

# Civil War Food Prices Were Lower Than Those of Today

**T**HE high cost of living during the civil war and the inconvenience and suffering which followed have remained for half a century the standard for all comparisons. The prices demanded, especially in 1863, were thought to be beyond all reason. Poor people, even those in moderate circumstances, often found them prohibitive. A violent protest followed, and strikes and mass meetings became common throughout the country. In every city parades were organized to demand lower prices and high wages. The social unrest was far more serious than any we know today.

With the present cost of living in mind, the records of food prices during the civil war make interesting reading. Prices rose steadily from 1861 to 1863, and the level reached in the third year of the war was the high-water mark. The increase for the period varied from 60 to 75 per cent., and in some instances 100 per cent.

At the beginning of the war eggs sold for 15 cents a dozen, and in 1863 at 25 cents. Cheese rose from 8 to 18 cents a pound. A bushel of potatoes sold for \$1.50 in 1861, and three years later for \$2.25, a price scarcely exceeded today. One of the chief sources of complaint was the cost of sugar, which rose to 12 or 15 cents a pound. One of the curiosities of the list was the price of butter, which for a long time hung around 80 cents a pound. Cotton sold at one time for \$1 a yard.

The saloons felt the pinch also in 1863. A meeting of saloon owners was held in New York to consider the problem, and in the face of great public opposition the price of a drink of liquor was raised from 6 to 10 cents. The best hotels raised their rates to \$2.50 and later to \$3 a day and charged extra for heat and light. The rate included a room and three meals a day. The barbers de-

manded 10 cents for shaving and 20 cents for a hair cut. Ice was considered a great luxury and was supplied at the rate of 50 cents a week for a supply of ten pounds a day.

The average cost of foods, it is seen, was well below the prices of today. The explanation of the violent protests throughout the country will be found, however, in the comparatively low wages paid in the trades and professions. Banners borne in a parade in New York demanded a wage of \$1.12 a day. The average rate for common labor rose as high as \$1.25 for a day's work. Even the skilled workmen fared little better. The wages of blacksmiths rose from \$1.75 to \$2 a day, while the bricklayers in 1863 received \$2 a day instead of \$1.25, as at the beginning of the war. A skilled painter received \$1.75 a day, joiners and shipbuilders \$2, quarrymen \$1.12. Coach-

men were paid \$30 a month and waiters from \$12 to \$18 a month.

The prices of food and clothing reached far greater heights in the South. In a diary kept by Mrs. Jefferson Davis it is recorded that in 1862, in Richmond, mutton sold for 37 cents a pound, potatoes for \$6 a bushel, tea for \$5 a pound, flour at \$300 a barrel, and turkey brought \$60. A pair of boots cost \$25. Many of these prices were due to speculation in food. At one time beef sold for \$6 a pound and flour for \$1,000 a barrel.

These extraordinary prices, however, were fictitious. It made all the difference in the world whether the bills were paid in gold or in Confederate money. At this time an Englishman wrote from Charleston that he had never lived so well and so cheaply. The regular hotel rates in paper money were \$20 a day, but they cost the Englishman but 3 shillings a day. The bill was paid in gold.

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