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THE LEGEND OF JOHN HENRY

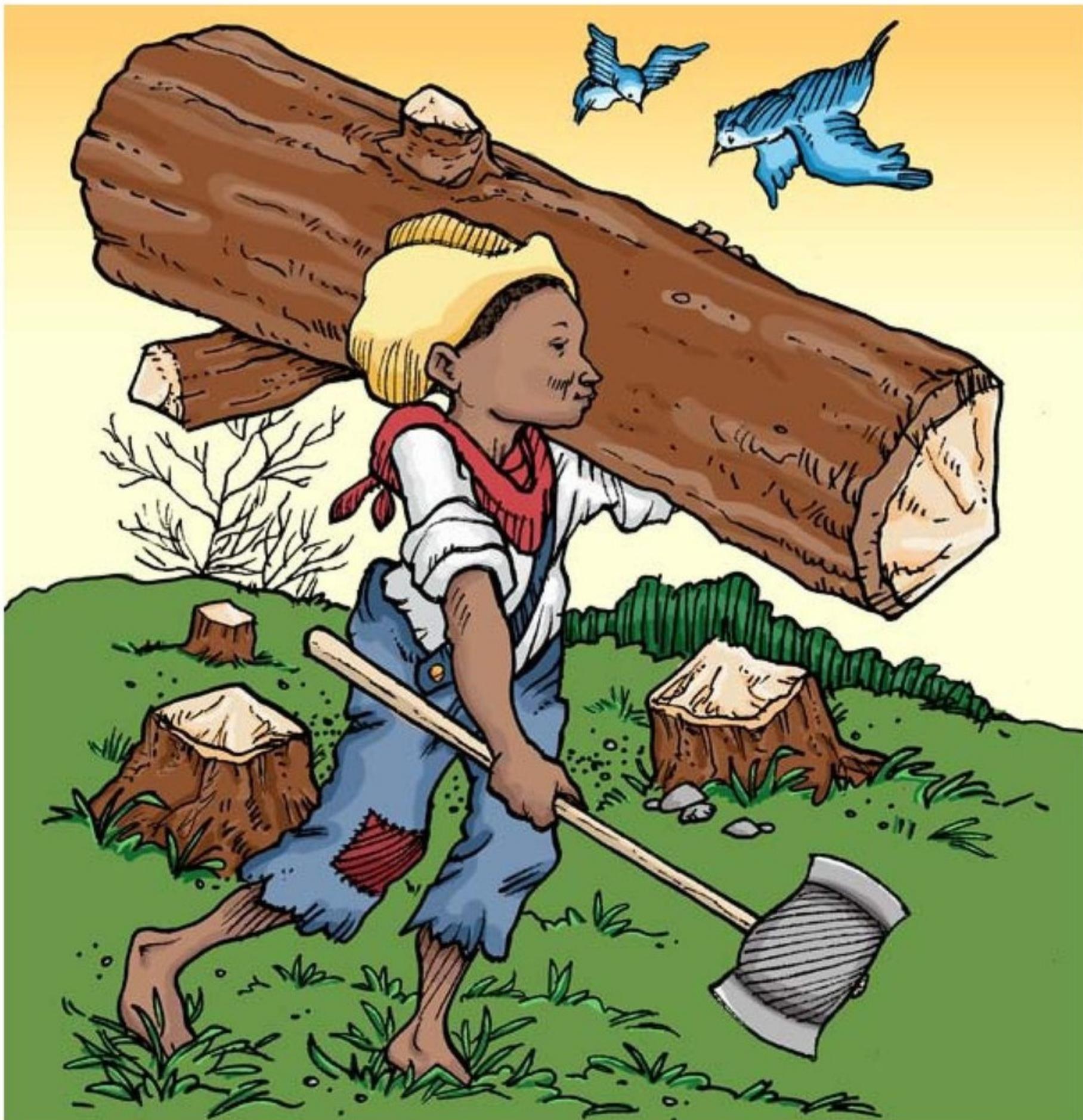


Retold by Heather Lynne Banks
Illustrated by Joel Snyder

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John Henry was born into a **slave** family. When he was just a boy, he had to do the work of a full-grown man. He grew so fast that sometimes the pants he put on in the morning were too short by nightfall. Soon, he was the biggest man around and the strongest, too.



