



#10028 JOHN HENRY

DISNEY EDUCATIONAL PRODUCTIONS, 2001

Grade Level: 3-6

10 mins.

1 Instructional Graphic

DESCRIPTION

Freed slave John Henry is a steel-driving man laying track for a railroad. When the use of a modern steam drill threatens the crew's jobs and dreams, John issues a challenge to race it in order to prove which is faster: man or machine. Animated version of a familiar tale.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Subject Area: Language Arts–Reading

- Standard: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts
 - ◆ Benchmark: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand a variety of literary passages and texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, fantasies, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, tall tales, supernatural tales) (See INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS 1 and 3.)
 - ◆ Benchmark: Knows the defining characteristics of a variety of literary forms and genres (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, fantasies, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, tall tales, supernatural tales) (See INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS 2.)

Subject Area: Grades K-4 History–The History of People of Many Cultures Around the World

- Standard: Understands the folklore and other cultural contributions from various regions of the United States and how they helped to form a national heritage
 - ◆ Benchmark: Understands how stories, legends, songs, ballads, games, and tall tales describe the environment, lifestyles, beliefs, and struggles of people in various regions of the country (See INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS 1.)

INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

1. To illustrate the story of John Henry.
2. To explore elements of legends and tall tales.
3. To promote the reading of children's literature.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

American tall tales are unique in the world of literature for the way in which humor and exaggeration are used to recount the exploits of legendary heroes. This exaggerated form of storytelling began in the 1800s as a way for early American settlers to bolster the pioneer spirit that was needed to face the dangers of the wilderness.

Tall tales include the traditional story elements of folktales: characters, setting, and plot. Some tall tale characters are real people whose exploits have been embellished by storytellers. Other characters are pure fiction. Most tall tales use the American frontier as the setting and most take place during the time period of American westward expansion.

All tall tales use humor, exaggeration, and acts of bravery as elements of the plot to explain how the main characters confronted the uncertainty of exploring the North American wilderness. Tall tales invited new retellings, with each narrator freely expanding favorite parts and incorporating his unique sense of humor.

VOCABULARY

- | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1. Canaan Land | 7. hammer | 13. steam drill |
| 2. challenge | 8. might/mighty | 14. steel drivin' |
| 3. contract | 9. mountain | 15. swing the hammer |
| 4. deadline | 10. promised | 16. tall tales |
| 5. depending | 11. railroad | 17. worn out |
| 6. free/freedom | 12. slaves | |

BEFORE SHOWING

1. Discuss slavery and the lives of slaves after they were freed.
2. Discuss life during the frontier times. Describe the challenges workers faced in building a railroad.
3. Read at least one of the book versions of John Henry. Fill out the "Elements of a Tall Tale" chart. (See INSTRUCTIONAL GRAPHIC.) Discuss the elements.
 - a. *John Henry: An American Legend* by Ezra Jack Keats.
 - b. *John Henry* by Julius Lester.
 - c. *John Henry, the Steel-Driving Man* by Corinne J. Naden.
 - d. *A Natural Man: The True Story of John Henry* by Steve Sanfield.
 - e. *American Tall Tales* by Adrien Stoutenberg.
 - f. *Big Men, Big Country: A Collection of American Tall Tales* by Robert Paul Walker.

AFTER SHOWING

Discussion Items and Questions

1. Discuss the meaning of the phrase, "This story is about John Henry, who gave his life for his dreams."
2. What did the story say that John's hammer was made from? Why was that significant?
3. Explain the contract that the C & O Railroad had with the workers.

C a p t i o n e d M e d i a P r o g r a m

4. Why were the railroad workers worn out and discouraged when John Henry arrived.
5. What did John Henry do to motivate the workers? What was Polly's role?
6. Describe the tall tales that grew about John Henry.
7. Why was it so important to the workers not to be replaced by the steam drill?
8. What challenge did John Henry make?
9. Discuss the things John said about the challenge:
 - a. "If they steal our dreams, they chain our souls."
 - b. "Somebody's got to stand tall."
10. Why did John Henry and the workers think they had won when he came to the wall of the mountain? Why did the challenge continue?
11. Describe what happened when John Henry and the steam drill worked to build a tunnel through the mountain.
12. Discuss the meaning of Polly's statement at the end of the story, "When you believe you can overcome, the battle is already won."

Applications and Activities

1. Analyze the video of the tale by adding to the "Elements of a Tall Tale" chart. (See BEFORE SHOWING 3 and INSTRUCTIONAL GRAPHIC.)
2. Compare and contrast a book and the film versions of the tale. Consider using a Venn diagram. Discuss why similarities and differences might exist.
3. Investigate more about John Henry. Analyze how the character was created how he became a legend. Answer the following questions:
 - a. Was there a real person behind the legend? If so, locate information about him.
 - b. How was the tale developed?
 - c. Which parts of the tale might be rooted in fact and which parts might be imaginary details added as the story was handed down?
 - d. Why did John Henry become an important legend?
4. Choose a historical figure or event and write a legend based on that person/event. Use imagination and embellish the truth. Perform the legends as brief skits.
5. Write a newspaper article which might have appeared in a community newspaper when John Henry worked on the railroad.
6. Discuss the role of machines in the legend of John Henry. List examples of work done now by machine that once was done by people or animals.

SUMMARY

Through animation and song, *John Henry* brings alive the legend of the "steel-driving" man who was "born with a hammer in his hand". As the story begins, John Henry and his wife Polly are freed from slavery. The C & O Railroad has promised acreage to every worker who helps to build a new line through West Virginia, but they'll have to reach the other side of a wide valley by noon. The men are discouraged until John Henry steps forward and sinks spikes with one blow of his hammer. Soon the job is well under way. Then a huge steam drill arrives and its driver challenges John Henry to a race. Together John Henry and the steam drill bore a tunnel through a rocky mountain. John Henry wins the race, but collapses into Polly's arms, dying, as she places the hammer in his hand.

CMP RELATED RESOURCES

- *The Legend of Johnny Appleseed* #10034
- *Paul Bunyan* #10029
- *Pecos Bill* #10030
- *The Saga of Windwagon Smith* #10036



World Wide Web



The following Web sites complement the contents of this guide; they were selected by professionals who have experience in teaching deaf and hard of hearing students. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and "kid safe" sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

• JOHN HENRY–THE STEEL-DRIVING MAN

http://www.summerscvb.com/john_henry.html

Read historical information about the Big Bend Tunnel, the C & O Railway, and John Henry. Find information about John Henry and the park that was established in his honor. An excellent source of information for teachers.

• THE LEGEND OF JOHN HENRY

http://www.ibiblio.org/john_henry/

This site contains the legend and facts, and links to more information about John Henry.

• TALL TALES

<http://www.hasd.org/ges/talltale/talltale.htm>

This site has general information about tall tales and specific information about John Henry, along with some other famous tall tale characters. It also has a tall tale template that can be copied and pasted into a word processing program to assist students in writing an original tall tale.

• THE BUILDING OF THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

http://www.univie.ac.at/Anglistik/easyrider/data/building_of_the_transcontinental.htm

Although the focus of this Web site is the transcontinental railroad, it also contains general railroad building history, drawings and photos, abuse of the workers, and links to other information.

INSTRUCTIONAL GRAPHIC

- ELEMENTS OF A TALL TALE

Elements of a Tall Tale

Directions: List the elements of book versions in Column 1 and Column 2.
List the elements of the video version in Column 3.

	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
	Book Version	Book Version	Video Version
Character			
Time Period			
Setting			
Plot			
Use of Exaggeration			
Hazards			
Phenomena Explained			

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