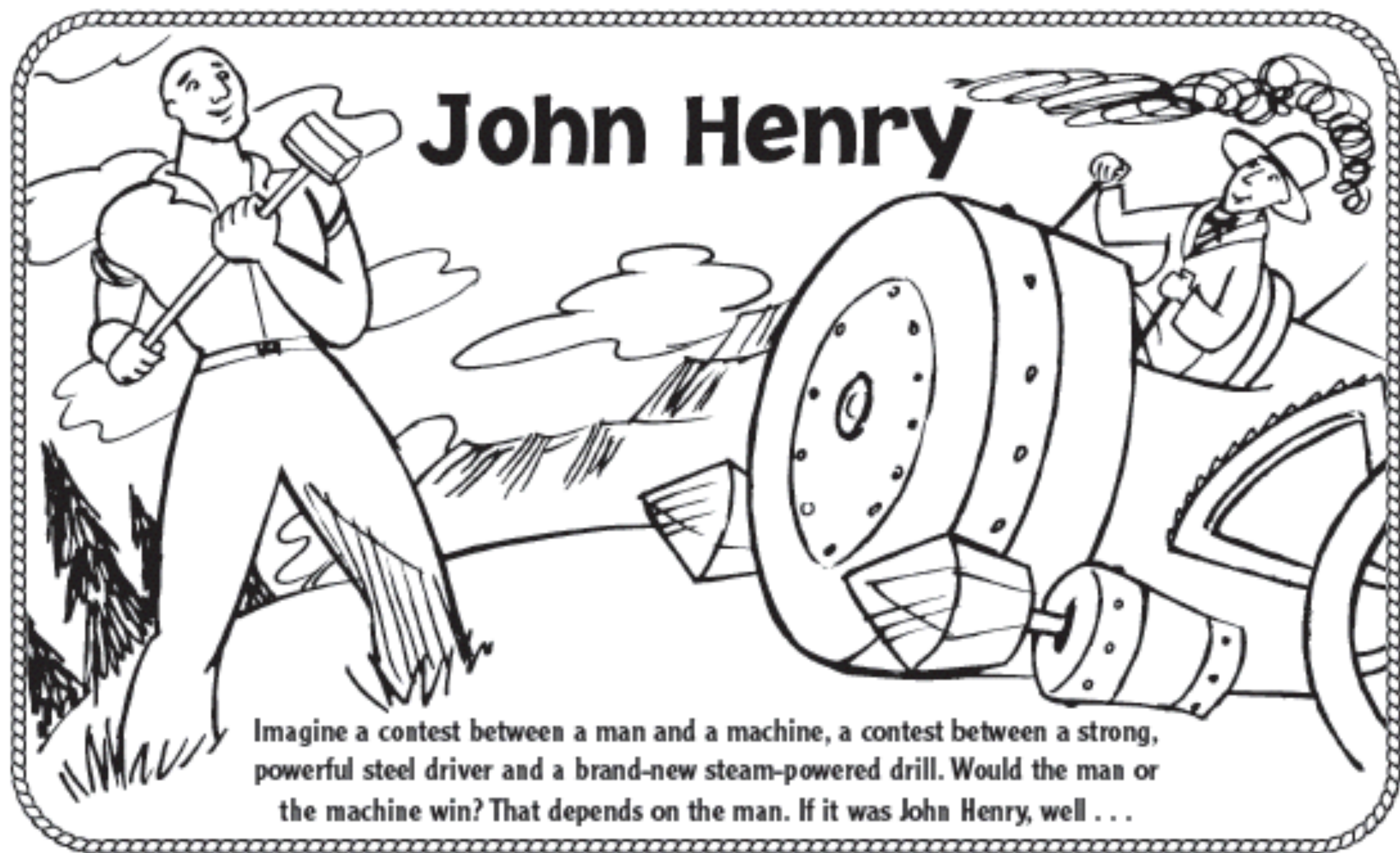


John Henry



Imagine a contest between a man and a machine, a contest between a strong, powerful steel driver and a brand-new steam-powered drill. Would the man or the machine win? That depends on the man. If it was John Henry, well . . .

