

Lesson Plan

Mill-Worker Simulation

This is an adaptation of a lesson plan prepared by Maura Parnin while participating in the New Hampshire Historical Society's New Hampshire History Summer Institute.

What Students Learn

By participating in a simulation, students better understand the transition from a home-based agrarian economy to that of a factory economy with mass-produced goods. The “rounds” of the simulation also will show students the general progress of labor relations during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Procedures

In preparation for the simulation, teachers may wish to read “The Setting,” the opening chapter of Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach's *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (1–39). Also, either on their own or through a teacher read-aloud, students could become acquainted with the lives of mill workers. “Anna Douville” (Hareven and Langenbach 283-291) is a selection of a diary of an Amoskeag employee. Emily Arnold McCully's novel *The Bobbin Girl* and Katherine Paterson's *Lyddie* also are recommended.

During the simulation, teachers may wish to play selections from Alex Demas's audio-cassette *Cottonmill Girls*—e.g., “A Weaver's Life” during round two, “Cottonmill Girls” during round three, and “I Can Not Be a Slave” during round four—and show reproductions of graphics depicting mill life in the nineteenth century. Many visuals at the New Hampshire Historical Society's Tuck Library are available for reproduction.

Round 1

Ask a volunteer group of five “cottage-industry” students to craft placemats from beginning to end, as follows:

In front of each home-based worker (sitting in his or her own seat) place a stack of recycled paper, a stapler, and three crayons—blue, green, and yellow. Show the students a sample placemat having a yellow sun in the upper left corner, a blue house in the center, and a green tree in the lower right corner. Instruct them to reproduce the placemat using the materials they've been given and to fold and staple their mats for sale. The mats they produce must be acceptable to their “client.” Each worker works for himself or herself and is to be paid ten tokens for each bundle of ten acceptable mats produced in a “work day”—approximately five minutes.

At the end of the work day, discuss workers' reactions to their working conditions and ways to make the process more efficient. If someone suggests creating an assembly line, make that student the “overseer” for the next round; otherwise appoint an overseer.

Round 2

Another volunteer group of five “factory worker” students is hired to work in a factory making placemats.

Seat workers in a line with a stack of recycled paper at one end. The first worker has a yellow crayon and is responsible for drawing the sun in the upper left corner of each mat. Worker number two has a blue crayon and is responsible for drawing the sun in the center of each mat. The third worker has a green crayon and is responsible for drawing the tree in the lower right corner of each mat. Worker number four folds each mat, while the fifth worker staples each mat for shipping.

The overseer must make sure the production line runs as fast as possible and that the quality of the mats is up to standard. Workers who produce substandard mats are to be fired. (In the final round of play, the group may incur a penalty if a worker needed to be fired.)

Workers are paid ten tokens for each bundle of mats accepted. Because they are working faster and more efficiently than the “cottage-industry” group, their wealth is greater.

At the end of the round, students discuss their feelings about factory work and what is gained and what is lost in the change from a cottage-industry economy.

Round 3

The “factory owner”—the teacher—informs workers that more placemat mills have opened and that the increased competition means they must charge less in stores for each mat. In order to maintain profits, workers must increase the number of mats per bundle to fifteen. They still receive ten tokens for each bundle. Also, the jobs of folder and stapler are to be combined. The overseer determines whom to lay off.

At the end of the round, students again discuss their feelings: how do they feel about working for less money? Are they worried that their job may be the next one to go?

Round 4

Inform the “workers” that due to their increased speed and production, too many mats are being produced for sale. The demand for mats and the world price have decreased. Each group of workers must accept a 40% reduction in pay: workers are to be paid six tokens for each bundle of fifteen mats accepted.

Again, follow up the round with a discussion period. Finally, determine the winner by counting the total wealth tokens earned. Exchange wealth tokens for Tootsie Rolls™.

Congratulate the winners: their jobs are spared as other mills close and move south!

Bibliography

Most entries, as well as other teacher resources, are available through the New Hampshire Historical Society's Tuck Library and its Museum Store.

Demas, Alex. *Cottonmill Girls* [audio-cassette]. CAP Productions, 1986.

Hareven, Tamara and Randolph Langenbach. *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

McCully, Emily Arnold. *The Bobbin Girl*. Dial Books for Young Readers, 1996.

Paterson, Katherine. *Lyddie*. London: Puffin, 1995.

Assessment Tools and Techniques

Students will create a rubric to express themselves in a journal entry, poem, essay, or taped artistic performance. Their work will reflect upon their experiences, answering such questions as the following: What was your life like before entering the mills? Would you prefer to go back to living your life as it was on the farm? How has your life changed? What have you gained or lost?

Curriculum Information

Information relating to the *New Hampshire History Curriculum* refers to the K-12 resource in two volumes developed by the New Hampshire Historical Society in partnership with Public Service of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Department of Education, and the New Hampshire Council for the Social Studies. The K-6 volume is available on-line through the school programs section of the Society's Web site (<http://www.nhhistory.org>).

Grade Level

Elementary School and Middle School

New Hampshire Social Studies Standards

Economics 1, 2, 6; US/NH History 4

New Hampshire History Curriculum Focus Topics

Technology and Science; Material Wants and Needs

New Hampshire History Curriculum Eras

1801–1861: Expansion and Reform

1850–1877: Civil War and Reconstruction

1870–1900: Development of the Industrial United States

1890–1930: Emergence of Modern America