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### HISTORICAL USA RETAIL FOOD PRICES: SOURCES, SURVEYS & DATA

#### [1600-1860]

*The Value of a Dollar: Colonial Era to the Civil War*, prices extracted from advertisements, newspapers, commodities listings, and personal inventories. Earliest prices are expressed in pence/colonial scrip. Food units are generally for large quantities, not comparable to modern supermarket prices.

#### [18th century]

[Early American Tavern menu prices](#)

#### [1720-1775]

[Average wholesale prices of selected commodities in Philadelphia](#) (bread, ship's bread, corn, rice, pork, flour, beef, salt, sugar, molasses, wine, & rum. Currency is expressed in Pennsylvania shillings. Monthly prices also available; 1762 sample. [SOURCE: *Prices in Colonial Pennsylvania*, Anne Bezanson, et al, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1935.]

#### [1786-1817]

[Median annual prices for 14 leading commodities](#), *Western Prices Before 1861*/Thomas Senior Berry [Harvard University Press:Boston] 1943 [NOTE: This book offers dozens of price charts, including seasonal variations of Cincinnati Wholesale Commodity Prices 1824-1860 (p. 568-567).]

#### [19th century]

[American pioneer provision prices](#)

#### [1817-1930]

[Family food expenditures](#) [1817, 1833, 1851, 1864, 1926, 1930], *The American and His Food*/ Richard Osborn Cummings

#### [1832]

[Meat prices](#), Boston MA

#### [1849]

[Retail food costs](#), California gold miners

#### [1861-1865]

[American Civil War food prices](#)

#### [1860-2009]

*The Value of A Dollar: Prices and Incomes in the United States*, selected food prices extracted from advertisements and federal data [NOTE: *Value of a Dollar* books are available in most public libraries. In the back of this book you will find charts for selected items listing both historic prices and prices expressed in 2007 dollars.]

#### [1890-1970]

[Basic commodities](#) (go to page 31): average retail prices of eggs, bread, flour, milk, beef, potatoes, coffee, butter, bacon &c., reported by the federal government. Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*/U.S. Dept. of Commerce, volume 2, series E187-202. Retail food prices are supplied by the U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Source notes detailed on p. 11 of this document.

#### [1881]

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journals (*Beverage Digest*, for example), and newspapers. Ask your librarian how to access these databases. Some of these should be accessible from your own computer. All you need is a library card or student ID.

### The "Hershey Bar Index"

Tracking the prices of "regular" candy bars is a complicated project because over the years the definition of regular (ie, size and weight) has also changed. Contrary to popular opinion, the size of the average chocolate bar is not ever-shrinking. The price? Is a function of global trade.

The Hershey Company was kind enough to supply us with price/weight data for their famous Hershey Bar from 1908-1986:

|                             |                              |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| [1908] 9/16 oz.....2 cents  | [1960] 1 oz.....5 cents      |
| [1918] 16/16 oz.....3 cents | [1963] 7/8 oz.....5 cents    |
| [1920] 9/16 oz.....3 cents  | [1965] 1 oz.....5 cents      |
| [1921] 1 oz.....5 cents     | [1966] 7/8 oz.....5 cents    |
| [1924] 1 3/8 oz.....5 cents | [1968] 3/4 oz.....5 cents    |
| [1930] 2 oz.....5 cents     | [1969] 1 1/2 oz.....10 cents |
| [1933] 1 7/8 oz.....5 cents | [1970] 1 3/8 oz.....10 cents |
| [1936] 1 1/2 oz.....5 cents | [1973] 1.26 oz.....10 cents  |
| [1937] 1 5/8 oz.....5 cents | [1974] 1.4 oz.....15 cents   |
| [1938] 1 3/8 oz.....5 cents | [1975*] 1.05 oz.....15 cents |
| [1939] 1 5/8 oz.....5 cents | [1976] 1.2 oz.....15 cents   |
| [1941] 1 1/4 oz.....5 cents | [1977] 1.2 oz.....20 cents   |
| [1944] 1 5/8 oz.....5 cents | [1978] 1.2 oz.....25 cents   |
| [1946] 1 1/2 oz.....5 cents | [1980] 1.05 oz.....25 cents  |
| [1947] 1 oz.....5 cents     | [1982] 1.45 oz.....30 cents  |
| [1954] 7/8 oz.....5 cents   | [1983] 1.45 oz.....35 cents  |
| [1955] 1 oz.....5 cents     | [1986] 1.45 oz.....40 cents  |
| [1958] 7/8 oz.....5 cents   | [1986] 1.65 oz.....40 cents  |

[1991] .45

"Last year, candy makers raised the price of candy bars 5 cents, to an average of 45 cents. The previous hike was in 1986."

