

The Industrial Revolution The Legend of John Henry

During the Industrial Revolution, machines started doing the work of people. They were used to make yarn, weave cloth, and saw wood. They were even used to make furniture. However, the changes taking place filled some people with sadness. Many craftsmen, who took pride at their trade, suddenly couldn't find work. They resented that machines were replacing men. This famous American legend tells about one man determined to prove he could beat a machine.

No one's really sure where John Henry came from. Some people say Alabama. Some folks say West Virginia. But one thing's for sure. John Henry was a big man. He could tackle anything, even Big Bend Tunnel. That is where he died.

John Henry was a steel-driving man. That means he helped make railroads. He used a big ol' hammer and a stake to punch holes clean through mountains made of solid rock. He would whistle and sing all day working away. But ol' John Henry was stubborn as an **ornery**¹ mule.

One day John Henry showed up at a camp yonder in Virginia. A team of men was building a railroad up the East coast. The team's captain was a **wiry**², little man. He says to John, "What can you do?" John Henry took a deep breath and puffed himself up just like a rooster. "I'm a steel drivin' man," he said. "I'm gonna to take my hammer and take my stake, and work for you. If you give me a chance, I'll work from 6 to 5. I can crumble more mountain than any man you've ever seen."

¹ **Ornery** – stubborn and mean

² **Wiry** – thin but tough

The captain laughed. “With that hammer you ain’t gonna work for me,” he said. “We use machinery here called steel drills to grind that mountain tired. Them drills run on steam power. That’s power stronger than any man.”

But John Henry’s stubbornness stood firm. He wouldn’t listen to the captain. Instead, John Henry challenged the captain to a race. Whichever man punched a tunnel clean through the mountain first would win.

The little captain and big ol’ John lined up by the Big Bend Tunnel. The captain had his drill and John had his hammer in his hands. All the men watched and waited. They knew that big brave John would break with sadness if he lost. John Henry hammered for all he was worth, pounding away at the rock. But the little man and his wiry drill blew went through that rock like a hot knife through butter.

John Henry didn’t give up. He hammered and heaved. He gave it all his might. Finally, he won the race with his hammer in hand but died from exhaustion while the little Captain laughed. John Henry’s legs and arms gave out, but he never gave up. All the big strong men **wept**¹ to see him go. To them, John Henry was a hero. He was the last of a dying breed of men who refused to let machines change their lives. They buried John Henry under the rock at Big Bend Tunnel.

¹ **Wept** - cried

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Whom did John Henry challenge to a race to drill through a mountain?
 - a. Five other steel-driving men
 - b. A team captain and his steel drill
 - c. A team of horses
 - d. The strongest man in Virginia

2. Why were some people sad that machines were replacing men at work?
 - a. The change made things like furniture more expensive
 - b. Many craftsmen, who took pride in their trade, suddenly couldn't find work
 - c. People were afraid that the machines would hurt them
 - d. Some people used machines to make fun of people like John Henry

3. Which outcome did the other workers probably want in the race between John Henry and the steel drill?
 - a. They probably wanted John Henry to win
 - b. They probably wanted the steel drill to win
 - c. They probably wanted a tie
 - d. They probably wanted the captain to stop the race in the middle

4. "But John Henry's stubbornness stood firm. He wouldn't listen to the captain."
The first sentence most nearly means that John Henry
 - a. couldn't hear well
 - b. agreed with the captain
 - c. held his hammer firmly
 - d. refused to change his mind

5. The passage "The Legend of John Henry" is mostly about
 - a. a sneaky team captain and the tricks he played with his steel drill
 - b. a competition to see who was the strongest man in Virginia
 - c. a competition between a man and a machine during the Industrial Revolution
 - d. the effect of the Industrial Revolution on women

6. Based on the passage, why did John Henry lose to the steel drill?

7. Why do you think this story about John Henry became a famous American legend? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

John Henry challenged the captain to a race _____ he wanted to prove that he was faster and more useful than the machine.

- a. even
- b. meanwhile
- c. because
- d. anyway

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

John Henry competed against the steel drill using his hammer.

Who? John Henry

(did) What? _____

How? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** craftsman: A craftsman is a person who makes things skillfully with his or her hands. He or she could be making furniture, clothes, or anything else that requires skill.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____
