

Suggested Internet Resources

Periodically, Internet Resources are updated on our web site at www.LibraryVideo.com

- www.catskillarchive.com/rrextra/htstory1.Html
The Hoosac Tunnel was one of the first places where the steam drill was used. This resource provides an account of that endeavor published in *Scribner's* magazine. It provides a lot of interesting information and many excellent illustrations. More useful for teachers than students.
- www.cohs.org/
This is a link to the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Historical Society, the railroad line on which John Henry worked.
- music4kidsandmore.com/jhenry.html
Historical background on John Henry and the Big Bend Tunnel.

Suggested Print Resources

- Johnson, Angela & Barry Moser. *Those Building Men*. Scholastic, Inc., New York, NY; 2000.
- Keats, Ezra John & Anne Schwartz. *John Henry: An American Legend*. Sagebrush Educational Resources, Minneapolis, MN; 1987.
- Yin, Patricia Lee & Chris K. Soentpiet. *Coolies*. Penguin Group, New York, NY; 2003. A book about the contribution of Asian Americans in the building of the railroads.

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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COMPLETE LIST OF TITLES

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| • ANNIE OAKLEY | • MOSE HUMPHREYS |
| • CREATING A TALL TALE | • OLD STORMALONG |
| • DAVY CROCKETT | • PAUL BUNYAN |
| • JOHN HENRY | • PECOS BILL |
| • JOHNNY APPLESEED | • REGIONAL TALL TALES |

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John Henry

Grades K-4

Tall tales are stories in which the characters and their actions and adventures are extremely exaggerated, and the audience is aware of the exaggeration and therefore in on the joke. Most American tall tales grew out of specific parts of the country and are connected to particular lines of work: lumberjacks in the Midwest, cowboys in Texas, and frontiersmen and women in the South and along the Mississippi River. The tall tale is not static; it is a living thing. The tall tale is very much a part of American folklore tradition, constantly evolving as it is retold with the teller's own particular spin. American tall tales have been around for several hundred years. They began in the oral tradition, as a form of entertainment, and have continued to evolve ever since.



Program Summary

In this program, students will meet steel drivin' man John Henry, his loyal friend and coworker Willie, and the other men who worked on the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad. John Henry was born with a hammer in his hand in rural West Virginia and, once grown, left home to seek his fortune driving steel for the booming railroad industry. John Henry's great physical strength and work ethic enabled him to drive steel faster than anyone else, which won him the favor of his employer. But it was his determination, dignity and concern for his fellow man that won him the admiration of his peers in the Big Bend Railroad Camp. In order to save the jobs of his coworkers, John Henry agreed to race a steam drill as it bored its way through the Big Bend Tunnel. Against extraordinary odds, John Henry beat the drill, but in the process made the ultimate sacrifice.

Background to John Henry

The late 19th century (1870s) was the boom time of railroad construction in the United States. Over 170,000 miles of track was added to the national railway system, and it was during this time that the transcontinental railroad was being constructed. Living at a railroad construction camp and building railroads was difficult and dangerous work. Railroad workers endured harsh weather and dangerous working conditions. During Reconstruction, thousands of former enslaved Africans, now emancipated Americans, sought employment building railroads. They earned about \$1.25 per day. The work was back-breaking and required great physical strength and stamina. John Henry was one of these men. It has never been determined if John Henry was a real person or not. Thematically, the John Henry tales are about steely determination — meaning that a person can accomplish anything they set their minds to doing.

Pre-viewing Discussion

- Provide students with a brief overview of the period in American history known as Reconstruction. Share with them the difficulties emancipated Americans had in finding work and the contributions they made to the development of the nation.
- Using a large wall map, show students the area in which the story of John Henry takes place.
- Discuss with the students the importance of transportation in the building of America and how the railroad was, at the time this story takes place, the fastest, most efficient mode of transportation.
- Remind students about the elements of fiction, such as characters, setting and plot (containing a problem and a solution), and explain the importance of exaggeration in tall tales.

Follow-up Discussion

- John Henry exemplifies the idea of putting the needs of others before oneself. Under what circumstances is this desirable? Under what circumstances is it not?
- Willie, the shaker, trusts John Henry with the hammer before he knows him. Is Willie brave or foolish? Discuss various reasons for the different answers.
- Given what students have learned about John Henry's character, encourage them to brainstorm some contemporary jobs for which he would be suited.

Follow-up Activities

- There are many traditional folk songs associated with the legend of John Henry. Students can listen to these songs and share their thoughts and feelings about them. Useful web resource:
www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/songlist.html
- What if John Henry had lived? What might have happened if he didn't beat the steam drill? Have students brainstorm possible alternate endings and then write a subsequent chapter in the legend of John Henry.
- John Henry worked for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad. Have students create their own railroad line using either a printable map of your state or the United States map. Students should name their railroad, trace the route their trains would take and tell about the places where the trains would stop. Printable maps are available at:
www.enchantedlearning.com/usa/statesbw/
- In small groups, have students research the Transcontinental Railway, paying particular attention to the contributions of minority populations. Students can create time lines, informational posters and maps.
- A eulogy is a formal expression of praise. Pretend that you are Willie, John Henry's friend and coworker, and write a eulogy that tells about how John Henry lived his life. Students can deliver their written eulogies orally to the class.
- The steam drill was one of many new things that were invented during the Industrial Revolution. In small groups, have students research other inventions of this great age.