

Name: _____

The legend of John Henry

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Long ago, many Americans traveled west to find new territory to settle in. Many of the pioneers who explored the West were called frontiersmen. They were considered heroes.

Legend tells of another hero. After more people settled in the West, railroads were needed to connect the East and West. The railroad industry was booming, and many men found work building railroads. John Henry was an African-American steel-driver for the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad, but he wasn't just any worker. John Henry was the strongest man working on the railroads.

Each day, John Henry drilled holes into rocks by hitting steel spikes into them with his mighty hammers. He was the fastest and most powerful of all the workers. Try as they might, no other man could match his skill.

One day, as the workers continued drilling, a salesman came along and said he had a steam-powered drill that could drill faster than any man could, including John Henry. A contest was held between John Henry and the machine. John used his mighty hammers to break through the rock. Working tirelessly, he defeated the machine, but his victory came at a cost. Physically exhausted, John Henry had collapsed and died.

Some people say he was a hero, and today, his story of man versus machine still lives on. In 1996, his portrait was used on a U.S. postage stamp. Special versions of it have been sold at auctions. He is celebrated in songs that reveal more about his life and family, including the widow he left behind.

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Comprehension Questions

1. Choose the main idea of this article.

- a. Steam-powered drills were very helpful for the people that built the railroad.
- b. A hero from many years ago drove a train faster than anyone else had before.
- c. John Henry became a legend by working faster than a steam-powered drill.
- d. Many of the songs we sing celebrate people who have done important things.

2. Which detail from the article best supports the main idea?

- a. He was the fastest and most powerful of all the workers.
- b. They were considered heroes.
- c. The railroad industry was booming, and many men found work building railroads.
- d. After more people settled in the West, railroads were needed to connect the East and West.

3. What tools did John Henry use to drill holes into rocks?

- a. Stamps and railroads
- b. Trains and machines
- c. Steam and drills
- d. Hammers and spikes

4. What effect did the contest with the steam-powered drill have on John Henry?

- a. John Henry collapsed and died.
- b. John Henry became even stronger.
- c. John Henry got a job somewhere else.
- d. John Henry wasn't allowed to work anymore.