



Video Story Transcript

JOHN HENRY

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://youtu.be/OMEMJO7eaNE>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

I grew up in Spring Grove, IL, a little German Catholic farming community about 60 miles northwest of Chicago. And my family has been there for about five generations; they came probably in the 1840's.

Growing up, I had heard off and on the story of, it seemed to me perhaps like a legend at that time, of a black man buried somewhere in Spring Grove in one of the cemeteries. And there was talk that he had been held in slavery in some time in his life in Tennessee. I probably forgot about that story for years and years. But when I got interested in family history and storytelling, I started digging around a little bit and came across the very person to come across, an 80-year-old man, Tommy Madden, who had been one of my father's best friends. And Tommy and another acquaintance of his, Jim Holderman, had known this gentleman from Tennessee.

They all referred to him as John Henry, which of course is ironic: John Henry is the mythical hero of black American folklore who won the race with the steam hammer and maybe that's why John Henry took his name. I'm not sure, but he had come out to Spring Grove, a little side-tracked town, come off of Chicago apparently.

In fact, the story was that he had left Tennessee, either been emancipated at the end of the Civil War perhaps or had escaped, no one knew for sure. But he had come out to Chicago, which makes some sense. But he had told everybody that he met in Spring Grove that he found things too "sportin'" in Chicago.

So he was looking for a quieter place, and he found the right place: in Spring Grove there wasn't much sporting going on. Nearly 200 people and four taverns and two churches, that was about it. But he worked for farmers there; he was a hired hand, a live-in hired hand. And he found one family, the Stevens family, that particularly took an interest in him, and he lived with that family and worked with that family for years and years.

In fact, he worked often in the farm house helping Mrs. Stevens, and the story was Mrs. Stevens said she just couldn't part with John Henry, that she would send her husband down the road before she let go of John Henry. He was so helpful to her, he loved children. There was a story that he would sit around the big dining room table, big farm family, and he always liked sitting next to the baby. He liked feeding the baby. And he would read the newspaper; he couldn't read, but he would hold the newspaper and make up the story. One of the boys, the youngest, I was told by his brother, just wouldn't go to sleep, wouldn't go to bed, until John Henry helped him take his boots and shoes off and got him ready for bed.

But there was more of the story, of course. Things couldn't have been easy for John living out there, the only black man for miles around. I remember this one story where they had a threshing and there were some day laborers hired from out of community to work. There was extra work to do when the grains had to be threshed, and a couple of these fellows were up high on a straw stack and they saw John below, maybe working on the machine, maybe oiling the machine, doing some kind of work beneath them, and they got the oil can and they squirted some oil on him as a joke.

I remember Tommy Madden saying, "John didn't complain, he never wanted to bother anybody." Of course, that was the internalized reality of being a slave: if you bothered someone, that might mean your life, your family might be sold down the river. But when the boss, the man who owned the farm found out about it, as they gathered around this big, incredible spread of food for the threshing crews, when the boss Mr. Stevens found out, he fired the two day laborers on the spot after what they had done because they humiliated John.

And old Tommy, who was 88-years-old, told me that story. I remember he was sitting on his couch there on a February afternoon and he had bib overalls on, and he was telling me that story about these two fellows that humiliated John being fired and he kind of raised his fist. I remember that he had a kind of gun metal blue nail on his fist and I remember him punctuating his word and saying, "That was the end of those fellows for what they did to John."

He felt a sense of justice there. I think perhaps the uniqueness of having someone who had been once held in slavery, the uniqueness of having a black man in the community, there was a certain deference paid to John. But I remember also hearing my relatives say that he would dance with the girls at church functions, and some of them wouldn't like that.

He, even with the Stevens family whom he loved and they loved him, they would ask him to come into the front room after dinner in the kitchen, and, no, he would always sit alone in his rocking chair in the kitchen, not in the front room. Things must have been lonely for him, but the story of course was fascinating, and when I heard Tommy that day, that February day when I got this story from Tommy, he said, "I know where he is buried."

This was new information to me. I heard he was buried somewhere in the county line, but I never met anyone who knew where he was buried. Tommy said he's in the old cemetery on Wilmot Road. Down along the fence line, over in the north east corner, you'll find John's grave.

On that February day I said goodbye to Tommy and left Wilmot, Wisconsin and drove along Wilmot Road looking for the cemetery and found it of course. I knew where the cemetery was. But I walked back and forth, back and forth amongst those grave stones that late February afternoon and did not find the John Henry grave.

And thinking about his life and even so far away from anything that would have been a familiar experience for him of being a helping hand in slavery in Tennessee, far away from family, there was no family that anyone knew of, and I thought, finally, now, his grave is gone too. Even the memory was gone, kind of punctuating the loneliness of his life or that aspect of that life.

And I literally had given up looking for the tombstone and was heading back to my car, I almost stumbled on it. You know, how you give up looking for something and you find it? There at my feet was a very proper granite stone. I knew he had died in the county home and, so, I had already concluded that perhaps there was no marker at all. Perhaps a wooden cross that had rotted or nothing to mark his grave, but there it was: a very proper granite stone that said John Henry Higler, and he died in 1947, the same year that my grandpa died.

The best of my memory was 1947, there on the stone. There was no birthday, because there was often no birthdays recorded for slaves, but there was a very proper stone and in front of that stone was a bright red, fairly new plastic flower.

And it occurred to me that those people who lived up there in that prairie, the English prairie, north of Spring Grove, had found a way to transcend race and culture and geography, and the monument to that connection that was made across all those challenges was that red rose, that red plastic rose that was there on that cold February day.

And perhaps that's kind of a metaphor for our country, our culture. Racism is solid still, frozen like the ground was that February day. But here and there we see these patches of red, these signs of life and flowering. Thinking about it, now with the last presidential election, we have kind of a garland in a snow bank, you know we got Obama in the white house. That's why they call it the White House, I guess. I don't know. So, it's still there in the old cemetery, John Henry, if you want to go, if you want to go check out the grave.