

Hoop Cheese And Pillows Of Sugar

Early Settlers Ate What They Could Get —
And Bagged Their Own

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Our forefathers would have marveled at our supermarkets with their tremendous variety of goods available year-round.



Nearby
History

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The packaging that we throw away so quickly would have amazed them. Plastic and Styrofoam are recent inventions. There were no brown paper bags before the 1890s and it was not until the shortage of railroad box-car space during World War I that pasteboard boxes were used to replace wooden crates.

What was used to carry the groceries home? Cotton or hemp sacks usually served for small items. Wooden crates or barrels held large amounts. Crockery was used for butter and tallow. Liquids were placed in earthenware jugs.

Cheese, more often spelled "cheese," was packed into a heavyweight "cheese cloth," coated with beeswax and placed in a wooden hoop. Some of us remember going to the store for "hoop cheese." That item was one of the last to change from its original packaging.

Sugar was not highly refined and closely resembled in color and texture our light brown sugar. It was molded in blocks called "pillows." Slipped inside a tight-fitting cotton bag called a pillow case, the sugar was ready to go. The storekeeper did not furnish pillow cases and bags for free, though he might lend or sell them.

Before the Revolutionary War, the people of this area, like their English forebears, drank tea. After the war it was unpatriotic. The people switched to coffee and bought it in the bean. Coffee beans were roasted over the fire and then boiled.

Salt was sold by the bushel. Before refrigeration, salt was a major preservative of meat. In 1809 a peck of salt sold for 50 cents. Beef was 4¼ cents a pound and coffee was 50 cents. At the same time, pay for a day's common labor ran about \$1, or \$2 if a horse was provided. It is evident that coffee and sugar were luxuries out of the reach of much of the population.

In 1812 flour was 3 cents a pound. It was not highly refined. Corn meal was cheaper but it spoiled so easily that it was not often found in the country stores. Instead, a man grew his own corn and shelled just enough to take to a miller to be ground. Heavy with bran, the corn had to be sifted at home. Again, the miller did not furnish the sack.

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In the early 1800s, goods were brought by wagon into this area from Charleston. There were no bridges, so every river and stream had to be forded. Breakables were packed in straw inside boxes or barrels. Waxed tarpaulins were used over goods to protect them from rain, but such care was not always enough, especially if the rivers were in flood stage. Many storekeepers found it easier to buy goods from Philadelphia.

Peddlers, especially tin peddlers, were common and often traveled on foot carrying their "sundries" in a pack. Wagons from the mountains of North Carolina brought apples and pork to market places in the fall. Drovers brought many animals on foot, sometimes from as far as Tennessee, to designated market places. The early farmers markets often became the fairgrounds of later generations.

Periodic droughts brought a demand for grains. Feeding livestock was a major problem. Word got around as to which areas had a surplus and which areas needed foodstuffs.

Farmers with surpluses peddled as much as they could load on a wagon and might be gone for weeks, often sleeping in barn lofts until they had sold their goods. The next year they might have to buy, depending on the vagaries of the weather.

Whiskey was a frontier staple. In 1810 in York County whiskey was \$1 a gallon. A gallon of cider was 50 cents, the same price as a gallon of vinegar. Every community had its tavern. Whiskey, cider and brandy made up nearly all of the alcohol consumption. Old tavern books do not mention beer or rum and if the customer took any home he furnished his own earthenware "jugg."

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