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WHAT THINGS COST



1900–1975

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A record of American prices and paychecks –
every figure verified, every one
converted to today's dollars

VERIFIED
&
CONVERTED

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FORGOTTEN AMERICAN WISDOM

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THE FORGOTTEN AMERICAN ARCHIVE • VOLUME

I

WHAT THINGS COST 1900–1975

*A record of American prices and paychecks — every
figure verified, every one converted to today's dollars*

FIELD EDITION • 2027

FORGOTTEN AMERICAN WISDOM

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— BEFORE THE RECORD —



A Note Before You Begin

What this book is, where its numbers come from, and how to read the arithmetic

CHAPTER THREE

1930s

The Careful Years

The decade that taught America to count everything twice

Ten gallons, ten cents a gallon... a little pin money.

— MARGARET BARRETT, B. 1917, NEAR ST. CHARLES,
MISSOURI • FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF ST. LOUIS ORAL
HISTORY

Start with the two numbers that ruled the decade. In 1936, the average factory worker in America earned fifty-five cents an hour — \$21.56 for a week of 39.2 hours. And the government’s own income study, taken across the whole country in 1935 and 1936, found the median American family living on \$1,160 a year.

In today’s money, that median is about \$27,967 — for the entire household, for the entire year. The study’s exact words are worth reading slowly: “14 percent of all families received less than \$500 during the year studied; 42 percent received less than \$1,000, 65 percent less than \$1,500, and 87 percent less than \$2,500.” Nearly half the families in America, on less than \$24,000 a year in today’s terms. That is the arithmetic every price in this chapter was paid out of.

THE GROCER’S COUNTER, 1936

The Bureau of Labor Statistics kept the record for us. Every other Tuesday, its agents collected prices from about two thousand grocers, bakers, and dairymen in fifty-one cities — stores, in the Bureau’s words, “patronized largely by wage earners.” Here is what they wrote down for 1936, and what those prices feel like now.

THE GROCER’S COUNTER — 1936 B.L.S. BULL. N° 635 · TABLES 7–8 · THEN → TODAY

Bread, white <i>per lb</i>	8.2¢	\$1.98
Wheat flour <i>per lb</i>	4.8¢	\$1.16
Round steak <i>per lb</i>	34.2¢	\$8.25
Bacon, sliced <i>per lb</i>	40.9¢	\$9.86
Butter <i>per lb</i>	39.6¢	\$9.55
Oleomargarine <i>per lb</i>	18.3¢	\$4.41
Eggs <i>per dozen</i>	37.8¢	\$9.11
Milk, fresh, delivered <i>per quart</i>	12.0¢	\$2.89
Cheese <i>per lb</i>	28.1¢	\$6.77
Potatoes <i>per lb</i>	3.2¢	\$0.77
Sugar, granulated <i>per lb</i>	5.6¢	\$1.35

Coffee <i>per lb</i>	24.3¢	\$5.86
Tea <i>per lb</i>	69.1¢	\$16.66
Navy beans, dried <i>per lb</i>	6.7¢	\$1.62
Lard, pure <i>per lb</i>	16.4¢	\$3.95

Annual averages, fifty-one cities combined. Conversions use the Bureau's Consumer Price Index, 1936 to May 2026.

Read the butter line against the oleomargarine line — \$9.55 against \$4.41 — and the whole decade is in two rows. The real thing and the substitute, and every family knew exactly which one came out when company did.

WHAT THE PAYCHECK HAD TO COVER

FACTORY WAGE, 1936 ALL MANUFACTURING · HOURLY 55c ≈ \$13.26 TODAY	FACTORY PAY, 1936 AVERAGE WEEK · 39.2 HOURS \$21.56 ≈ \$519.80 TODAY	MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME FAMILIES OF 2+ · 1935–36 \$1,160_{yr} ≈ \$27,967 TODAY	W.P.A. RELIEF WORK AVERAGE MONTH · FISCAL 1936 \$47.29 ≈ \$1,140 TODAY
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Hold the prices and the paychecks together, the way the household did. A pound of butter took 43 minutes of factory work. A dozen eggs, 41 minutes. A pound of round steak, 37. One illustrative week of basics — seven quarts of milk, four loaves of bread, a pound of butter, two dozen eggs, three pounds of round steak, five pounds of potatoes, a pound of coffee, two pounds of sugar — comes to \$3.86 at the 1936 counter: nearly 18 percent of the average factory week, for one basket that wouldn't fill two grocery bags. Food wasn't a line in the budget. Food was the budget.

