Steel Drivin' Man

Produced by Ginna Allison

Program Transcript

SFX-Doc Watson: [a cappella verse]

When John Henry was a little bitty boy
You could set him on the palm of your hand.
John Henry's mammy looked down at him and said,
'My Johnny gonna be a steel drivin' man, papa,
Johnny gonna be a steel drivin' man.'

Ray Hicks: John Henry . . . some said he was a black man, and then others teached he was a white man. And so I don't know, then, but probably he was a black man, John Henry. A steel drivin' man.

SFX-Hicks: Harmonica instrumental

Watson: John Henry, as far as I can find out, actually existed. And he must have been a pretty good fellow. He was a mighty man, and the truth of it.

Bill Perdue: He was a little over six feet tall, weighed about 200 pound. He wasn't a rough-house man. He was well-liked by those who worked with him.

Marie Jackson Nobody knows actually what size man he was, but he was an ordinary citizen, and an ex-slave. A lot of people think it's a myth; we don't know.

Talcott Elementary: Teacher: 'All right, boys and girls, you know we have been talking about stories? Well, today we have a story about a person that we're not sure is a real person, or it could be a make-believe person. And this person comes from around *here*. It's a *big* person . . .' Kids' voices: 'Ooooh, a giant! A giant!' Teacher: 'No, not a giant.' Child: 'John Henry.' Teacher: 'Okay, we pass that statue . . . today's story is about John Henry.'

SFX-John Cephas: [Verse with guitar]

Now John Henry was a little boy,
Setting on his mammy's knee
He picked up a hammer and a little bit of steel
Say 'The hammer gonna be the death of me,
Hammer gonna be the death of me.'

Talc. Elem.: Teacher: One day, John Henry and Polly Ann were walking through the hills of West Virginia. There were hammers ringing. Men were hammering and singing. They were building the Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, going right through the mountain, right where we live today. You can look over there on the railroad track below the tunnel and you can see that. [Thumps of roving children] Okay, come on back. The trees are hiding it right now, okay? Come on back . . .

Perdue: The tunnel started in 1870. Labor done mostly by the Irish and blacks.

Jackson: There were a lot of freed slaves that were looking for jobs, so they drifted toward this area. So my ancestors and my husband's drifted in here.

Perdue: At that time there was no modern machinery, but they did have people who were good at driving an iron bar . . .

Doc: It's like a huge crowbar, you know, with a star shaped point on it, and the shaker boy turned it back and forth every time he'd hit it and that made it cut into the stone . . .

Perdue: And it took two men to work with this. One of them was called a shaker, and his job was lift the bar up and twist it, and the other was to hit the bar and drill through.

Brett Williams: It was at best backbreaking work, long hours, low pay, and at worst incredibly dangerous because there were no very good safeguards against accidents. There were many deaths building the Big Bend Tunnel.

SFX-Cephas: [Verse with guitar]

Now, John Henry said to the captain, man,
'Man, you ought to see me swing.
I weigh forty nine pounds from my hips on down,
I love to hear that cold steel ring.
I love to hear that cold steel ring.'

Williams: The coming of the railroad meant enormous changes. It had been a largely white area and it was really very isolated, and I've thought about this a lot and I can't even imagine what it must have been like suddenly to have all this equipment, and all these new people and this tunnel going through this mountain... I mean, it must've just been astonishing.

Hicks: They invented a little old steam drill years ago, you know. And John Henry didn't want to be drove down. He said before he'd see the steel drill drive him down, he'd die with the hammer in his hand. And that's TRUE. That's true, yeah. That's a true song.

Va. Crockett: My grandparents moved here when they were building the tunnel. I've heard them talk about John Henry. We just grew up listening to all of them, you know, just talking about that.

O.C. Taylor: When I worked at the Big Bend Tunnel, I heard stories about the legend about John Henry and all, with the men that I worked with.

Jackson: Uncle Banks Terry, who lived to be I'd say 113 when he died . . . he didn't see John Henry but he heard everybody talking about the machine and the man that tried to beat the machine.

SFX-Hicks: [a cappella verse]

Said 'Before I see that steam drill drive me down
I'll die with this hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord.
I'll die with this hammer in my hand.'

