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HIGH COST OF LIVING IN OLDEN DAYS

By John R. McMahon

NOW that State and federal authorities are investigating the high cost of living, legal steps are taken against those held responsible for soaring prices, and a strike against meat has enlisted thousands of heroic souls all over the country, it is interesting to see what Governments did over two thousand years ago in Athens, afterward in the Roman Empire, in England in the Middle Ages, and later in the United States, to solve the same problem.

High cost of living has been a complaint raised at frequent intervals in the history of the human family. Numerous and stringent laws have been passed to remedy the condition. It is doubtful whether the present agitation will lead to any measures so severe as the Athenian penalty of death for cornering wheat, or so thorough going as the edict of Diocletian, which fixed the prices for hundreds of articles of necessity and luxury.

At Athens, in the time of Pericles, about 450 B. C., citizens and alien residents were forbidden to export grain, and whoever bought more than seventy-five bushels at a time was condemned to drink hemlock, the capital punishment of the time. There was a bureau of weights and measures which fixed the size and weight of loaves of bread. The publicists of the period compared the prices of Solon's time in the previous century with the prevailing high prices and pointed out that an ox on the hoof that used to sell for five drachmae (\$1) was now valued at \$20. The price of sheep had risen from 20 cents apiece to \$2 to \$4. A medimnus, or bushel and a half, of wheat, had reached the extortionate figure of 60 cents. Bread was high at 3 cents a loaf. Wine had advanced from 40 cents a gallon to \$2. It was complained that sandals at 40 cents and cloaks at \$2 were beyond the means of common people.

During the Peloponnesian War, on account of the increased cost of living, rowers in the Athenian fleet got the high wages of 20 cents a day, which, a century earlier, used to be the regular salary of Athenian Congressmen (*Bouleuter*). It was considered that the Greek soldiers under Cyrus were highly paid at the rate of \$5 a month for food, clothing, and compensation, Captains \$10 a month, Generals \$20, and pensioned cripples 3 cents.

Diocletian's Scale of Prices

THE high cost of living began to bother the Roman Empire around 303 A. D., when Emperor Diocletian promulgated an edict establishing a maximum price for all commodities, including the labor of artists and literary men. This schedule prevailed throughout the entire Roman world, and violation of any of its provisions probably entailed the death penalty, since military discipline was the order of the day. Here are some extracts from Diocletian's prices current:

Beer, pint	\$ 0.53
Medicated wine, pint	3.20
Rose wine, pint	2.67
Oil, best, pint	5.33
Oil, second quality, pint	3.20
Oil for common people, pint	1.60
Vinegar, pint	.80
Honey, best, pint	5.33
Honey, second quality, pint	2.67
Honey, palm, pint	1.07
Pork, pound	3.20
Beef, pound	2.13
Goat, pound	2.13
Hog's liver, pound	4.27
Ham, Westphalia, pound	5.33
Pig's feet, pound	1.07
Sausage, pound	4.27
Butter, pound	4.27
Tallow, pound	1.60
Sea fish, pound	6.40
Sea fish, second quality, pound	4.27
River fish, pound	3.20
Cheese, pound	3.20
Cock pheasant, fatted	50.00
Hen pheasant, fatted	40.00
Goose, fatted	40.00
Goose, not fatted	20.00
Chicken	12.00
Partridge	6.00
Duck	8.00
Hare	30.00
Rabbit	8.00
Lettuce, 5	.80
Cabbage sprouts, bundle	.80
Leeks, 10	.80
Beets, 5	.80
Radishes, second grade, 20	.80
Turnips, second quality, 20	.80
Onions, seconds, 50	.80
Watercress, bundle of 20	.80
Cucumbers, best, 10	.80
Melons, large, 2	.80
Asparagus, bundle of 25	.80
Eggs, 4	.80
Apples, seconds, 20	.80
Plums, large, 30	.80
Figs, best, 25	.80
Grapes, pound	1.07

lawyers did not escape from Diocletian's far reaching device to check the high cost of living. Following are some extracts from the literary schedule:

