

Prologue: John Henry

Anybody can visit the Grand Canyon and admire that big hole in the ground, but can you boast of having visited the John Henry Historical Park west of Talcott, Summers County, West Virginia? We can. We have seen the original Great Bend Tunnel and the adjacent and more modern Big Bend Tunnel. We have touched the eight foot tall statue erected in honor of the legendary John Henry, the steel drivn' man. Magically, the moment we turned left off Highway 12 onto the gravel road into the park a train hauling over eighty coal cars chugged along the nearby tracks cordoned off by chain-link fence. My road-trip partner for this prelude leg of the journey, Frank, snapped photos of the train as it entered the tunnel. We smiled at this favorable omen, good karma.

Are you familiar with the legend of John Henry? Hope so. Sadly, too many of these legends are fading from our cultural memory. I applaud the Hilldale-Talcott Ruritan Club for trying to keep the memory alive with statue, park, pavilion, historical marker, and informational bulletin board. Although, the club sure could use funds to improve the park, as seems the case throughout our impoverished rural counties. The park does provide a blue porta-potty. The Great Bend Tunnel -- hewed out from red shale and flint by pick, hammer, drill turned by the shakerman -- runs under the mountain for over a mile. It's now water filled. Layers of plastered concrete fall from a ceiling of elaborate curved brickwork. The first C&O train to pass through the tunnel did so in 1872. The Big Bend Tunnel replaced it in 1932.

For years when I read how Jesus promised that with faith small as a mustard seed you can move mountains I found myself equally bemused and confused. Now I get it. Anybody can move a mountain. It ain't magic. All required is faith, determination, and a sturdy shovel.

Roberta Flack's version of the ballad of John Henry, partnered with fierce animation, remains one of the sweetest renditions of this national treasure. But it remains Woody Guthrie's raw version that inspires me. Woody didn't compose this ballad. Yet, as with many folk songs, each singer would add their own personality to the words and tune.

So debuts my series of reflections based upon songs by Woody Guthrie, renown mostly as having authored the 1940 song, "*This Land is Your Land*." You'll read soon enough about the song's closing unpopular stanzas, for soon I'll begin my cross country tour visiting sites featured in Woody's songs and sending these columns back home.

Why? Simple: beware false populism. Lordy, imagine if everything were decided by majority vote. We'd still have slavery. Suffrage would never have happened. Joked writer P.J. O'Rourke: "Of course if everything were decided by majority vote, in my house we would have had pizza every night." Majority rule without being subject to law is just another word for a mob. And we in the United States have had some rather interesting mobs at times. We are prone to these spasms. Why do we get seduced every now and then by authoritarianism? The shell-shocked are prone to following the louder drum, I guess.

Why these columns about Woody Guthrie's songs? Simple: we need today to hear Woody's take on things again, what real populism means. What this land means and for whom it means. Standing up for the working man, working woman. To fight for the guy and gal who don't get the share they've earned with hard work. *"I'll beat your steam drill down, down, down. Whup that steel on down."*

The curse of Eden
This may seem odd to say
But Eden is our real sin
We were never meant to stay
Where happiness is guaranteed
Bucolic fountains of wine
God meeting our every need
Soft, safe, cruelly benign

Nothing demanding our trying
Nothing there to sweat for
Nothing there worth striving
No horizons to explore
Nothing we struggle to earn
Nothing we fear to lose
Nothing that pricks our concern
No freedom to choose

Fruit always ripe and juicy
Us pats cared for, comfortable
Rousseau's damn monotony
We're better when vulnerable
Thank God we got shoved outside
Lest we ate the other tree's fruit
And ended up with death denied
The curse of eternal ease absolute

An eternity of knowing we are separate
Kindness in pushed into the wilderness
Freed to strive and fail now our fate
Lonely us tasting sweetness and bitterness
We ate the fruit that made us learn
The difference between good and evil
Just as toddlers must grow to discern
How life is full of suffering and upheaval

Sent outside is the price of being human
Men and women meant to be restless
Needing each other's encouraging union
Never being quite happy makes life precious
The trick is suffering and loving together
Richer and tougher for paying the price
Taking care of each other wherever
Yes, beloved ones, there's your paradise

Without white-washing Guthrie's deep flaws, we shall remember here what and who Woody sang about. Woody sided with the oppressed, with men, women, and children machined-gunned by the National Guard for daring to strike, with the dust bowl refugees evicted by dust storm and exploitative banker, with deportees not given the respect of their own names identified when in forced deportation their airplane crashes. Woody challenged corrupt politicians for falsely imprisoning union organizers, exposed Christian townsfolk for lynching a thirteen year old black teenager beside his mother, ridiculed a landlord in Beach Haven (landlord's son now our President) who kicked Woody out of his apartment for welcoming black guests.

Who best then for introducing my trans-continental column tour than legendary John Henry from West Virginia? John Henry, the steel drivn' man. John Henry: former slave. John Henry: a singing man who loved his wife Polly Anne. Legend has him being able to swing a hammer in each hand. The imposing statue of this imposing man shows him resolute, raw, determined, battered, brawny. He is shirtless and muscular. He leans forward gripping in his mighty hands his steel drivn' hammer as if eager to get to work, to sweat, to dig, to build something even if it kills you. Which is what the legend of John Henry sings about: John Henry the man taking on the steel driving machine. Dignity and manhood, even if it kills you: "*Hammer be the death of me, me, me.*" Henry ain't going to give in, despite wretched conditions, despite hard work, despite lousy pay, despite rich bosses. He's going to show them what it means to be a man.