Jackson: John Henry knew that there several workers wanting a job, and this machine, if it could do the work, it was going to cut a whole lot of people out of jobs, so he said, 'No machine can do what a human can do.'

SFX: Steam train whistle

Cephas: I can imagine John Henry looking at that machine and saying 'shucks, I don't think that machine can beat me.' And then the captain . . . I can imagine they was all bettin', 'Hey, look man, captain gonna put John Henry against that machine out there.' And some of them taking it and . . . 'ohhhh, John Henry, he ain't never gonna get nowhere with that,' you know, and some of them talking about, 'Yeah, I believe he will too, I bet John Henry can beat that machine. And the next thing they might be betting money on that, stuff like that. And then the day of that contest when John Henry got up in that Big Bend Tunnel and started driving them spikes, boy I tell you, and that machine by his side, boy . . .

SFX-Watson [Verse with banjo]

John Henry hammered in the mountainside
Till his hammer was strikin' fire,
And the last words I heard the poor boy say,
'Cool drink of water 'fore I die,
Gimme a cool drink of water 'fore I die.'

Talc. Elem.: Teacher: "The whistle blew, the race was over! John Henry has beaten the machine! Everyone clapped their hands and stomped around and laughed and carried on. Polly

Ann came running over with the baby. When he got there, John Henry was laying on ground. 'I feel a little tuckered out,' he said, 'but I beat that machine, didn't I, just like I said I would.' John Henry reached for the baby with one hand and for his hammer with the other, and then he smiled and closed his eyes. 'I think he's gone,' Little Will said. 'He's gone,' said Polly Ann. Polly Ann nodded. 'He was the best, the very best.'" Children: 'Awwwww.' Teacher: 'Awwww.'

Perdue: You can't convince many people here but what John Henry actually lived. Too many local people have passed down from generation to generation enough history of John Henry. We have no doubt but what he lived.

Cephas: I'm so much convinced that John Henry was a real person that I would gamble my life on it.

Richard Spottswood: There's I guess about as much chance of tracing the historical John Henry as there is the historical Jesus.

Perdue: That's the trouble . . . what's happened: if we had all the history written down that could've been passed down from generation to generation, we would have a solid core to stand on.

Spottswood: We can't find birth date and a death date for him like you can George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington . . . they're the ones that we sort of trot out in our elementary school textbooks. John Henry has never needed that kind of artificial insemination or whatever you'd care to call it. John Henry has sort of been in our collective face all of this time.

Cephas: Lot of people use John Henry as a kind of role model, you know. Almost anywhere you would go in the black community where people were playing blues and playing folk music, there would be somebody come up and say, 'Hey, do you know John Henry.'

Williams: He lived almost entirely in oral tradition and so lots of different people made of John Henry many different kinds of men, and it contributes to the way in which he's a universal kind of hero and lots of different people can claim him and make him their own.

SFX-Cephas: National Steel guitar instrumental

SFX- Crickets, rooster

Richard Halloran: As you enter Talcott from the west or the east, you will see a sign that says 'Talcott, Home of John Henry Legend,' and 'Welcome.'

Jackson: When you come in Talcott, it looks like a little valley between the mountains and the hills, and in the center of this valley you will find the river, beside of it the track, and beside of the track the state highway.

SFX-Halloran: We're crossing the main line, which is the line that's being used today. We're entering the area where the old track used to be and the Big Bend tunnel, is now closed and growed up, you can't hardly get there. The hole is still . . . right now we can see the hole in the mountain. We're walking through a maze of crossties and snake infested areas [laugh].

SFX: Approach of freight train.

Perdue: I graduated in 1930. Back then, this was a big freight station. And the RR had a booming business here. I can remember the depot over here, and my dad would pick up wire and fencing and fertilizer and seed, to haul it back to the farm. And I still live on the same farm, still farming.

Crockett: Talcott was a big place. They had a station down there and we'd go down to the station and watch people get on and ones get off for every train, in the evening.

Taylor: Oh, there was a gang of trains running years ago here. And they all stopped. The number three, number four, number five, number six, and thirteen, fourteen . . .

Crockett: . . . Thirteen, fourteen. There was quite a few trains that stopped here. All of that was years ago.