And relief work paid less than half a factory wage. For the families on W.P.A. projects, \$47.29 a month meant the counting never stopped. Mrs. Barrett, whose words open this chapter, sold blackberries at ten cents a gallon and sewed clothes from printed feed sacks, and she was not the exception. By the middle of the decade, it was estimated that three million American women and children were wearing feed-sack garments in some form.

Every chapter of this book walks one era. This table walks all of them at once. Each cell shows the government-recorded price at the counter (SMALL) and what that price feels like in today's money (**BOLD**). Read it any direction you like: across a row to watch one item travel seventy-five years, or down the 1936 column to stand at one counter with the whole basket.

ITEM	1900*	1913	1925	1936	1943	1955	1965	1975
Butter, per lb	26.1¢ \$10.54	38.3¢ \$12.96	55.2¢ \$10.57	39.6¢ \$9.55	52.7¢ \$10.21	70.9¢ \$8.87	75.4¢ \$8.02	\$1.02 \$6.38
Round steak, per lb	13.2¢ \$5.33	22.3¢ \$7.55	36.2¢ \$6.93	34.2¢ \$8.25	43.9¢ \$8.50	90.3¢ \$11.29	\$1.08 \$11.53	\$1.89 \$11.74
Eggs, per dozen	20.7¢ \$8.36	34.5¢ \$11.68	55.4¢ \$10.61	37.8¢ \$9.11	57.2¢ \$11.08	60.6¢ \$7.58	52.7¢ \$5.61	77.0¢ \$4.80
Bread, white, per lb	— —	5.6¢ \$1.90	9.3¢ \$1.78	8.2¢ \$1.98	8.9¢ \$1.72	17.7¢ \$2.21	20.9¢ \$2.22	36.0¢ \$2.24
Sugar, per lb	6.1¢ \$2.46	5.5¢ \$1.86	7.0¢ \$1.34	5.6¢ \$1.35	6.8¢ \$1.32	10.4¢ \$1.30	11.8¢ \$1.26	37.2¢ \$2.32
Milk, delivered, per qt	6.8¢ \$2.75	8.9¢ \$3.01	13.9¢ \$2.66	12.0¢ \$2.89	15.5¢ \$3.00	23.1¢ \$2.89	26.3¢ \$2.80	— —

* 1900 conversions are approximate (pre-1913 index splice). Bread was not separately published before 1913; delivered-milk pricing was discontinued in December 1973. Per-pound and per-quart figures for years published in larger units (5-lb sugar sacks, half-gallon milk) are divided out from the published price. Sources: B.L.S. via Historical Statistics of the United States, Series E 187–202; B.L.S. Bulletins N° 635 and N° 1632; Handbook of Labor Statistics 1976, Table 123 — full citations in the sources chapter.

Two stories hide in this table. Read the butter row in today's dollars — \$10.54, \$12.96, \$10.57, \$9.55, \$10.21, \$8.87, \$8.02, \$6.38 — and real butter got steadily cheaper for seventy-five years; the “cheap old days” ran backward. Then read sugar's last cell: 37.2 cents a pound in 1975, more than five times its 1936 counter price — the sugar crisis of the mid-seventies, sitting in the record like a scar. The table doesn't argue. It just remembers.

One caution, repeated from the opening note: prices travel alone in this table, but nobody paid them alone. The 1900 column was paid out of roughly \$418 a year; the 1975 column out of \$13,719. That arithmetic — the paycheck beside the counter — is what the era chapters are for.

YOU HAVE BEEN READING A SAMPLE

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