

Ethics of Supply and Demand

Emigrants leaving for the Oregon territory or the California gold fields knew they had to pack their wagons carefully, as opportunities for purchasing supplies or food would be few and far between throughout their journey. If they broke a wagon wheel, or ran out of beans and bacon, they would pay dearly for replacements. Aside from trading with Indians or other emigrants, purchasing from merchants was the only option to resupply. These suppliers knew they could charge whatever price the market would bear and then some, and they reaped profits from many an emigrant.

Jasper M. Hixson, serving as cook and commissary for his forty-niner company, offers an example of how a naïve overlander became wise to the pricing of provisions on the trail. Since Hixson had never known bacon to sell for more than 8 cents per pound, he was surprised that so many packers willingly paid the 25 cents he arbitrarily asked, assuming that they did so because of “the superior quality of our bacon.”

As his company progressed farther west, Hixson prudently determined that the price should go up, so he began to ask 37 ½ cents per pound. He was even more surprised when a packer unhesitatingly purchased over twenty pounds of bacon at that price. Since such a price seemed outlandish, Hixson refrained from selling surplus bacon declaring, “I would not commence highway robbery.” Later, Hixson was astonished to learn that California-based traders charged and received \$1.50 per pound along the Carson River, and that even in Sacramento bacon wholesaled at 62 ½ cents per pound. He now confided to his diary,

I could understand the packers buying at the price without grumbling. Later on I dropped some of those conscientious scruples about high prices, and gradually fell into the ways of the country.

This sort of entrepreneurial spirit was shared by many overlanders, and it served them well upon their arrival in the new territories and states. In the 1840's, emigrants William Meek and John Llewellyn each hauled wagon beds planted with apple trees over the plains, and planted successful orchards in Oregon and California. In many gold rush towns, more settlers earned a steady income by providing services such as sewing, cooking or bartending than struck it rich in the gold fields. In the waning days of trail migration in the Salt Lake Valley, some enterprising Mormons would salvage and resell ‘leeverites,’ items that had been abandoned along hard stretches of trail when emigrants had to “leaver er’ right here” to lighten their wagons. While the supplies loaded in most wagons comprised the bare necessities to survive the trail, creative entrepreneurs like these helped the pioneers find creature comforts in the new lands.

Sources: The Plains Across by John Unruh. 1982, Univ. of Chicago Press. p. 107; Oregon-California Trail Association, <http://octa-trails.org/>