When the **Civil War** ended, the slaves became free, but life was still hard. John Henry needed to find a job. “Who will **hire** me?” he wondered.

John Henry lived before there were cars or airplanes. **Railroad** companies were hiring workers to build tracks all across America. The work was hard and dangerous, but John Henry was brave and strong. So, like many other black men who had once been slaves, he went to work on the railroad.



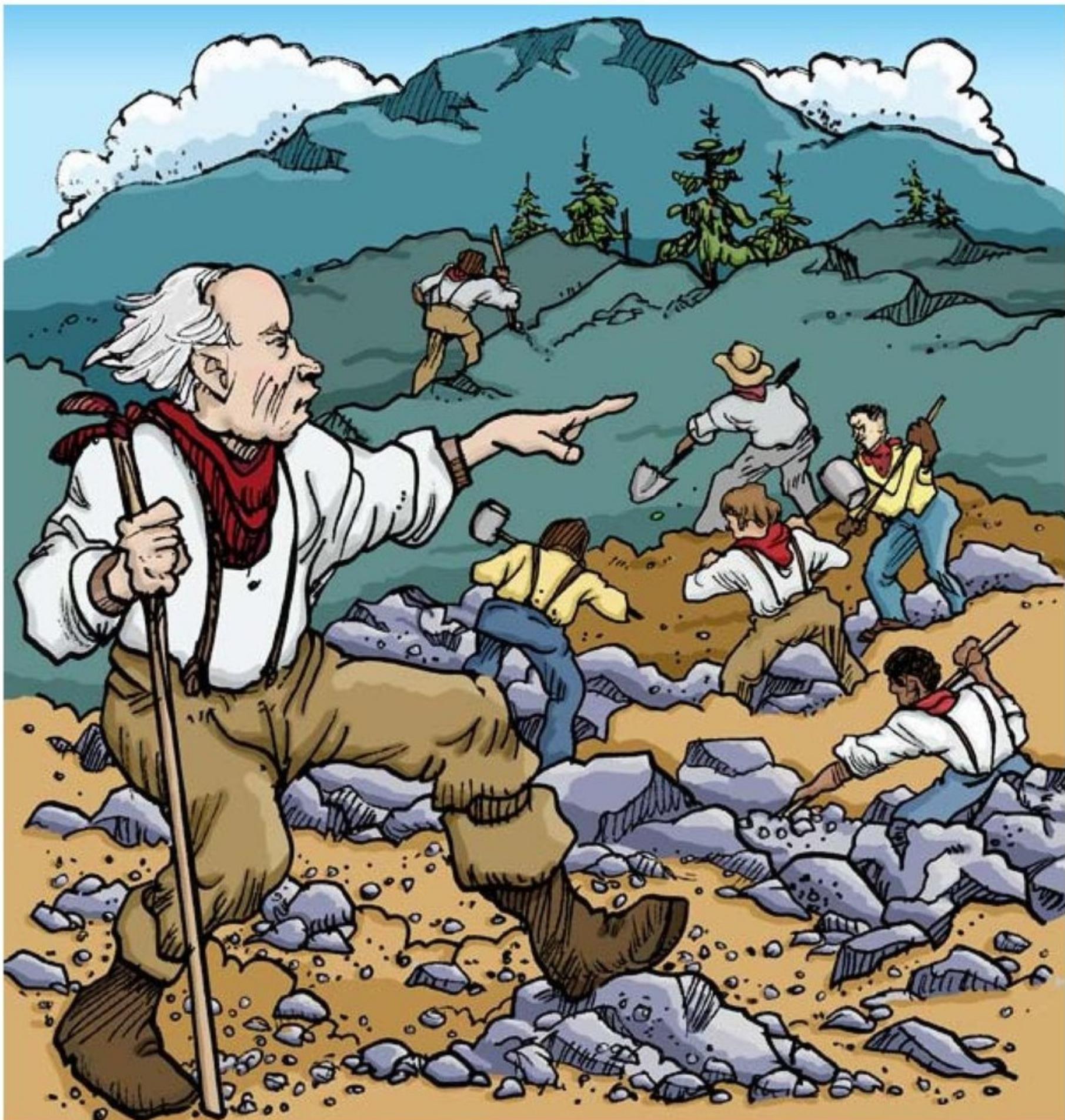
John Henry became a **steel driver**—a hammer man. Every day, he swung his twenty-pound hammer over and over again. Another man would hold a **drill bit** against a rock. Then John Henry would hit the end of the drill bit with his hammer. He broke up rocks and dug tunnels through hills to make a path for the tracks.



