

# ANIMATED TALES — OF THE — WORLD™

## U.S.A.: John Henry: Steel-Driving Man



### Background

Tall tales are stories in which the characters and their actions and adventures are extremely exaggerated. 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. This tale features John Henry, a larger-than-life figure with an even larger heart. It is set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a boom time of railroad construction in the United States. John Henry was known for his great physical strength and work ethic, which enabled him to drive steel faster than anyone else. While it has never been determined if John Henry was a real person or not, his legend lives on as a testament that a person can accomplish anything they set their minds to doing. Folk literature terms relevant to this tale are provided below:

**folk literature/folklore** — Traditional tales, knowledge and beliefs handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

**folktale** — A type of folk literature that has grown from the lives and imaginations of people. Folktales often tell of the adventures of human or animal characters and sometimes attempt to explain the physical or spiritual world. Folktales can be organized into several different categories.

### Program Summary

This is the tale of John Henry, a hammer-wielding railroad legend. John Henry helps to clear the way for hundreds of miles of railroad tracks and is highly regarded for his fierce strength, remarkable dignity and extraordinary compassion. Even in the most difficult and dangerous conditions, he is quick to volunteer his help. When the railroad bosses appear one day to demonstrate the power of the steam drill, workers are discouraged because the introduction of the new machine means no more work for those who dig, dig and mine. John Henry declares that the steam drill could never beat a steel-driving man and proceeds to challenge the drill to a race. If John Henry wins, all railroad workers will keep their jobs. Polly Anne, John Henry's wife, worries about how John will fare in the race, but John Henry dismisses her concerns and begins to plan a celebration feast to follow the race. Everyone gathers on the day of the race to watch as John Henry takes on the machine. At first, John and the machine are neck-and-neck. The deeper they dig, the more man and machine begin to gasp for air, but only John Henry has an unstoppable will. To the chagrin of the railroad bosses, John Henry defeats the machine, saving the jobs of his friends. The celebration, however, is short-lived as John Henry's heart is unable to cope with the strain placed upon it. John Henry dies at the tunnel opening. His memory lives on, though, with each whistle of a distant train.

### Pre-viewing Discussion

- A hero is.... Generate a list of heroic qualities. Invite students to talk briefly about people whom they consider heroes and their characteristics.
- Provide students with an introduction to tall tales — an important component of the American folklore tradition. Discuss and investigate other well-known tall tale characters, such as Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, while students identify their exaggerated and “larger than life” qualities.
- Spend some time viewing a map of the United States. Many believe that John Henry was a real person who worked on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Show students the location of this railroad line on the map. Use the map and other geographical information to make inferences about the landscape and people of that place. How might this information be relevant to a story set in this location?

### Follow-Up Discussion

- Throughout the tale, the railroad plays an influential role. Discuss the importance of transportation in the building of America, and how the railroad was, at the time this tale takes place, the fastest, most efficient mode of transportation. What forms of transportation are widely relied upon today?
- At the end of the tale, a friend says about John Henry, “Your heart was too big, my friend. But also too small.” What does he mean by this statement?
- Discuss the cultural elements of the characters, setting and plot by asking students which aspects of the tale appear to be unique to the United States and which ones are more universal in nature.

### Follow-up Activities

- John Henry is a legendary figure that has become the subject of songs, poems and artwork. Visit [www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/johnhenry/index.html](http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/johnhenry/index.html) to hear some of the songs and ballads written about John Henry. After hearing different presentations of John Henry's tale, students can get creative and come up with their own songs and poems about this steel-driving man. Convert the classroom into a coffeehouse setting for students to share their poems and songs with their peers. Students can even decorate the walls with artwork inspired by John Henry.
- Tall tales are stories in which the characters and their actions are greatly exaggerated. Most American tall tales grew out of specific regions 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. Have students compare *U.S.A.: John Henry: Steel-Driving Man* to other tall tales. Consider Pat Mora's *Doña Flor: A Tall Tale About a Giant Woman with a Great Big Heart* (Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2005) or Jerdine Nolen's *Big Jabe* (HarperCollins, 2000). Use a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer to compare and contrast these tales. Have students investigate the different ways in which exaggeration is used and think about why these types of stories are so widespread. As an extension, encourage students to get creative and come up with their own tall tales. Students can write and illustrate their stories or prepare for a dramatic storytelling.
- The late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the boom time of railroad construction in the United States. Over 170,000 miles of track was added to the national railways system, and it was during this time that the transcontinental railroad was constructed. Building railroads was difficult and dangerous work. It required great physical strength and stamina. Workers also had to endure harsh weather and dangerous working conditions. Challenge students to place themselves in the shoes of a railroad worker during this time and write a series of journal entries from this point of view. Be sure to mention the challenges and any rewards of being in such a position.

