

Merchants and Miners

Topic

The California Gold Rush

Objectives

Students will use a variety of resources to compile pertinent data on the living conditions of the “forty-niners.” Students will experience the economic principle of supply and demand.

Materials

- a variety of resources on the “forty-niners”—e.g., library books, reference materials, filmstrips, etc.
- Gold Rush Money page (as many as needed for the simulation)

Procedure

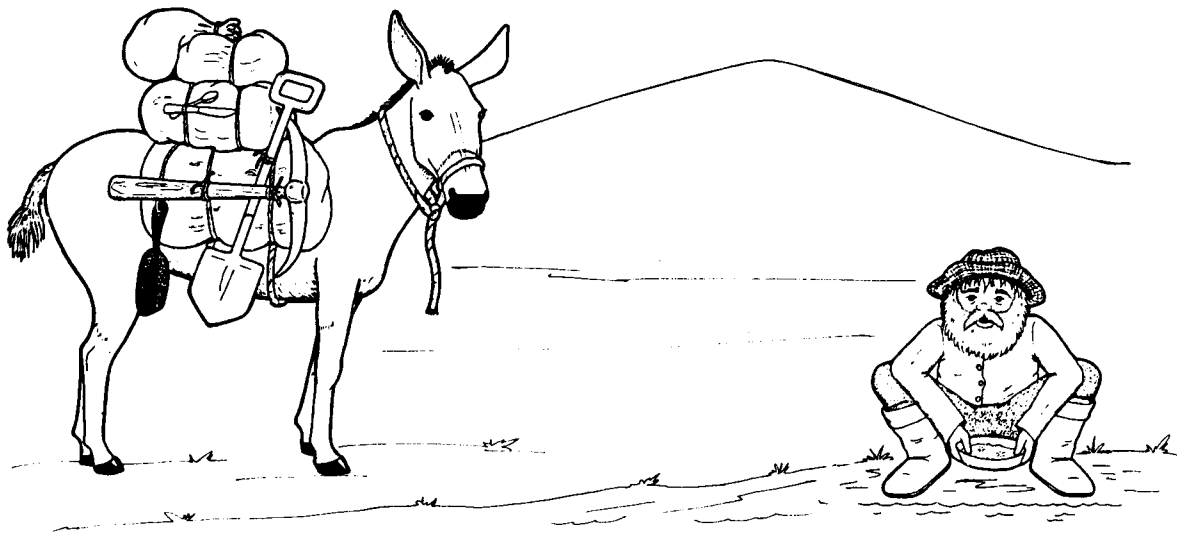
1. If students are not already in learning teams, set them up into groups of three or four. This should provide anywhere from five to nine groups in most classes.
2. Select one group to assume the role of the merchants near the California gold fields. The remaining groups will be miners, and all will be involved in a simulation dealing with the Gold Rush of 1849.
3. Students from all groups are to research the “forty-niners” specifically to identify what types of goods they would have needed to undertake life in the gold fields. Each group is to independently compile a list of items deemed mandatory for gold miners of this era. Each group’s list will be known only to the group and to the teacher to whom they will furnish a copy. These groups will transact some business after their completed research. (See Procedure 5) For the sake of the profit motive, any sort of collusion between groups would be counterproductive.



Merchants and Miners *(cont.)*

Procedure (cont.)

4. Of course, to have commerce, funds must be appropriated. In this case as students are using independent study time to research the “forty-niners,” more than a week’s time could be devoted to completing the rest of the chapter and/or unit on westward migration. (Students could also use a portion of each social studies lesson time for research, if the teacher so chooses.) Provide students with play money. While answering group worksheet assignments, text questions, or in-class review questions, groups can be earning a dollar amount of Gold Rush money for each correct answer they provide in the week or so preceding their day of business. In this manner, a group could conceivably earn fifty to seventy-five dollars of Gold Rush money depending on the number of questions, activities, and correct responses given.
5. On the day the groups assume their roles, the merchant group “sets up shop,” posting signs of their own design announcing their goods and prices. The merchants need to properly estimate how many of each item they should have on hand to be sure they have enough to supply the class needs. With a now-determined fixed amount of cash in hand, miners must peruse their lists to see how it matches the merchant’s list and what they can afford. They may have to prioritize and buy only the most important item(s).
6. As previously mentioned, there is a profit motive beyond the use of play money. The money by itself means little to the students unless it can be exchanged for something more tangible. If your cooperative teams have been working towards a prescribed reinforcement, add to it with this activity. For every five dollars of goods sold by the merchant group, advance them one point or increment on that reinforcement schedule. The miners advance one point for every item that they purchase on their list. (Be sure the merchants hand out receipts.)