The other workers liked John Henry. He worked harder and faster than any three other men. John Henry had a deep, booming voice, and the other men enjoyed singing work songs with him.



One day, the railroad tracks ran smack into Big Bend Mountain. Big Bend was so huge that the railroad couldn't be built around it. A tunnel would have to be built through the mountain instead. "Don't worry," John Henry said. "That ol' mountain's just a big rock, and smashing through rocks is what I do."



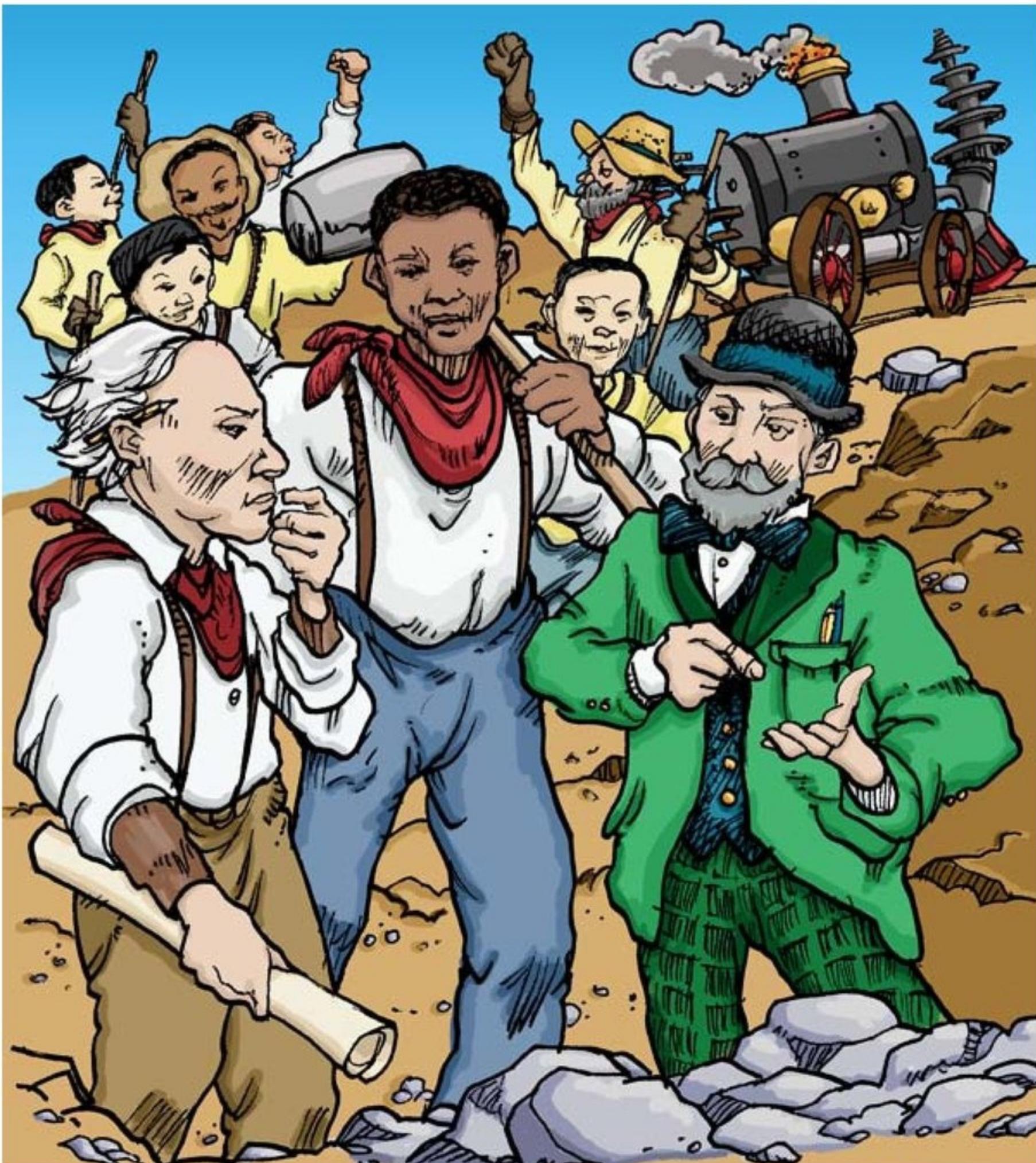
The men worked fast, and John Henry worked fastest of all. They hammered away at Big Bend Mountain. But their boss wasn't happy because he wanted the tunnel finished even faster. The boss said he would fire the men if the tunnel wasn't done on time.