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- All of the spectators are filled with suspense as they watch the race between John Henry and the steam drill. Pretend that you were there and write or speak a play-by-play breakdown of what happened throughout the race. While preparing for this, consider how radio announcers and sportscasters capture and communicate exciting moments.
- The steam drill was one of many new things that were invented during the Industrial Revolution. Have students work in small groups to investigate other innovations and their innovators of this era. Visit [www.teachersfirst.com/lessons/inventor/ag1.htm](http://www.teachersfirst.com/lessons/inventor/ag1.htm) for some ideas. Students can build models of different inventions of the time and create time lines that discuss important milestones in the lives of their inventors.
- John Henry's defeat of the steam drill was a remarkable victory that saved the jobs of many of his fellow railroad workers, but in doing so, he made the ultimate sacrifice. Have students memorialize John Henry by writing obituaries for the legendary steel-driving man. Consider including a brief description of the man as well as short anecdotes that reflect his nature and personality.
- Act it out! Recreate this tale in your classroom. This can be done as a puppet show, a mime skit, a student play, etc. In preparation for the production, examine and critically think about the story's elements of characters, setting and plot. Consider how the story might change if the setting was a different time and place.
- Before folktales were written or turned into films, they were passed down orally, from one generation to the next. Introduce students to the art of storytelling. Discuss different ways in which the storyteller can engage listeners (e.g., using sound and gestures, giving vivid sensory details). Practice storytelling techniques by having each student retell a portion of this tale.
- Compare the United States today with the setting and people portrayed in the folktale. Organize these similarities and differences using a Venn diagram.

## Suggested Internet Resources

- [www.cohs.org/](http://www.cohs.org/)  
Learn more about the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, the line on which many believe John Henry worked.
- [42explore.com/talltale.htm](http://42explore.com/talltale.htm)  
This site features a compilation of links for teachers and students about tall tales and a collection of favorite American tall tales.
- [memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html)  
This site, from the Library of Congress, presents detailed information on the history and culture of the United States.
- [www.darsie.net/talesofwonder/](http://www.darsie.net/talesofwonder/)  
This archive of folk and fairy tales from around the world presents a sampling of the many stories that make up our world's oral tradition.

## Suggested Print Resources

To learn more about the land and people of the United States:

- Collins, Paul and Meredith Costain. *Welcome to the United States of America*. Chelsea House Publications, New York, NY; 2001.
- Hintz, Martin. *United States of America*. Children's Press, Danbury, CT; 2004.
- Johnson, Angela and Barry Moser. *Those Building Men*. Blue Sky Press, New York, NY; 2001.
- Johnston, Robert D. *The Making of America*. National Geographic Children's Books, Washington, D.C.; 2002.

If you are interested in other tall tales from the United States, you might also enjoy:

- Glass, Andrew. *Mountain Men: True Grit and Tall Tales*. Doubleday Books for Young Readers, New York, NY; 2001.
- San Souci, Robert D. *Cut from the Same Cloth: American Women of Myth, Legend and Tall Tale*. Putnam Juvenile, New York, NY; 2000.
- Walker, Paul Robert. *Big Men, Big Country: A Collection of American Tall Tales*. Harcourt Paperbacks, Orlando, FL; 2000.

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| • China: The Magic Paintbrush            | • Ireland: Fionn                                 | • Russia: The Two Brothers                             |  |



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