---M&Ms Plans to Nickel and Dime the Competition, *New York Newsday*, April 8, 1992 (p. 41) [NOTE: product weight not referenced in this article]

[1995] .50

1.55 oz., *Value of a Dollar: Prices and Incomes in the United States 1860-2009*, Scott Derks [Grey House Publishing:Millerton NY] 2009 (p. 641)

[2003] .80

1.55 oz Hershey Bar purchased at Quik (privately owned convenience store), Randolph NJ...80 cents

[2007] .79

1.45 oz., *Value of a Dollar*

[2008] .59

1.55 oz., Super FoodTown (regional grocery chain), Cedar Knolls NJ

[2009] \$1.10

1.55 oz., 7-Eleven convenience store, Randolph NJ

[2010] .95

1.55 oz., Acme supermarket, Randolph NJ

[2011] .99

1.55 oz, Super FoodTown, Cedar Knolls NJ

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**NOTE:** The *Value of a Dollar* book includes charts illustrating both historic price and price in 2007 dollars (price/oz).

## Great Depression vs. WWII

"Nickel candy bars still cost a nickel. But their cost has soared since CU last tested them in 1939. That's a paradox only until you examine the facts. The paradox vanishes with the words, "hidden price rise." Here's an example of how the hidden price rise works for candy bars. Let's say you are in the habit of buying Mars' *Forever Yours* candy bars. Chances are that you haven't noticed any appreciable difference in bars you've been buying for the past four years. But had you --like CU--saved the labels, here's what you'd find: in 1939 your nickel bought four ounces of *Forever Yours*. Now the nickel bar weighs only 2 1/4 ounces. In other words, if you bought the candy bar by weight, the way you buy sugar, you'd be paying almost 9 cents instead of 5 cents for a four-ounce bar. The sad truth is that price ceilings of candy, as set by the General Maximum Price Regulation last March, have not halted the boosting of prices. And the Office of Price Administration recently tried--and failed--to get a permanent injunction against Mars, Inc., because the company had reduced the weight of its candy bars 11 per cent last May. The Federal Court judge who heard the case ruled that "slight reductions" in weight of candy bars sold in March did not constitute a violation of OPA regulations, and therefore he dismissed OPA's application for an injunction. OPA is appealing the case; unless the decision is reversed, price control will be seriously threatened.

**Reduction in Weight** CU's survey of prices and weights of popular brands indicates that reductions in the weight of candy bars have been far from "slight." CU was able this year to buy 20 of the kinds of candy bars studied in 1939. of the whole assortment, *Tootsie Rolls* were the only ones that hadn't shrunk in size. A two-ounce *Tootsie Roll* used to cost 5 cents; it still does. But the other bars which were tested then and now showed a hidden price increase averaging around 23 per cent. CU's analysis of candy bar prices revealed some other interesting facts. The least expensive of the rapidly disappearing milk chocolate bars in the present survey--aside from the six-ounce bars priced at two for 25 cents (which CU hasn't found in the stores for several months)--was Hershey's 3/4-ounce bar. These used to cost three for 5 cents; not many stores sell them for a straight 2 cents each, and some, for 3 cents each. At 2 cents they are a good buy. Their cost per ounce is 2.7 cents, compared with 3.1 cents per ounce for *Peter's* ( 1 5/8-ounce bar), the lowest priced 5 cents bar CU found, and 3.3 cents for *Hershey's* 5 cents (1 1/2-ounce) bar. Puffed milk chocolate bars were found to be more expensive than unpuffed bars of either the same or competing brands. But for utter extravagance in candy buying CU cites the penny bar. *Hershey's* penny bars of milk chocolate cost from 6.3 cents to 6.7 cents an ounce. As for milk chocolate with almonds, *Aero* (made by Hershey) was both the best buy and the worst, depending upon how it was bought. The 5 cent bar was comparatively cheap, costing 3.3 cents an ounce; the penny bar, on the other hand, cost 10 cents an ounce. CU's shoppers found that there was no abundance in the stores of any kind of candy bars. The supply varied from day to day, as evidently most retailers sold out one shipment long before the next one arrived."

