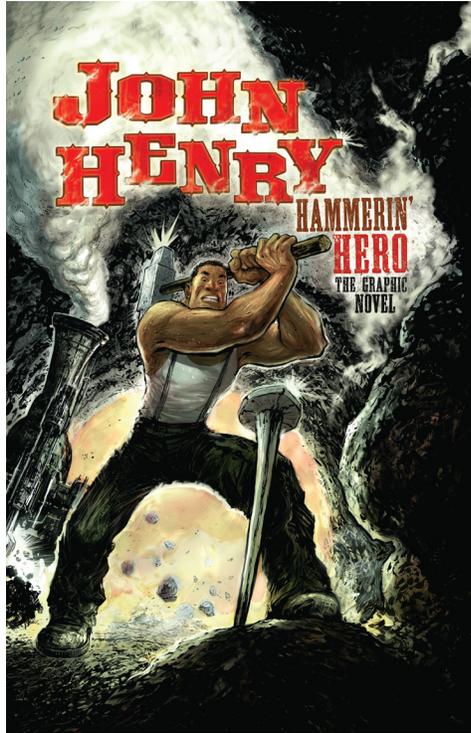




## READER'S THEATER



### **John Henry, Hammerin' Hero** **retold by Stephanie True Peters**

**Characters:**      **Narrator**  
**Mr. Henry**  
**Mrs. Henry**  
**John Henry**  
**Captain Tom**  
**Little Bill**  
**Drill Salesman**

**Genre:**            **Tall Tale**

**Ages:**             **8-13**

# John Henry, Hammerin' Hero page 1

**Narrator:** When John Henry was born, his parents knew that he was special. For one thing, he was the largest baby they'd ever seen. For another, he could talk!

**John Henry:** May I have some eggs and bacon and some oatmeal and milk, please?

**Mr. Henry:** Did you hear that, dear?! Our boy has an appetite to match his size!

**Mrs. Henry:** And where did he get that hammer?

**Mr. Henry:** He must have been born with it!

**John Henry:** HAMMER!

**Narrator:** As he grew older, John's hammer never left his hands.

**Mrs. Henry:** That's enough pounding for now, son.

**John Henry:** Just one more, Ma!

**Mr. Henry:** That's enough firewood for now, son.

**John Henry:** Just one more, Pa!

**Narrator:** In fact, John was hammering when his life suddenly changed.

**Mrs. Henry:** John! We've been looking all over for you!

**John Henry:** Is something wrong, Pa?

**Mr. Henry:** No! Everything is finally right! The North has won the war!

**Narrator:** You see, John Henry and everyone he loved had been born into slavery...but soon they would be free. The next day, John packed his bags.

**Mrs. Henry:** You always were a hungry boy, John. I'm not surprised you'd want a taste of freedom. But what will you do, my son?

**John Henry:** I'm gonna make my mark on the world, Ma!

## John Henry, Hammerin' Hero page 2

**Narrator:** That day, John set off, carrying his trusty hammer.

**Mr. Henry:** Find your own path, son!

**Mrs. Henry:** But never forget where you came from!

**Narrator:** While remembering the past, John Henry headed toward the future. He headed west, where the railroads were being built. On his travels, he often went for days without seeing another soul. Soon, John heard a curious sound.

**John Henry:** I hear something!

**Narrator:** He had found the railroad. Soon, John arrived at the railroad camp.

**John Henry:** Are you in charge?

**Captain Tom:** That depends on who's asking.

**John Henry:** I'm John Henry, and I'm here to hammer for the railroad.

**Narrator:** Captain Tom always needed strong men to clear the way for railroad tracks.

**Captain Tom:** Do you know how to drive steel?

**John Henry:** See this hammer? I was born with it in my hand. Just give me a chance to show you what I can do.

**Captain Tom:** You there! Be his shaker and hold the stakes for him!

**Narrator:** But no one would do it. They were all afraid one wrong swing from John Henry would smash their heads like melons.

**Little Bill:** I'll hold the stakes for him, sir.

**Narrator:** When the shaker was in position, John lifted the mighty hammer. He stuck the stake hard and true. CLANK!

**Captain Tom:** You're hired!

## John Henry, Hammerin' Hero page 3

**Little Bill:** I've never seen anyone bury a stake with just one swing! You've got yourself a permanent shaker, John Henry.

**John Henry:** I'll need a new hammer. Make it two. And they'll need to be as strong as I am to get this job done right.

**Narrator:** John Henry quickly learned the dangers of working on the railroad...

**Little Bill:** Run for cover! The tunnel is collapsing! John Henry is trapped inside!

**Narrator:** Meanwhile, inside the tunnel, workers were panicking. But John Henry wasn't worried.

**John Henry:** Don't worry, I'll have us out in a jiffy!

**Narrator:** News of John Henry's heroic feats spread across the railroad lines like a locomotive. The stories soon caught the ear of a slick salesman.

**Drill Salesman:** My machine could outhammer John Henry easily!

**Narrator:** Later that day, the salesman found John Henry at the foot of Big Bend Mountain.

**Captain Tom:** Big Bend is just too big for the railroad to go around. We'll have to build a tunnel through it.

**Little Bill:** It'll take time — and it'll be dangerous.

**John Henry:** But we can do it!

**Drill Salesman:** I can do it faster and safer than you can!

**Captain Tom:** You can? How?

**Drill Salesman:** With my fabulous steam-powered drill! It's guaranteed to punch holes faster than any man! And it's safer, because it does the dangerous work for you!

## John Henry, Hammerin' Hero page 4

**Narrator:** John Henry didn't trust the smug salesman. He didn't trust the man's machine either.

**John Henry:** Don't listen to him, Captain Tom! A machine can't do what a man can do!

**Narrator:** Captain Tom was in a fix. On one hand...

**Captain Tom:** This machine might keep my men out of danger.

**Narrator:** On the other hand...

**Captain Tom:** What if his machine can't do the job right?

**Narrator:** He needed proof.

**Drill Salesman:** Let's have a contest! My drill against John Henry! If my drill wins, you buy ten of them.

**John Henry:** And when I win, you take your drill and go!

**Drill Salesman:** Deal! Ten drills as good as sold!

**Captain Tom:** Are you sure about this, John?

**John Henry:** I'm a natural steel-driving man, Captain. As long as I hold a hammer in my hand, no machine will ever beat me!

**Narrator:** Who will win the bet? Will John Henry prove that he's the best steel driver in the land? Or will the Drill Salesman's machine prove to be too much for John Henry to handle? To find out, read *John Henry, Hammerin' Hero* from Stone Arch Books.

**THE END**