



Children of Early Appalachia

Story and Song

John Henry

One of the earliest stories I remember hearing is this one, about the first railroads built into West Virginia. They say it was nearly 150 years ago. First came the coal mines. Then they had to get all the coal from the mines to the cities. So the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Company, the “C & O” for short, started in on a railroad line. They hired lots of local people to clear a way, lay the tracks, and dig the tunnels. Digging the tunnels was some of the most dangerous work. Two people worked together in a *driving team*. One person, called a *shaker*, held a long iron pole, while the other, the *driver*, swung a heavy sledgehammer and hit the pole right on the end. After the driver had hammered the shaker’s pole into the mountain, they’d pull it out, pack the hole with dynamite, and blow out the side of the mountain for the tunnel. It took great skill to make a safe tunnel.

Well, some fellow came along, went up to the crew boss, and said, “That’s a mighty slow way to make a tunnel! I’ve got a machine here that can do the work of ten men in half the time! Why don’t you buy my machine, lay off a bunch of your workers, and save your money?”

The boss liked the idea and announced that’s what he would do.

One great black man named John Henry stood up and spoke for everyone. “Boss, we are the people who have worked hard for you with our backs and our brains. We’ve made this company a lot of money. Now you’re going to replace us as if we were worn-out tools. That’s no way to treat folks! Besides, you’re not even sure this machine can out-work us. Let’s have a contest! Me against that machine!”

So they did. And the song *John Henry* is the story of that contest.