Then one day, a little man in a fancy suit arrived at the work camp. He was selling a steam-powered machine that could drill through rock. His machine was the size of a **locomotive**, and it spit fire and smoke into the air.

“My machine can drill faster than any of your workers,” the salesman told the boss. Most of the men looked down and shook their heads. They feared he was right. But John Henry spoke up. “That machine can’t beat me!” he roared. The other men raised their heads and cheered.

Everyone came running to watch the contest. John Henry stood tall in front of Big Bend Mountain. He gripped a hammer in his mighty hands. The salesman pulled the **levers** on his machine, and it made an awful noise. “When my machine wins, you’ll want to buy it. It will replace all these people!” he yelled to the boss.



John Henry knew he had to beat the machine. If the machine won, the boss would fire the men and use the machine to drill through Big Bend Mountain. But if John Henry won, the boss wouldn't want the machine. He'd keep paying the men.



For the first time in his life, John Henry looked kind of small. Or maybe the machine just looked big. But that didn't scare John Henry.

Whoo! The whistle blew, and the contest began. John Henry groaned as he swung his hammer into the rock. He heard the machine groan, too. “A man is better than a machine,” he said under his breath.

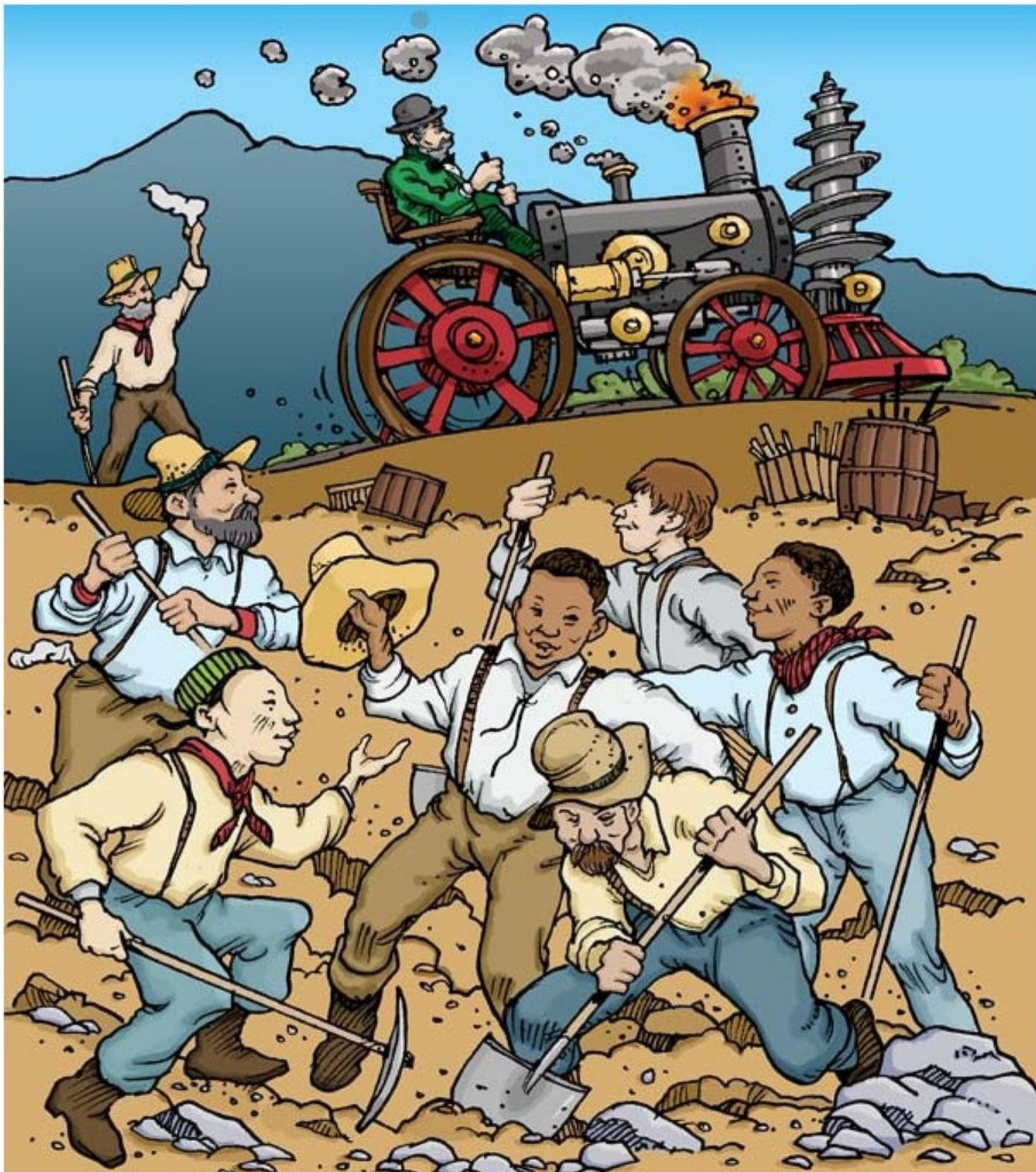


John Henry swung his hammer as quick as lightning. He put all his strength into breaking through the rock. He pushed ahead of the machine and didn't look back.

