they will wear when they are killed. (One man opted to wear green and purple because they were favorite colors of his family, TDCJ spokeswoman Michelle Lyons said. Many choose to stay in their prison whites.)

"You're trying to make their last moments on Earth as fitting and as comforting as you can, and one of the ways to do that is sending them off on a full stomach," said James W. Marquart, a criminal justice professor at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville.

He acknowledged, though, that there also is a practical side.

"If you can provide them with creature comforts, you're going to have a more malleable individual to strap down and to execute," Marquart said.

Others are more cynical about the ritual.

Philip Cohen, a sociologist at the University of California, Irvine, teaches a course in the sociology of food. He described the last meal custom as insincere, "paying respects to this person in a civilized way when, in fact, what's going on is deeply barbaric."

Mimi Martin, an instructor in nutrition and food studies at New York University who has researched last meals, compared the tradition to ritual sacrifice.

"You're looking after the body," she said, "but at the same time you're going to kill it."

Texas prisoners are confined to meals that can be made with what is on hand in the cafeteria. They are not allowed to have alcohol or cigarettes, but they can have soda, which is usually available to them only if they buy it at the commissary.

Officials acknowledge bending the rules to bring in bacon, an occasional steak or other unusual requests for well-behaved inmates.

"I mean, it's a guy's last meal, shoot," said TDCJ spokesman Larry Fitzgerald, who recently bought Bing cherries for a prisoner.

Price volunteered to prepare last meals when he served as an inmate in the Walls unit, where Texas' executions are carried out.
"Half the guys didn't want to do it because it gave them the creeps," said Price, who worked as a cook in the prison kitchen during the 14 years he served for sexual assault. He was released from prison in January.

Price could not turn frozen fish fillets into lobster, but he did what he could to make the meals special. He would wash the breading off the fish and cook it in his own homemade batter. He spent hours trying to figure out how to make the "blooming onion" one prisoner requested. When he failed, someone finally bought one for the man at Chili's. Price also carefully arranged the plates to look nice and prayed over each one.

"It gave me a feeling like I had done something to comfort the man right before he went to meet his maker," he said. Most of the prisoners would send word back to Price that they enjoyed their meals, although some also returned their plates full.

"Sometimes they'd be completely clean; sometimes they'd come back just the way we sent them," Price said. "Karla Faye Tucker didn't touch hers."

Tucker, the first woman to be executed in Texas since the Civil War era, had asked for a banana, a peach and a garden salad with ranch dressing for her last meal in 1998.

Many inmates want comfort food, such as eggs or fried chicken.

Prison chaplain Richard Lopez often sits with prisoners as they eat their last meal. In February, he asked John Elliott why he requested a cup of hot tea and six chocolate chip cookies.

"It just reminded me of when I would relax at home. That's how I would relax," Elliott responded, according to Lopez.

Another prisoner scarfed down eight pieces of fried chicken.

"He was in heaven with that chicken," Lopez said.

Cohen, the sociologist, said the requests for abnormally large meals are probably rooted in a desire to delay the execution, a "tragic attempt to prolong life."

"You don't want the meal to end," he said.

Other prisoners do not request a meal, saying they think it is hypocritical to take the offerings of their killers.

"They felt that it was wrong to take food from someone who ultimately was going to execute you," prison spokeswoman Lyons said.

There is little information on why prisons serve last meals or when the ritual started.

Social scientists say there are a number of historical customs that could have generated the last meal tradi-