

# Cost of living low in the 'good old days'

When elderly Monroe Countians talk about the "good old days," they often dwell on the difference in the cost of living. Admittedly, wages were lower, too, but even a superficial look at the cost of the way we were in the early days of the county, gives one cause to long for the prices, if not the inconveniences.

CONSIDER, for example, the minutes of the February 1819 meeting of Monroe County Commissioners. (The most striking difference between those minutes and ones of today is the focus of concern and authority.)

Admittedly, Bloomington was little more than a pioneer village. But the commissioners' price-fixing seems out of character with the general laissez faire attitude of the country in those days.

Still, their efforts to bring some standards into local life give us a glimpse of what things and services cost in those days. In an early 1800s version of personal property tax, the commissioners decided that Monroe Countians should be charged 37½ cents per year per horse owned. First class land was taxed at the rate of 50 cents for each 100 acres!

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## Looking Back

By Rose H. McIlveen

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Fair enough. Taxes have always been the revenue-garnering prerogative of units of government. But clearly, the commissioners got carried away with concern for the well-being of their constituents.

IT WOULD BE interesting to know if the local tavern owners had been engaging in some price gouging. The commissioners proclaimed that breakfast and dinner should cost 25 cents and supper, 18¼ cents. Alcoholic beverages came in for their share of consideration by the local lawmakers. Prices were set at: half pint of whisky, 12½ cents; half pint of brandy, 18½; half pint of wine, rum or French brandy, 37½.

(Presumably the plain brandy was a local product.)

The following month (March 1819) there appeared in the court records an inventory of the estate of John Loving. There we get another glimpse of the cost of living in those days.

The most expensive item in the estate was his set of blacksmith tools worth \$5.87½, plough, \$4.40 and kettles at \$3 each. Strange inconsistencies abound in the list, but they are due to the differences between home-made products and imported ones. For example, his tobacco was valued at \$2.82, three decks of cards, 50 cents, and two chairs, 57½ cents.

ANOTHER BRIEF view of local prices in the 1830s may be found in a letter written by the wife of Cornelius Perring to a friend back home in England. In this largely agricultural region, farm products were plentiful and cheap. Mrs. Perring, whose husband was an artist-female seminary principal, wrote that tree sugar was, 6¼ cents per pound, cane sugar, 12¼, and loaf sugar, 16 cents. Coffee was 20 cents per pound bought locally or 17 cents when ordered in bulk

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