Perdue: About the end of the 40s, they tore the depot down, no trains stop here now.

Halloran: The coal industry has, in West Virginia, has gone down. There used to a big yard office, a switching yard in Hinton, and that's completely gone. And that's what's caused the depression in this area—the depletion of the railroad industry. It's just about gone any more.

Perdue: And so we're down until very few people are employed. It just drained the population.

Halloran: We have quite a few retired people, and quite a few people in our area are on welfare. Because they can't find work and they can't afford to pick up what they have here and move away. Between a rock and a hard place.

SFX-Cephas: Guitar instrumental

Halloran: John Henry was supposedly the fastest spike driver that ever worked for the railroad. He could drive a spike in so many licks, hit it so many times and the nail, the spike

would be in. Manual labor done all the railroad work, they drove every spike, set every tie by hand. The steam drill came along and it hit it one time and knocked it plumb through the crossties, so now, you have a whole bunch of machines and four or five men go down the railroad track putting in ties and rail and spikes and they do the whole thing, so automation has taken its toll.

Spottswood: This always happens every time there's a technological advance: what happens to the people who are displaced? Manual labor suddenly becomes obsolete because of the technological takeover. It's something we're still encountering in the twentieth century. We've played versions of the John Henry drama throughout our entire history as a people, I think.

Jackson: When they got ready to put the tunnel, they bought all the property down through there. And some of the people didn't want to sell to the railroad. They just condemned it and took it. And when the first state road came through here, Mrs. Crockett . . . her grandfather owned a house on river and they wanted to buy her grandfather's home, and he didn't want to sell. His children had been raised there and everything. They just condemned it and took it.

Crockett: When I was a child, I used to stay with my grandparents a lot down on the river. Then when they put the highway through, they blasted that place up, and they had to move. I wrote a poem about that. I've got it here somewhere. Can I read it to you?

On the banks of the Greenbrier River,
Where the sun shines bright each day,
I spent a happy childhood with my
Grandparents old and gray.

Where the whippoorwills sang me to sleep each
And the crickets chirped with glee.
The frogs, the owls, and katydids,
That place was a heaven to me.

My grandparents were the Evans
Who I am sure everyone knows.
Uncle "Cal" and Aunt "Ada"
As the saying goes.

They lived by the Greenbrier River,
For more than thirty years,
Down close to the Big Bend Tunnel.
The old place still seems so dear.

We all lived there so happy,
Until that awful day
The state decided to build a road.
Then they had to move away.

It broke our hearts to leave there,
But the state had other plans.
They were building a state highway,
And they had to take their land.

My grandparents both are dead now.
They died with a broken heart.
The old home place they loved so we
I am sure they never forgot.

I go there every summer,
Just to fish and swim.
There's no one there to greet me,
No home to enter in.

I often sit and wonder
Just why it had to be.
But the old home place we loved so w
Was more than a heaven to me.

SFX: Steam train whistle, rumble of train wheels

Jackson: People say that Talcott doesn't change, it's the same. But if you go away, you'll see there's a *lot* of changes. I notice the changes are names. So many, everybody mostly, had to leave Talcott to get jobs, and there's nowhere near as many people.

Halloran: You look out here now, and you see a couple kids playing together. Back when I was kid they'd be fifteen or twenty gathered up in some field somewhere, kicking some ball around.

Brad Wykle: I don't really see myself coming back after I graduate 'cause there's really no industry around Summer's County, no businesses, you know . . . I've just always had a part of me that wanted to live in the city.

Halloran: We have one daughter that . . . she's in Pennsylvania because there was no work here. She hates to be away from home but, she's in a small area and she enjoys it and I don't think she'll ever come back because there's nothing there to *bring* her back here.

Perdue: It's a shame that when the young people finish their education that they can't find some employment. And the young people don't like to go back to the farms. You don't get rich on a farm. You can EXIST.

JoLynn Halloran: I've always like living here. The ones I graduated with, a lot of them have moved away to college and married and stuff, but I still see them every now and then and I just, I don't like the city, I like the country, I like the quiet. I really don't want to move away.

Kenni Pierce: If you see anybody from here that maybe fifty years ago, they used to live here, they want to come back to Talcott, and they are buried, a lot of them, in the cemetery now. They always come back to Talcott.

