

HISTORIC BREAD RIOT IN VIRGINIA CITY

Virginia City, Montana Territory, in the Spring of 1865 was approaching the mature age of two years and was coming to the end of her second winter. With her three suburbs, Nevada, Central and Summit, the fast growing camp could boast of a population of over 10,000. It was located 400 miles from Salt Lake the nearest and most regular source of supplies and 500 miles from the head of practical navigation on the Missouri and 200 miles from Fort Benton on the same river to which steamboats could reach once or twice in a favorable season.

The camp, thus located, was isolated from the outside world during the winter months; so it was necessary to accumulate sufficient supplies in the fall to feed and cloth this large population. Due to accident or failure of the merchants to properly gauge the needs of the community there developed in the Spring of 1865 a decided fear that the supply of flour on hand would not be sufficient to supply the ordinary demands until the first freight trains arrived from Salt Lake.

The purpose of this paper is to show the sudden rise in the price of flour, the results that followed the exploitation of the miners by speculators and the sudden return to normal conditions as soon as the melting of the snows in the mountains opened the roads to the freight trains.

As I am to deal with prices at a time when the treasury notes were at a low ebb and might cause some question to arise as to the real value of money, I will quote from the heading of the Market Report of the *Montana Post*, of Jan. 14, 1865, the source of practically all the figures used in this paper. "Non resident readers will please note that our quotations are based upon actual transactions and are gold prices. The retail prices average 10% above quotations."

In the fall of 1864 flour could be purchased in quantity at the following prices St. Louis Winter Wheat Flour, 26.50 per 98 lb. sack; States Flour, 25.00; Salt Lake Flour, 24.00—(*Montana Post* Sept. 17, 1864 Market Report.)

Five months later the market report in the *Montana Post* for Feb. 25, 1865, quotes flour slightly cheaper than was the case in September, the prices are as follows: St. Louis Flour, 26.00 per sack; Salt Lake Flour, 22.00; States Flour, 23.00 to 24.00.

Three weeks later, many people were very much interested in

the state of their flour bins and sacks. Earlier than this some dealers must have come to the conclusion that there was not sufficient flour on hand to last until the roads would be open again. The Market Report in the *Montana Post* of March 18, 1865, gives the following report on the situation. "Flour—Is on a rampage, For the present it may have touched the highest point and possibly may decline. Everyone is asking: What is the matter with flour. There is nothing the matter with flour. The question is with the generous holders of the staple. They think the honest, hard working miner will run short before spring arrivals and they very considerably, for their benefit, raised the prices to thirty dollars a sack." Flour the next week is quoted in the issue of March 25 at \$30.00 to \$32.00 a sack without any comment.

The issue of the *Montana Post* for April 1, 1865 indicates that the situation is becoming more acute. I quote as follows from the Market Report: "Flour—The market has been very excited during the past week. A large business being transacted at the unprecedented high prices, ranging from \$30.00 to \$37.00 for Salt Lake and ordinary States. Extra St. Louis reached \$40.00 and some holders are over these figures.

"How long flour will remain at these figures it is impossible to state. It may even run higher as all are aware that the stock in the market is light and prospect for new arrivals is not very favorable for even one month.

"Consumers are now thrown on the tender mercies of the holders and speculators to be dealt with according to their ideas of justice and equity."

Two weeks later the *Montana Post* of April 16 simply quotes flour as follows: "Flour is in considerable demand at a considerable advance over last quotations. St. Louis, 48.00 to 50.00; Salt Lake, 45.00 to 47.00.

This was the lull before the storm for in the *Post* for April 22, 1865, the market simply went wild; I quote as follows: "Flour—Market during the past week has been very active. Several lots of flour changed hands, prices at the close of the week were optional with the buyers.

"April 16—The flour market open at an advance of ten dollars a sack and by 11 A.M. had reached a nominal price of 65.00 for 98 lb. sack. the day closed with a further advance of 5.00 a sack.

"April 17—The demand for flour is increasing. The market opened at yesterday's prices. Before 10 o'clock it had reached

75.00 a sack. 11 o'clock rolls round and finds dealers in the staple asking 80.00 per 98 lb. sack. A few transactions were made at these figures. Before 12 o'clock transfers were made at 85.00 a sack and some dealers were asking further advance of 5.00 a sack. Consumers having no other resource were compelled to concede to the nominal price of holders and paid 90.00 a sack in gold.

"April 18—Flour is truly on a rampage no concession from dealers prices on the part of very few holders of considerable quantities with still further advance of 5.00 a sack which brings the price of an average lot of flour to the unprecedented figures, in this market of 1.00 a pound.

"April 19—The flour market weakened under the excitement of arrival reports from some new speculators in the market, transfer of some small lots being made at 80.00 per sack."

The above is a plain statement of probably the wildest orgy which the flour market of the United States has ever seen. What the honest, hardworking miner thought and did about the plain and unvarnished attempt to profit by his need for bread should be of interest, but we can know very little about his thoughts. His acts were sudden and decisive even as they had been in the days of the Vigilantes.

The drop of 15.00 a sack which was noted on the 19th did not satisfy the miners for we find the following item in the *Montana Post* for April 22 which gives better than any words of mine what the miners did about the question. I quote:

"Flour—On Tuesday last the citizens were informed that large bodies of men armed and organized, were marching from Nevada, with avowed determination to take all the flour in town, and divide it among those who had none.

