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POLLY ANN AND JOHN HENRY

From: **MULTICULTURAL FOLKTALES: Readers Theatre for Elementary Students**

Summary

Polly Ann is setting fence posts when John Henry sweeps her off her feet. They marry and John Henry joins a steel-driving crew for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. When the arrival of a steam drill machine threatens his livelihood, John Henry enters into a contest to prove that a man is more powerful than a machine. RL4.

Presentation Suggestions

The narrator plays an important role and should rehearse the script carefully. Because the parents only speak one line each, they could leave the stage after their parts. The machine salesman could enter the stage late in the story.

Props

John Henry could wear a railroad or workman's cap. A sledge hammer, fencing materials, and other tools could be propped on stage.

Delivery

The spoken parts are written in a casual style. The characters should sound folksy without sounding ignorant.

Related Books

Grant, Neil. American Folk Tales and Legends. London: Peerage Books, 1988.

Osborne, Mary Pope. American Tall Tales. Illustrated by Michael McCurdy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.

Characters

Narrator

Mama

Papa

Polly Ann

John Henry

Captain Tommy

Men

Machine Salesman

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Polly Ann and John Henry

Narrator: When Polly Ann arrived in this world, the moon moved in front of the sun for five full minutes. Her parents took this to mean that Polly Ann would be truly special.

Mama: You were so fine the sun winked at the world. Child, there's nothing you can't do!

Narrator: Polly Ann believed her mama. When other little girls played with their dollies, Polly Ann practiced pounding nails into wood scraps from her papa's shop. While her cousins had tea parties, Polly Ann pitched horseshoes with her papa.

Papa: My pretty Polly! How you can pound a nail and pitch a horseshoe! You make me proud!

Narrator: With all that pounding and pitching, Polly grew to be one strong young lady. Pretty too. Fellas would come calling. But it wouldn't take long for those unsuspecting young men to decide that anyone who could pitch a game like Polly Ann would not make a good housewife. One hot day Polly was about to start a new fence down by the road. Just as she was fixing to set the gate post, up sauntered a young man as handsome as the night and looking twice as strong.

John Henry: Looks like you could use some help, miss.

Narrator: Polly Ann looked the young man square in the eyes, hoisted her hammer, and set that post with one blow.

Polly Ann: Thanks anyway, but I rather enjoy setting posts.

John Henry: Then maybe you'd be so kind as to fetch me a dipper of water. It is mighty hot today.

Polly Ann: Help yourself. What's your name?

John Henry: My name's John Henry. And yours?

Polly Ann: Polly Ann. Where you from and where you headed?

John Henry: Yonder the next county, but now I'm off to find the new railroad. I've a hankering to pound some steel.

Polly Ann: But you've got no hammer.

John Henry: I reckon I'll just have to use yours, Miss Polly Ann.

Narrator: And that's how Polly Ann and John Henry commenced to courting. It only took two games of horseshoes to see that they were fairly matched. John Henry suggested they finish that new fence together. By the time they set the third post, they were in love. By the seventh post they were engaged. By the time the last post was pounded into place, the wedding date was set. After the wedding, John Henry was ready to move on.

John Henry: It's time to find that railroad, Polly Ann. We'll have a fine honeymoon on our way.

Narrator: John Henry and Polly Ann headed west until they came to the Big Bend Tunnel of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Hearing the men hammering and singing as they worked made John Henry eager to join them. It didn't take long for him to find the boss.

John Henry: Captain Tommy! I would surely like to sign on as a steel-driving man!

Captain Tommy: I don't know about that. That's a mighty big job. You don't even have a hammer.

John Henry: I've got hers.

Men: A girl's hammer? What kind of man is he?

Narrator: Just to prove that he could do the job, Polly Ann gave over her hammer and stood in as John Henry's shaker, setting each spike in place for John Henry to hit. In no time she was calling for a bucket of water to cool down that fast-moving hammer.

Captain Tommy: You're hired! You'll get a dollar a day, a house to borrow, and your vittles. You can start right now!

Narrator: John Henry and Polly Ann settled down, happy as fleas on a dog. Before long Polly Ann and John Henry had a little one, John Henry Junior. They put every spare penny into the cookie jar for the day when they could have their own place. Then one day a man came along bragging about a new-fangled machine called a steam drill.

Machine Salesman: This machine never stops! It can do the work of twenty men! Just try it out, Captain Tommy. You won't regret buying it.

Captain Tommy: I have a hard time believing your claims. But, I tell you what, how about a race between that machine and my best natural-born machine, John Henry? If John Henry wins, you give me that machine and two hundred dollars. If the machine wins, I'll buy it from you.

Machine Salesman: Sounds fair enough, if your natural-born steel driver is willing!

Captain Tommy: John Henry, I'll give you one hundred dollars if you can beat that machine.

John Henry: You don't have to talk me into it. If that machine takes over, where are hard-working, natural-born folks like me going to find jobs?

Narrator: They set the day for the contest, and people from a hundred miles away came to watch.

Polly Ann: John Henry, I know you feel you got to do this, but I won't be the same if anything happens to you.

John Henry: Polly, a man ain't nothing but a man. And a man's always got to do his best. I'll beat that machine, just you wait and see. That hundred dollars can buy us our own place.

Narrator: The contest began. At first the steam-powered machine pulled ahead. But John Henry just grabbed a hammer in his other hand and worked harder and faster. He sang as he worked, knowing he could beat that machine. Every hour they had to call in a new shaker to keep up with all the spikes John Henry drove. The machine worked hard too. But after eight hours, it began to shake just a little. John Henry just kept driving with both hammers, but he was getting weary, and there were no shakers left. Polly Ann pushed past the men in the tunnel and took over as the shaker.

Polly Ann: John Henry, you're going to win. You're a natural-born, steel-driving man.

Narrator: Polly kept setting those spikes as her eyes burned from the dust and smarted from the tears at watching the man she loved drive those spikes. Finally, during the ninth and last hour, the machine began to overheat. Polly Ann and John Henry just kept setting and driving.

Men: Come on, John Henry! Don't give up! You can do it!

Captain Tommy: Time's up!

Narrator: The machine wheezed and died. John Henry began to drop the hammers, but Polly Ann took both his arms with hers and brought them down together on the last two spikes. The crowd listened as that one last furious ring of the hammers echoed throughout the tunnel, and then quiet settled in the tunnel. The dust cleared and the men saw that John Henry had indeed won--by three spikes! They also saw that he lay on the ground. Polly Ann was holding him in her arms, with her tears washing the dust from his face.

John Henry: Did we win, Polly Ann?

Polly Ann: You won, John Henry. We're gonna' go buy that place with our hundred dollars.

John Henry: Just give me a cool drink of water, and I'll be ready to move on, my fine Polly Ann.

Narrator: But before anyone could fetch him a drink, he had moved on forever. Polly Ann picked him up and carried him outside the tunnel and right up to their little home. A few days later, she and Junior buried John Henry on the hillside with her hammer in his hand and a steel rod across his breast. The clouds moved across the sun for five whole minutes, and the earth trembled as if a train were roaring down the tracks.

Epilogue

Polly Ann stayed on for a while, working to complete that tunnel. Some days she'd drive steel. Other days she'd be a shaker. But memories of John Henry became too much for her. She took that hundred dollars plus all her cookie jar savings and headed west with Junior. They got that place, and every time she set a fence post with her new hammer she'd think about her natural-born, steel-driving man and tell their son how his daddy beat a new-fangled machine.