To the teacher for each boy, month	\$ 10.00
To the Greek or Latin grammarian and to the geometrician for each pupil	40.00
To the orator or sophist for each pupil	40.00
To the lawyer, retainer	50.00
To the lawyer for court work	200.00
To servant at bath	.40
To the tailor for lining a fine vest	1.20
To the same for an opening and an edging with silk	10.00
A woman's common tunic	3.20
A woman's close vest or shirt	2.00
A cloak	3.20
A cloak, second hand	1.20
Oxhide, best leather	120.00
Leopard's skin	200.00
Lion's skin	200.00
Shoes, laborer's	24.00
patrician's	30.00
senator's	20.00
woman's	12.00
Mule bridle	24.00
Mule whip	3.20

In England and Europe

IN England, France, and Germany, between 1350 and 1380 there were periodic rises in the price of wheat and barley, from 48 and 20 cents a bushel up to \$2.61 and 92 cents. In 1372 the Town Council of Strasburg tried to stop excessive prices by ordering that no woman should spend more than 30 gold florins (\$70.50) on a dress. The working classes of England, Germany, and France were prosperous in the period 1451-1550, measured by the purchasing power of wages. In the second half of the sixteenth century complaints were constant of the increased cost of living. In the early period the day's wage of a carpenter or mason bought three-fifths of a bushel of wheat, while in the nineteenth century it bought one-fifth of a bushel. In parts of Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a day's wages bought only one-seventh of a bushel of rye.

The English Parliament was first prompted to take measures against high prices after the ravages of the Black Death in 1348-49, when it extended the local regulations over prices and wages. The Statute of Laborers (23 Edw. III.), passed in 1349, provided that laborers should not ask nor employers grant wages above the old scale, and also that "butchers, fishmongers, regrators, hostlers, brewers, bakers, poulterers, and all sellers of all manner of victual shall be bound to sell the same victual for a reasonable price, having respect to the price that such victual be sold at in the places adjoining, so that the same sellers have moderate gain and not excessive."

In 1350 a revised Statute of Laborers fixed the daily wage of a haymaker at a penny, a corn harvester two to three pence, a carpenter and mason two to four pence, while the price of shoes was to be the same "as in the twentieth year of King Edward the III." The diet and clothes of workmen of different classes were prescribed with minuteness, all under penalties of jail and fine. In 1363 a law was passed "that the price of a young capon shall not pass three pence, and of an old capon four pence, of a hen two pence, of a pullet one penny, of a goose four pence." Under Henry VIII., in 1533, certain judges and officials fixed the prices of cheese, butter, poultry, and other things. A preamble to the statute says it was necessary by reason of dearth, high prices, and "the greedy covetousness and appetites of the owners of such victuals."

The exorbitance of book publishers came under the ban in 1533, when a law was passed fixing the prices of books and binding. Ten years later it was discovered that beer barrels cost too much, and a law fixing their price went through Parliament. A legal price for longbows was also established. Under Queen Anne in 1709 and George II, in 1758 the old Assize of Bread was elaborated, and the price of all kinds of loaves of bread, according to the price of grain, constituents, and weights of loaves, was established.

Early American Attempts

VALIANT legal attempts to combat high prices of commodities were made in this country during the American Revolution. The Continental Congress asked the thirteen States to pass laws that might amend the high cost of living. Massachusetts in 1777 tried bravely to do her share by passing a statute that limited the price of farm labor to three shillings a day in summer and fixed the price of wheat at seven shillings sixpence a bushel, rye at five shillings a bushel, not to mention the prices of salt, rum, sugar, shoes, molasses, cotton, beef, flannel, wool, leather, cloth, and flour. No citizen was allowed to have more food or other commodity in his house than he needed and was compelled to sell the surplus at a fixed price. This law was repealed the same year that it was enacted.

New York State in 1778 fixed the wages of laborers and mechanics, the price of most commodities, and regulated the profits of tradesmen and merchants. The law was repealed the same year. In 1786 it came to the attention of New York legislators that authors might be partly responsible for the high cost of living by reason of their excessive charges for their literary wares, and after profound consideration a law was passed restraining the greedy author from asking too much money for his manuscript.

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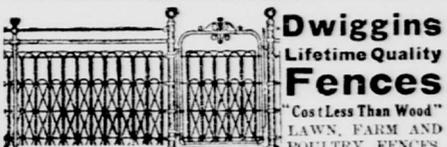
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