Whoo! The whistle blew again. The contest was over. John Henry had hammered through almost twice as much rock as the machine. John Henry won!



But the contest was too much for John Henry. He was too strong even for his own heart. While the men were still cheering, he sat down against a rock and died. But he died happy, with his hammer in his hand.



The other workers were sad to lose John Henry. But they were also proud of him for saving their jobs. From that day on, they sang a new song as they worked. It was a song about John Henry, the steel-driving man.

Glossary

| | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Civil War (n.) | the war between the northern and southern states of the United States of America (1861–1865) (p. 5) |
| drill bit (n.) | a metal cutting tool used to make a hole in something (p. 5) |
| fire (v.) | to end a person's job (p. 8) |
| hire (v.) | to agree to pay someone to do a job (p. 4) |
| levers (n.) | control arms that can be used to operate a machine (p. 10) |
| locomotive (n.) | a vehicle that acts as a large engine to push or pull railroad cars along tracks (p. 9) |
| railroad (n.) | a set of metal tracks on which a train travels; a company that operates a network of trains (p. 4) |
| slave (n.) | a person who is owned and completely controlled by another person (p. 3) |
| steel driver (n.) | a railroad construction worker whose job is to pound steel rods into rocks with a heavy hammer (p. 5) |

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| Reading Recovery | 19 |
| DRA | 24 |