

ON THIS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA HISTORY DECEMBER 28



West Virginia State Archives

The John Henry statue at Talcott, commemorating the "steel drivin' man" who participated in the construction of the Big Bend railroad tunnel, was erected on December 28, 1972.

CSO: SS.8.9, SS.8.11, SS.8.23, ELA.8.1

Investigate the Document: (*The Monroe Watchmen, October 27, 1932*)

1. Where is the Big Bend tunnel located?
2. How long is the Big Bend tunnel?
3. How did the workmen dig the tunnels before the steam drill?

Think Critically: Do you know the story of John Henry? How does this account of the story compare to that of the John Henry legend? What role did John Henry have in digging the Big Bend tunnel? Do you believe John Henry was a real person? Have you visited the John Henry monument, located just outside the old Big Bend tunnel, at Talcott?

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THE JOHN HENRY LEGEND

Story Retold Of Man Who "Died With A Hammah In his Han"

Writing again of the John Henry legend at the old Big Bend tunnel in Summers county, Myrtle I. Cooper gives the following highly interesting details of the story, taken from the C. & O. Railway's magazine, "The Rail."

This is the story of a tunnel, of an honest man, and of John Henry.

The tunnel is a smoke-grimed reality of brick and stone, Big Bend tunnel, that bores its way through a spur of the Alleghanies between Talcott and Hilldale, W. Va.

The honest man was a reality, too, the tunnel contractor who went broke doing a good job but lived to make good and satisfy his creditors in handsome fashion.

John Henry is a legend. But is he? Time dims the border line between fact and fable, and delving historians are not certain whether John Henry was flesh and blood, or myth. But no matter; John Henry lives today in song and story. He lives where men sing to "help the work go smoother," for in their songs they tell again of John Henry, steel driving man, who "died with a hammah in his han" in bitter contest with a steam drill.

Once again they are digging at Big Bend tunnel, a new Big Bend, paralleling the old one where proud John Henry hammered his heart out. And so the story of the giant Negro comes to a retelling. If the shade of John Henry watches over the growth of the new tunnel it grieves, no doubt, for the days when pride in human strength resented the intrusion of machine to replace it.

To begin at the beginning, one must go back to 1870-72 when Captain William R. Johnson undertook to bore Big Bend tunnel for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. It was a monumental task for that day. The tunnel is 6,500 feet long, about a mile and a quarter. It was lined with timber, and the space between the lining and the excavation line was packed with cord wood and stone. It was driven before mechanical drilling had come into general use, and most of the work was done by stalwart laborers whose pride in brawn is woven into the legend of John Henry.

Captain Johnson drove a tunnel that was satisfactory to the Chesapeake and Ohio, but when he had finished he was an impoverished man with a legion of creditors at his back, victim of a financial depression. To recoup his fortune he went into the coal fields of West Virginia. Ten years later he emerged, rich again, and to the creditors who had besieged him a decade before, he gave checks covering principal and interest on the money that had literally gone through his hands into the tunnel. Captain Johnson's comeback was glorious and complete. The closing chapter of that phase of the story of Big Bend tunnel is related in the Richmond Dispatch of September 5, 1884, which tells of a great banquet given by Richmond business men in honor of Captain Johnson, to whom they presented a solid silver punch bowl inscribed: "An honest man is the noblest work of God."

So much for interesting facts, but facts and fancy always will be intermingled by time and play of imagination. It is not strange, therefore, that the story of John Henry has outrun the story of Captain Johnson. Not only songs but books have been written about John Henry and the first steam drill. We read in Guy B. Johnson's book on the fabled Negro that: "John Henry undoubtedly is the Negro's greatest folk character. His fame is sung in every nook and corner of the United States where Negroes live, sung oftenest by wanderers and laborers."

The story goes that the introduction of the steam drill at Big Bend tunnel was strongly resented by the workmen. John Henry, steel driver, crystallized their resentment with a boast that he could beat the steam contri-

vance in a contest. A steel driver is the man who strikes the steel drill with a heavy hammer, sinking the drill into the rock to make an opening for the blasting charge. A companion workman holds the drill in place and gives it an occasional twist to make the cutting edge effective. This man is known as the "turner" or "shaker."

And so the contest began, with John Henry hammering away to outdo the mechanical rival. In the John Henry saga, the contest is waged through countless verses. In the end the redoubtable hero won out, to fall dead "with a hammah in his han."

Considerable investigation has been made by writers and folk song collectors to establish whether John Henry really lived, and if he competed with the newly invented steam drill. The pursuit of fact has led to various parts of the country and into picturesque old time cabins, especially in the vicinity of the tunnel, where aged residents vaguely recall the days of the first Big Bend and of the incomparable John Henry.

Now that another Big Bend tunnel is underway the stories speed again along the grapevine route from cabin to cabin, to laboring camps and crossroads, and to campfires in the far, lonely places. It seems fitting that, at the moment, the fame of John Henry is brightest at the new Big Bend tunnel, close to the spot where he won to glory.

Perhaps after another sixty years historians will trace the origin of some human incident to the construction of the new Big Bend, but the picture has changed. To be sure, brawny workmen grapple again with earth and rock, but the modern John Henry works with, not against, every conceivable mechanical device to ease the task.

The new underground passage is 6,152 feet long, 18 feet wide and 23 feet in height above the rails. Steel lining is used throughout 5,525 feet of its length, and timber the remaining distance. Concrete with a minimum thickness of 18 inches is used inside the steel and timber lining. Concrete slab with reinforced ballast walls is being poured in the floor of the tunnel to minimize track maintenance.

It seems likely that no matter how many Big Bend tunnels may come and go, the story of John Henry will carry on. Wherever Negro laborers are at work, from Mississippi levees to mountain tops, will be heard the songs of John Henry "to make the work go easier." Now the radio brings us the ever-lengthening verses, and fiction has made a place for the great steel driving man, as the hero of Roark Bradford's recent popular story, "John Henry."

One may wonder if, on a lonely night, the bravely curious really can hear the hammer of John Henry still ringing clear in old Big Bend tunnel. Few probably will ever know, but likely they who know the legend will never pass through new or old Big Bend without remembering the pioneer days of railroading, the story of a tunnel, of an honest man, and of John Henry.