Merchants and Miners *(cont.)*

Background

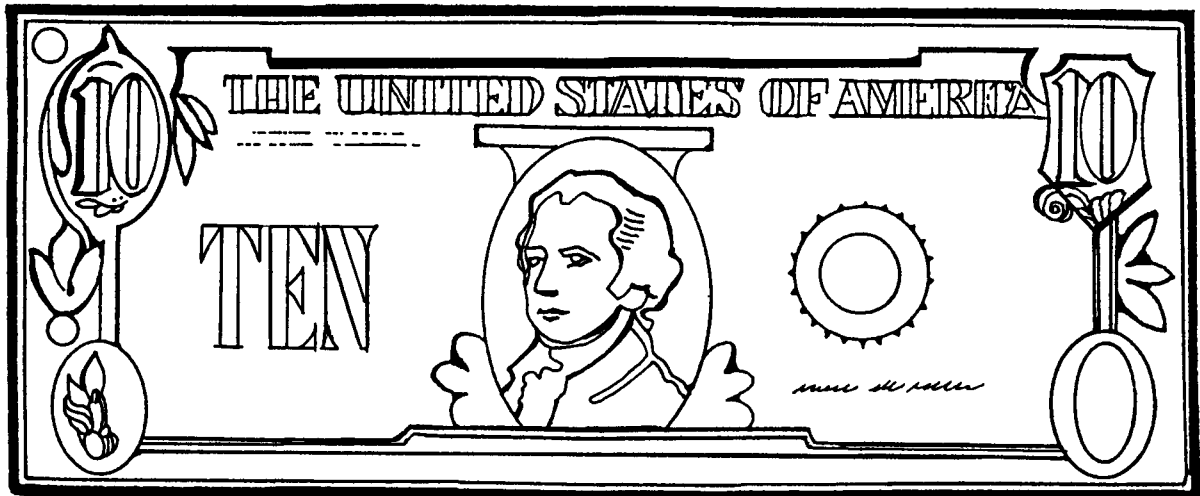
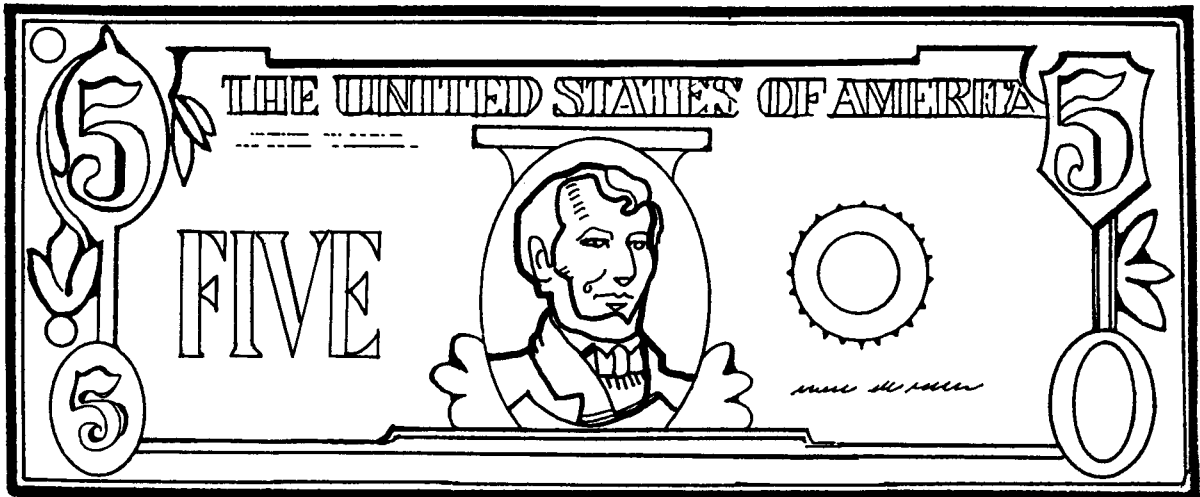
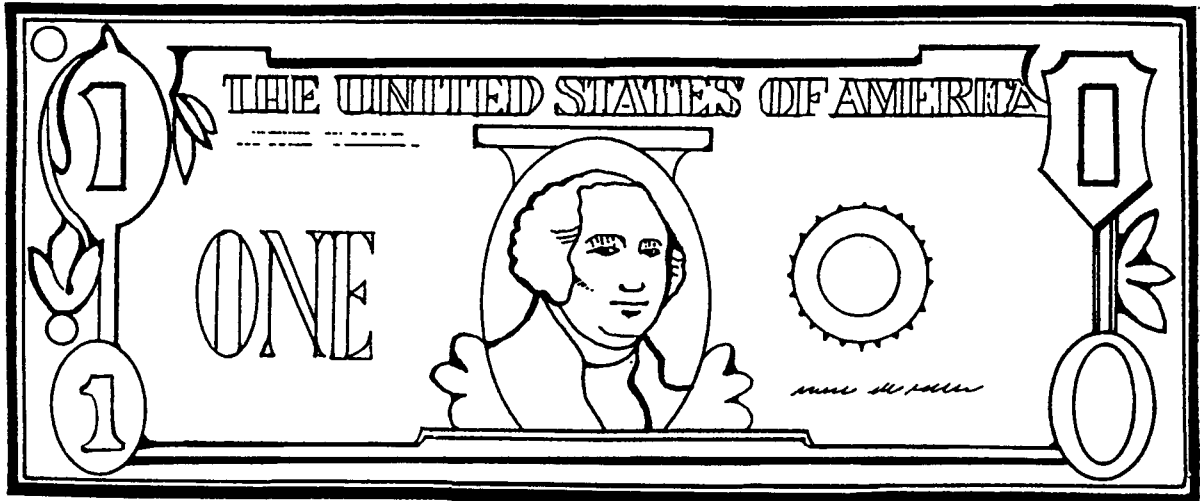
“Merchants and Miners” is really two lessons in one. It presents the situation of the numerous miners, staking their lives and dreams out in the gold fields, being taken advantage of by the few merchants who were able to procure the needed supplies. A single egg would cost one dollar at a time that it could be had for a penny back East. Simultaneously, the students are learning a very basic economics lesson on supply and demand. It should become quite evident who is going to be getting the most reinforcer points as the merchant group makes sale after sale (provided they did adequate research).

Follow-Up

As a variation, on the next day have one miner group become a second merchant group and see what happens to the prices as supply begins to meet demand. You may wish to try this with three merchant groups. This reproduces what occurred historically as more and more miners began to realize a greater profit in abandoning their digs in order to service their former competitors.



Gold Rush Money



Gold Rush Money *(cont.)*

