

“John Henry Blues”

The Basics

Time Required

1 class period

Subject Areas

8th Grade US History

Development of the Industrial U.S., 1870-1900

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

Author

Steven Rapaport (2006)

The Lesson

Introduction

This lesson plan will each focus on aspects of the relationship between music and the railroads. It will also explore the question of whether we are better off using technology or letting everything being done without the use of machines.

It is amazing how Americans from their earliest childhood days till their deaths tend to think fondly of the railroads. Even though trains are still an important means of transporting products from one end of our great nation to another, they are not the primary mode of transportation for people anymore. We tend to use the automobile and planes to cross our great land but what is heroic about those modes of transportation? No, the train has been indelibly immortalized in the songs of our nation forever. We hear the rhythm of the train’s wheels hitting the tracks or ask the conductor to blow his whistle as we see trains pass. From the time we are little kids in school till we pass on we sing and hum the tunes that helped make our country great!

Guiding Questions

Who was John Henry?

What purpose do machines serve?

Learning Objectives

Students will better understand who John Henry was, and be able to discuss the role of machinery in the Industrialization of the United States.

Preparation Instructions

Song used in this lesson:

“John Henry Blues”

Lesson Activities

1. Sing the John Brown and then discuss it in class trying to determine the deeper meaning.

2. Why would a man be pitted against a power spike driller?
3. What did the man have to prove?
4. What question do we ask when we see men trying to beat machines?
5. Should men even try to compete against machines?
6. Would John Henry be a heroic figure if he had lost the race? Did dying enhance the legend?
7. Was John Henry a real person or a legend? (John Henry could have been a real person or a legend. The chances are that he existed and he did race the steam drill and beat it. It is just not sure if this took place in Canada or the United States.)
8. What is the difference between a work song and a ballad?

While driving steel, John (Henry and his fellows probably sang work songs. With the help of work songs, a tradition brought from Africa, many heavy, cooperative tasks became easier. Work songs were used for different types of railroad work, such as lining track and, in the case of John Henry, pounding drills into the rock or "driving steel." Workers mixed and matched improvised and pre-existing lyrics to fit the rhythm of the work. For example:

Take this hammer, huh!
Take it to the captain, huh!
Tell him I'm gone, huh!
Tell him I'm gone, huh!

Imagine John Henry swinging his legendary 20-pound hammer high above his head as a line began, and hear the ring of the steel as it landed on the drill: "huh!")

Assessment

Power Point Project on one part of the construction of the Central Pacific or Union Pacific Railroad.

Extending the Lesson

Activity#1

Have the students read one article from "The Railroad Man's Magazine from 1906 and review and report on an article to the class.

<http://home.mindspring.com/~railroadstories/rmmv1n1/>

Activity #2

This project requires students to look at their hometown from the perspective of transportation options and to determine what option, if any, the railroads offer. With maps readily available, ask each student to select as a travel destination a large city at least 500 miles from where he or she lives. Each student's objective is to figure out the best way of getting to that destination and back. Options they should look into include train, bus, and plane.

Activity #3

Poem on the Railroad

http://cpr.org/Museum/Ephemera/The_Age_of_Progress.html

Talk about what the design means and analyze the poem.

Activity #4

Man vs. Machines: What are some things that pit man against machines?

(Man has taken on the computer playing chess) (Man has changed the great American baseball game, Football, Track and Professional Bike Racing by the use of drugs) What are the consequences of taking performance-enhancing drugs? Are the risks worth the financial rewards?

Resources

Lyrics

“John Henry Blues” available at

<http://www.bluegrasslyrics.com/node/31>