---"Candy Bars," *Consumer Reports*, April 1943 (p. 94-95)

[NOTES: (1) CU=Consumer's Union, publisher of *Consumer Reports* magazine. (2) This article offers a chart comparing the weights and costs for the following candy bars: *Tootsie Rolls*, *Hersehy's Milk Chocolate*, *Suchard Bittra*, *Suchard Milka*, *Oh Henry*, *Hershey's Milk Chocolate with Almonds*, *Butterfinger*, *Milky Way*, *Nestle's Milk Chocolate*, *Peter's Milk Chocolate*, *Nestle's Puffed Milk Chocolate*, *Nestle's Milk Chocolate with Almonds*, *Baby Ruth*, *Love Nest*, *Baker's Milk Chocolate*, *Mounds*, *Mr. Goodbar*, *Rockwood's Sweet Chocolate with Fruit and Nuts*, and *Forever Yours*.]

**How many different sizes of Hershey bars were there in 1975?** According to this article: "Candy Bars Size Much Smaller," Newhouse News Service, Times-News [Twins Falls, ID], June 1, 1975 (p. 19) a 15 cent Hershey bar was 1.05 ounces. Our survey of historical USA newspapers from 1975 also returned these sizes & prices:

Giant, 8 oz, 66 cents

6 pack, 15 cent size, no ounces, 69 cents

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Junior size, 18 pack, no ounces, 98 cents [Halloween]  
 30 bar pack, 15 cent size, no ounces, 1.47 [Halloween]  
 Hershey Bar miniatures, 9 oz bag, no product count, 1.29  
 5 cent bar, no ounces, 3 for 10 cents

### McDonald's hamburger prices

A comprehensive study of McDonald's hamburger prices through time is a complicated topic. The ultimate authority is the company. Articles in newspapers, magazines, and wire services typically report major changes, and promotions (dollar wars, reduced price when purchased with other products).

If you are researching the price of McDonald's hamburgers in the United States these sample prices will get you started:

#### [1955]--15 cents

"On that cold, cloudy first day of business 30 years ago, Mr. Kroc's No. 1 McDonald's sold \$366.12 worth of 15-cent hamburgers, 19-cent cheeseburgers, 20-cent milkshakes and 10-cent sodas and orders of fries."  
 "THE MCBURGER STAND THAT STARTED IT ALL," SHIPP, E. R., *New York Times*, Feb 27, 1985, pg. C.3

#### [1964]--15 cents

"1964: St. Paul's first McDonald's restaurant opens, on Fort Road. A burger costs 15 cents. "  
 ---*Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN) September 29, 2002

#### [1968]--18 cents

Source: *Value of a Dollar: Prices and Incomes in the United States 1860-2009*, Scott Derks [Grey House Publishing: Millerton NY] 2009 (p. 643)

[1972] We find several articles about a scandal concerning the McDonald's food prices and the Federal Price Commission, no simple hamburger prices quote in the *New York Times*. Sample here: "Quarter pounder priced at 55 cents." --"McDonald's Told to Reduce Prices," *New York Times*, June 3, 1972 (p.21)

#### [1974]--30 cents

---*Value of a Dollar*

#### [1975]

This year was special for McDonald's. Not only was the company celebrating 20 years of business, it was opening new restaurants worldwide. In the USA, basic McDonald's hamburgers cost 30 cents (*Daily Mail*, Hagerstown MD, May 1, 1975). Several USA newspapers confirm McDonald's celebrated its 20th birthday April 20, 1975 by selling hamburgers at original price: 15 cents. McDonald's pricing in foreign countries is yet another matter. Newspapers reporting 1975 Hong Kong launch stated "Items are priced quite comparably to those in America: the equivalent of a 32 cents for a regular hamburger and 70 cents for a Big Mac." ("Big Mac a Smash in Hong Kong," *The Capital Times* [Madison WI], October 25, 1975 (p. 3). McDonald's also splashed that year in London's Piccadilly. "Golden Arches on the European Horizon? A cheeseburger and tea? 'le big mac' on the Champs Elysee? McDonald's has come to Europe...Next Saturday, McDonald's opens officially its second fast-food shop in Britain...Until the appearance of McDonald's the availability of pure-beef American-style hamburgers here had been limited to the recent wave of chic, crowded and expensive hamburger joints such as the Hard Rock Cafe, the Great American Disaster and Yankee Doodle. Compared with the \$1.50--or higher--price for such elegant burgers, the basic sells in London for 45 cents, about the same price as as the less Americanized hamburgers sold in the 600-ship Wimpy chain. McDonald's Golden Arches Restaurant Ltd. gets its beef patties made to order by a British meat company. A baker in the English Midlands makes the rolls. But the cheese has to be imported from Germany, the milkshake mix from the Netherlands, the potatoes from Canada and the pickles from New York." ("The Big Mac in Piccadilly