SFX: Birds

Halloran: If you were to drive through the Talcott area from east to west, all the way through Talcott you would see the C&O Railroad, which *was* the C&O Railway, which is CSX now.

Jackson: Let's see, going west . . . there's the old swimming hole, the first thing that you would notice, on the river.

Pierce: The swimming hole was a place that, even back in the days like in the 40's and 50's, was not segregated. Other places in Talcott were, you know; the black people had their place of living, white people had their place of living. But the swimming hole was like a meeting place. Everybody went there.

SFX-Pierce: Okay, I'm taking you to the old swimming hole, at Talcott. It's, like, trees that are very old and some are leaning over towards the river. Lush undergrowth, and, like, a camper there, and it's like a little island, we call it, and . . . it's just a beautiful, peaceful place. Other places, on down lower, was the baptismal place for the church. And the older people who can't come down because of the rock cliff, they will stand up there and sing or pray. Baptized my son a year ago, here.

Jackson: Our Baptist church is called the Second Baptist Church of Talcott, but it's across the highway and the railroad track from the Rollynsberg Church, which is all white. At times we have joined our congregations; there's no malice as I've ever seen, but we have two separate churches.

D.L. Stalnaker: There's been, I believe, a general decline in church attendance, really. Of course the church is like anything else, it goes up and down, you know. Sometimes you have good prosperity and then sometimes you kind of level off and maybe take a dip or two before you come back up again.

Sfx: [Service at Rollynsberg Baptist Church]

In times like these, you need a savior.
In times like these, you need an anchor.
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds, and grips the solid rock . . .

Halloran: The next thing you see would probably be a railroad crossing. Just before you would cross this crossing, there's a post office. We do have a post office here.

Bill Dillon: 'My name's Mr. Dillon. I'm postmaster here at Talcott, West Virginia. It's a small community, but it's a very tight-knit community and most everybody knows everybody. Afternoon! ' Customer answers: 'Afternoon.' Dillon: 'How you doing today?'

Halloran: As you cross this railroad crossing you would find the only grocery store in our community, and run by a very nice family.

Donna Wykle: Running a small little country grocery store, Dillon's Superette. I'm pretty well familiar with everybody, I've lived here all my life and—you know, anybody wants to know anything . . . fire trucks go out, our phone starts ringing, 'Where's the fire truck going?' If anybody has a wreck or if anybody is sick or anybody in the hospital, you know, they'll call here. They think we know everything. But we don't.

SFX-Dillon's: [Cash register] Wykle: 'How's everything up New Jersey way?' Customer: 'Same.' Wykle: 'Same thing?' Customer: 'Same thing.' Wykle: '$5.50.' Customer: 'You know, you keep coming back; this is still home.' Wykle: 'Oh yeah. There's no place like home . . . '

Halloran: As you continue past the post office, there is road on the right hand side. It turns into a place called 'Pie Hollow.' And this is a black community, basically black community. Most of them live in this area and have lived there for years and years.

Pierce: In the days when John Henry was building the tunnel, it was sort of segregated, and the hollow was the place where all the black people lived. And to this day, it's still that way.

Taylor: They're colored, they're up there, but I go up there every once in a while. Lot of our friends are up there.

Halloran: When I was a kid I went into their homes and set down at the table and ate with them, and played with them. They're some fine people.

Jackson: Talcott has always . . . we had no trouble. We knew there were certain things that we were not supposed to do like go in front; we were supposed to go 'round to the side and all that. It was just accepted. But I can't say that there was ever any real trouble.

Taylor: It's quiet and it's good people here. There's a lot of colored but they're good people. They come in here when these works was going on years ago, and of course another generation . . . but the old generation was fine people. And they all got along, worked together and everything. We had good times. A lot of them now is my friends. They stop by and see me. I worked with them on the C&O. A lot of the porters that rode the train.

Jackson: I'll tell you how it is. I . . . there's four sons that I have, and they had married four white girls. My grandmother was half white and half Indian so I couldn't bring up a child to hate anybody, either side, and I tried not to. People people.

