**A Steel-Drivin’ Man**

By Scott Reynolds Nelson

The word went out quickly. It spread from hill to hill and from valley to valley. John Henry, the man who could outwork ten men, would go up against a machine. John Henry, known to all as the strongest man in the South, would drive steel against a steam hammer.

 All through the night people moved toward the mountains. Some were John Henry’s friends, and some were his relatives. Some were strangers who had only heard tell of the tall black man whose strength equalled ten. One and all, they wanted to see John Henry drive steel against a machine, and, one and all, they wanted to John Henry win. John Henry’s folks came, and his wife, Sally Ann, came too. John Henry’s ma cried and grabbed John Henry by the hand. “Don't do it, John Henry,” she begged. “Don't race that machine. Don't you remember what you told me once when you were just a little tyke? You picked up your daddy’s hammer and you said, ‘I’m gonna die with a hammer in my hand.’ Don’t you remember that, John Henry?”

 “I remember,” John Henry answered. “But I'm a natural man, a steel-drivin’ man, and I got to beat that machine or die trying.”

 The machine started fast and drove steel well into the mountains. But John Henry started faster still and drove steel deeper than anyone had ever seen. He had a forty-pound hammer in each hand, and he held the spikes between his teeth like pins. Running, he spat the spikes into the mountainsides and drove them home with flying hammers that looked like raindrops sitting on his shoulders.

At noon, John Henry and the steamhammer were tied dead even. When the sun passed its zenith and headed down the other side of the sky, John Henry pulled ahead. Then the machine pulled even and went in front. John Henry groaned, and his hammers sounded like great church bells. Soon John Henry came even with the machine. And the pounding of his heart drowned out the rat-a-tat-tat of the steam hammer.

 The day grew late and the sun touched the tops of the peaks. John Henry and the machine were still dead even. John Henry’s pounding heart shook the mountains so that the people feared for their lives.

 “He'll never make it,” the people cried. “John Henry’ll never beat that machine. He done his best, but no man can outlast a machine.”

 Now the sun was nearly gone. Only one red point glowed over the tallest peak. The machine was one spike ahead.

 “I'm gonna beat that machine,” John Henry cried. “I'm gonna beat that machine or die trying.”

 John Henry’s hammers flashed and rang like bells from heaven. He caught up. He went ahead by one spike, then by two, then three. The tiny point of sun disappeared, and the race was over. John Henry had won. The crowd began to cheer.

Suddenly John Henry’s chest heaved and his thundering heart drove him to the ground, his hammers in his hands. The people gasped.

 And then a great silence fell on the mountains. The steam hammer had ceased its rat-a-tat-tat. John Henry’s hammers no longer rang out. And John Henry’s pounding heart no longer echoed among the peaks like drums.

 So they buried John Henry in the mountains. They buried him with his hammers in his hands. To this day, they still tell about the race between John Henry and the steam hammers. And the trains pass by these words carved in the rocks: HERE LIES A STEEL-DRIVIN' MAN.