John Henry and the Steam Drill

In the nineteenth century, hundreds of miles of railroad tracks were laid through West Virginia. Thousands of workers, called steel drivers, were hired to build the tracks. Using only their strength and a sledgehammer, the men drilled steel spikes and pounded huge steel nails to lay the tracks.

In songs and stories, John Henry was known as the best and strongest steel driver in the country. No one knows whether he was a real person or a made-up character. Some experts think the tales and ballads are based on the life of a real steel driver.

The best-known tall tale about John Henry begins with a challenge. His boss asks him to compete in a contest against a machine called a steam drill. The steam drill was a new invention. Some thought it could do the work of four men.

John Henry wasn’t afraid of anything or anyone. He was more than eight-feet tall and made of pure muscle. He knew he was stronger than any machine. So he accepted the challenge and assured his boss that he could win.

Before long, news of the contest spread throughout West Virginia. Onlookers came from all over to watch a man compete against a machine.

When the whistle blew, the contest began. The steam drill was turned on. John Henry lifted his 20-pound sledgehammer into the air. It came down with an enormous CRASH!

All the other steel drivers waited and watched. They had entrusted all their hopes in this one man. Again and again, John Henry kept driving steel. Again and again, the steam drill kept drilling. All day and all night, John Henry swung his hammer harder and faster.

Suddenly, the contest was over. The steam drill had broken down! The onlookers cheered! One man had beaten a machine!