Halloran: And if you continue on down the road there, we have what I call a 'beer joint,' and our school road is right beside of this, goes up onto a hill, to where our local school is at. Okay, if you continue past the schoolhouse road, on the left-hand side of the road almost to the top of the mountain, you'd be directly over the tunnels that John Henry supposedly built.

Perdue: The old tunnel still stands, with the brick arch. The water drips through the brick. You can go there and see the water dripping and hear it dripping in the tunnel even yet today.

SFX-Halloran: [Visit to tunnel] This tunnel is the Great Bend Tunnel, which is the tunnel that John Henry supposedly drove a spike in, had a heart attack, and died racing with the steam drill. It would have happened right here where we're standing, in this general area. Looking in the tunnel, the track is gone and the water is dripping through the tunnel. As we stand here and look we can see a small light which is the other end of the tunnel which is some nine-tenths of a mile away. And we can only barely see a small light because of the debris that has fallen somewhere in the middle of the tunnel.

SFX-Jackson: [Visit to tunnel] When it rains like it is today, that water dropping down in there, and you can hear, 'Ping, ping,' just like a hammer, and they said it's John Henry's. You can hear it. You get a feeling of other people.

SFX-Brad Wykle: [Visit to tunnel] You look into it and it's foggy and misty and it seems like the water's . . . I mean, it just looks like a river inside of it. See a few pop cans and crossties laying in front of the tunnel. It's just total blackness and you can feel the wetness in the air.

SFX-Halloran: [Visit to tunnel] It's really dangerous for us to be here. I'm ready to get out of here.

Perdue: In '73, the statue of John Henry was erected up there, right on top of Big Bend Tunnel.

Halloran: The statue has been rocked and bombed and drug down and tore down, by children, but he's there, and I guess in the hearts of the people of this community, it's something I guess that we cling to.

Pierce: People do stop at the statue. I believe that it could be a profitable thing if Talcott would talk it up more, or, like, if we'd had a ball team named 'The Steel Drivers,' or something like that.

Perdue: There's a lot of community spirit here. If we can get the ball field fenced, we can give the go-ahead and get some Little League up there, and that'll be another addition and attraction to go with John Henry.

SFX-Watson: [Verse with banjo]

Early Monday morning on the eastbound train
Couldn't hardly stay in bed.
Early Monday morning on the eastbound train
Goin' where John Henry was dead,
Goin' where John Henry was dead.

Hicks: What makes me love that song . . . there's a feeling in it. A feeling in John Henry. That's what's makes it a' holding on. It goes to you, what makes it hold on, and going through the people to remember it yet and singing it yet with their music.

Cephas: The story still stands. Even today, they probably got machines that can drive ten times as fast as John Henry drove them spikes, but he had made a mark that people will forever look up to him.

Spottswood: John Henry was helped along by the folk song process, which is that the song stayed important because it *was* important. It's a little microcosm of an ongoing American conflict that we all understand.

SFX: Freight train horn

Dillon: It's nice that you live in a community where you know everybody, but you have some history that you can always identify with. No matter where you go, somebody has heard that legend. And, it's nice being able to say 'Well, I'm postmaster of where John Henry beat the steam drill.'

Crockett: You can't keep nothing looking like nothing around here on this river but I wouldn't trade it for nothing in the world. I love the river.

Jackson: I been to most of the large cities and after I see everybody, I begin to think about coming home to these mountains. You notice there's mountains all the way around and you feel protected. The song says,

'From Allegheny's lofty peaks to mountains towards the west,
There lies a state whose mooring speaks of beauty and the best.
And it's West Virginia's scenic grandeur is a boon to every eye
And a mountain's tall commanding shoulders out the very sky.'

So that's the way I feel about West Virginia.

SFX-Cephas: Guitar instrumental.

Credits: This program, 'Steel Drivin' Man,' was produced by Ginna Allison. Thanks to recording artists John Cephas of blues duo Cephas and Wiggins, and Doc Watson. Thanks also to broadcaster and ethnomusicologist Richard K. Spottswood, Professor of American Studies and Anthropology Brett Williams, Storyteller Ray Hicks, and Professor of Folklore Archie Green. And heartfelt thanks to Virginia Crockett for her poem, and to all the generous people of Talcott, West Virginia. 'Steel Drivin' Man' was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.