"The information was soon to be verified by the appearance of 480 men marching in file armed with revolvers, rifles, shotguns or carbines. This force was under a leader on horseback, displaying an empty flour sack as a banner. The men were divided into six companies, each commanded by a captain and moved as directed in military fashion. There was no doubt of their intentions. They commenced at the foot of Wallace Street and searched every store, house, cabin and cellar in which they suspected flour was concealed. The results were about 82 sacks of flour which were safely stored away in Liviathan Hall. The search was pretty thorough and disclosed sundry lots of flour concealed under oats in boxes, barrels, etc. and one large find was stored away under a hay stack. The whole

proceeding was of a most novel character. Here was an armed force determined to have all the flour that could be found in stores of the property of dealers, wherever hidden; and yet going through the matter as steadily and quietly as if it were a seizure by order of the courts. In very few instances would the men notice a remark addressed to them; but they pressed on after their captain, halted, fronted and stood like a provost guard, while the leader made known his business and detailed a party for search. This being completed, if flour was found it was packed off without ceremony, an account being kept and a promise to pay for all at a rate of 27.00 for Salt Lake Flour and 30.00 for States being given the owner. One of the chiefs of the body walked into our office, and a written copy to the dealers signed 'Flour Committee' ordering them to sell flour at 27.00 and 30.00 a sack. For the printing he handed us dust in advance. No act of violence has been reported to us to the hour of writing. A meeting was held in the evening at Liviathan Hall and judging by the cheering—the speeches suited the audience.

"A representation having been made to the committee, of three cases, in one which flour had been taken from a boarding house keeper, another in which a bakers stock had been confiscated and in a third a German family lost a sack the complaints were investigated and the flour returned next day.

"On Wednesday, the distribution of the flour to the necessitous was made 12 lb. being given to each man willing to affirm that he had none and could get none. A double ration and in some cases a triple ration was given to those having families."

"On Thursday the Committee called upon Professor Dimsdale and J. E. McClurg to accompany them and witness payment of the parties from which flour had been taken. The list of disbursement's is as follows—all in gold, at the rate of 27.00 for Salt Lake and 30.00 for St. Louis Flour.

George Mann	459.00	Joseph Marcon	540.00
J. T. Sullivan	210.00	John Creiton	270.00
Ming & North	180.00	Kercheval & Co.	150.00
Henry Schwek	60.00	Tohmy & Porke	60.00
George Glahon	30.00	Erfort Bros. & Co.	525.00"
Wm. Lambert	39.00		

This ended the "Bread Riot" which the news section of the *Montana Post* seemed to approve but editorially the paper took a slightly different stand. I quote as follows:

"Flour is seized where ever found in large or small quantities

and taken to the common depot. On the pretext under which several lots of flour were confiscated, we do not consider it wrong or objectionable to store flour under the present circumstances, in fire-proof cellars or warehouses. We, however, do not endorse the concealing of flour under floors or hay stacks when the article is up to the present price. We know of no parties that were holders of flour that could not have realized a handsome profit at 75.00 a sack, but in favor of the merchants that have invested in the staple, at high figures, we should state that we have known of flour to be sold in a circumference of a few hundred miles, at a rate of 5.00 a pound, and no raiders in the market."

The seizure of the flour and the following distribution of the same to those who needed it did not seem to worry the leaders of the movement, but the statement referred to above ordering the dealers to sell in the future seemed to give the Flour Committee some worry and the same issue of the paper published the following statement.

"Virginia City, April 21, 1865.—We the undersigned, do hereby certify that no authority was ever granted by us, or with our knowledge or consent, to any person ordering the printing of a notice to the flour dealers that they should for the future sell Salt Lake flour for 27.00 and States flour for 30.00. Neither did we authorize the printing of any notice whatsoever; but if our names were used by anybody, it was without authority to do so, and a private and highly reprehensible act contrary to the principles that have actuated us throughout.

S. R. Blake
Joseph Kieth
R. Huget
Pat Carrol

P. Murphy
Wm. Johnson
John B. Krenon
Flour Committee."

The issue of the *Montana Post* of April 29, 1865, gives a view of the situation a week later. I quote from the Market Report.

"Four—The excitement in the market reprinted in the last issue of the *Post* has subsided. A few sacks of flour were offered early in the week, and sold readily at 80.00 per sack. We have not heard of any other lots offered for any sales. At present we do not know of any flour in the market. By our next review we hope to give quotations at some figures. The demand for all kinds of substitutes for flour have been heavy, and the market is now nearly bare of rice, beans, homony and etc."

It was about three weeks before any flour appeared on the

market, but the *Post* for May 27, 1865, quotes flour as follows: St. Louis flour, 28.00 to 30.00; States, 28.00 to 30.00; Salt Lake, 22.00 to 23.00. A week later Salt Lake flour had fallen to a price of 19.00 to 21.00 dollars and the issue of the *Post* for June 10, 1865, shows Salt Lake Tanner Provo (a favorite brand) quoted at from 18.00 to 19.00.

This covers the flour panic of the Spring of 1865 and in a later article on the cost of Living in the camp from 1863 to 1865 I will try and show the prices of commodities other than flour during this crisis. There was plenty of food at what were for the time and place reasonable prices but the miner felt that he must have bread.

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