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TAH: Westward Expansion

Railroad Songs
Connections to Music

Objectives:

- To have students perform a railroad song
- To compose lyrics for an original railroad song

Background:

The expansion of railroads in the late 1800s helped tie the nation together. Working on the railroads inspired many songs. One of the most famous railroad songs is “John Henry” a real African American railroad worker who became a folk hero. The song tells the story of a tunnel-building contest between John Henry and a steam drill.

Strategies:

1. Distribute the song “John Henry” to the class. Give the students several minutes to read the music. Make sure they note all the features they know about the music and explain to them that some student may pick up things like key, and tempo and others may not have had that kind of musical background.
2. Ask students to explain what they know about the story of John Henry, an African American railroad worker. Like Davy Crockett, John Henry was a real historical figure who became a folk hero in tall tales. Point out that the story in the song is set during the late 1800s, when machines were starting to replace workers. Tell students that the captain referred to in the song is the foreman of the work crew.
3. Have students perform the song.
4. Divide the class into groups and have them make up lyrics for a song about the building of the

transcontinental railroad. They can set their song to a familiar melody and perform it in class.

5. Remind students that their original song lyrics should be based on realistic events and should include verses with rhyming lines. Students might set their song to music from another railroad song.

Standards for evaluation:

Railroads songs should:

- reflect real historical events
- include at least three verses
- use rhythm and rhyme

John Henry: Lyrics

John Henry driving on the right hand side,
Steam drill driving on the left,
Says, 'fore I'll let your steam drill beat me down I'll hammer my fool self to death,
Hammer my fool self to death.

John Henry told his Captain,
When you go to town please bring me back a nine pound hammer
And I'll drive your steel on down.
And I'll drive your steel on down.

John Henry told his Captain,
Man ain't nothing but a man,
And, fore I'll let that steam drill beat me down
I'll die with this hammer in my hand,
Die with this hammer in my hand.

Captain ast John Henry,
What is that storm I hear?
He says Cap'n that ain't no storm,
Tain't nothing but my hammer in the air,
Nothing but my hammer in the air.

John Henry told his Captain,
Bury me under the sills of the floor,
So when they get to playing good old Georgy skin,

Bet 'em fifty to a dollar more,
Fifty to a dollar more.

John Henry had a little woman,
The dress she wore was red,
Says I'm going down the track,
And she never looked back.
I'm going where John Henry fell dead,
Going where John Henry fell dead.

Who's going to shoe your pretty li'l feet?
And who's going to glove your hand?
Who's going to kiss my dimpled cheek?
John Henry's going to be my man,
John Henry's going to be my man.

Where did you get your pretty li'l dress?
The shoes you wear so fine?
I got my shoes from a railroad man,
My dress from a man in the mine,
My dress from a man in the mine.