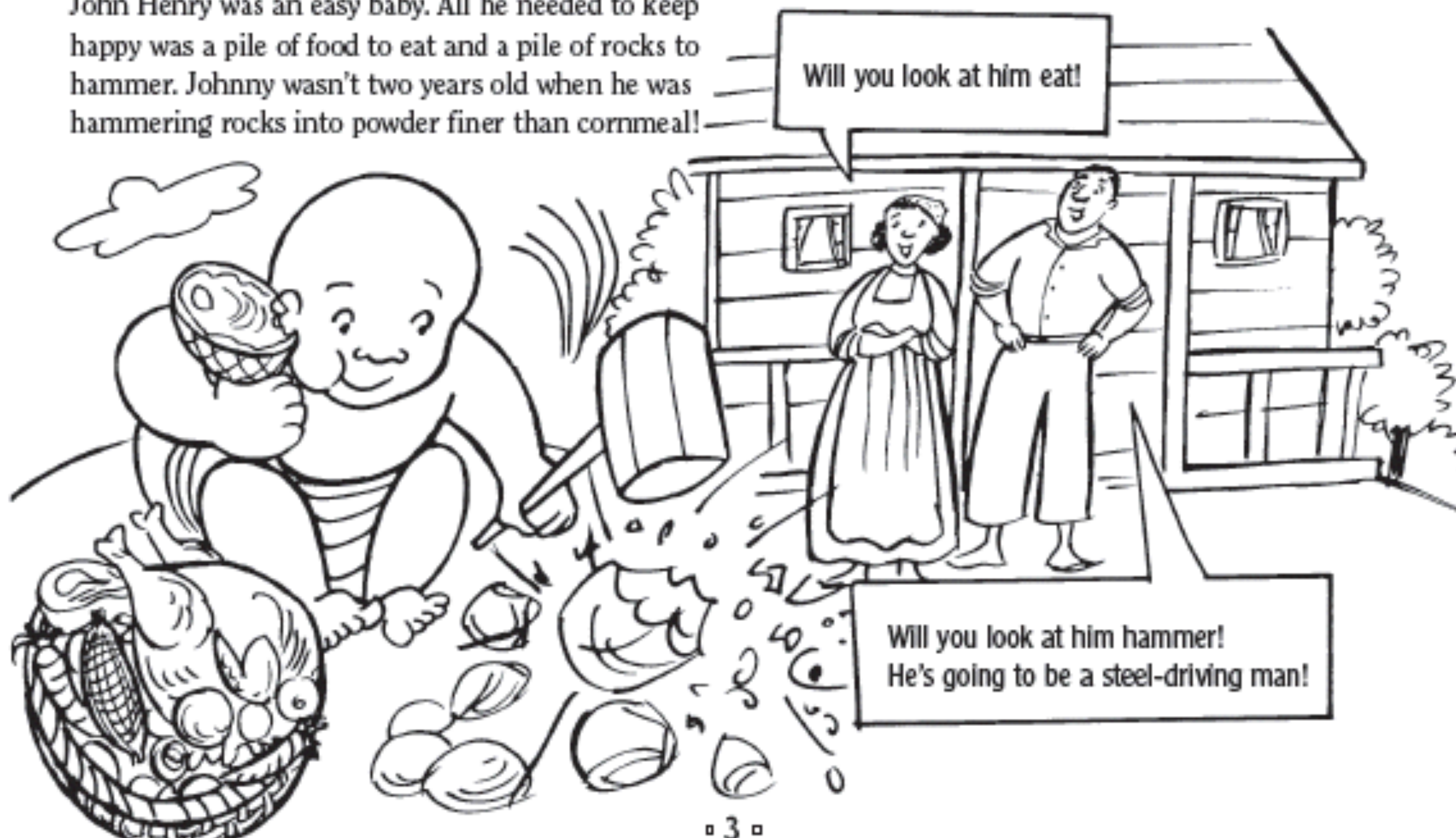
The night John Henry was born, lightning lit the sky and thunder hammered the air. Folks wondered if this new baby was going to be as big as the storm that welcomed him. As it turned out, he was bigger!

He's bigger than all our other babies combined—he must weigh 44 pounds!

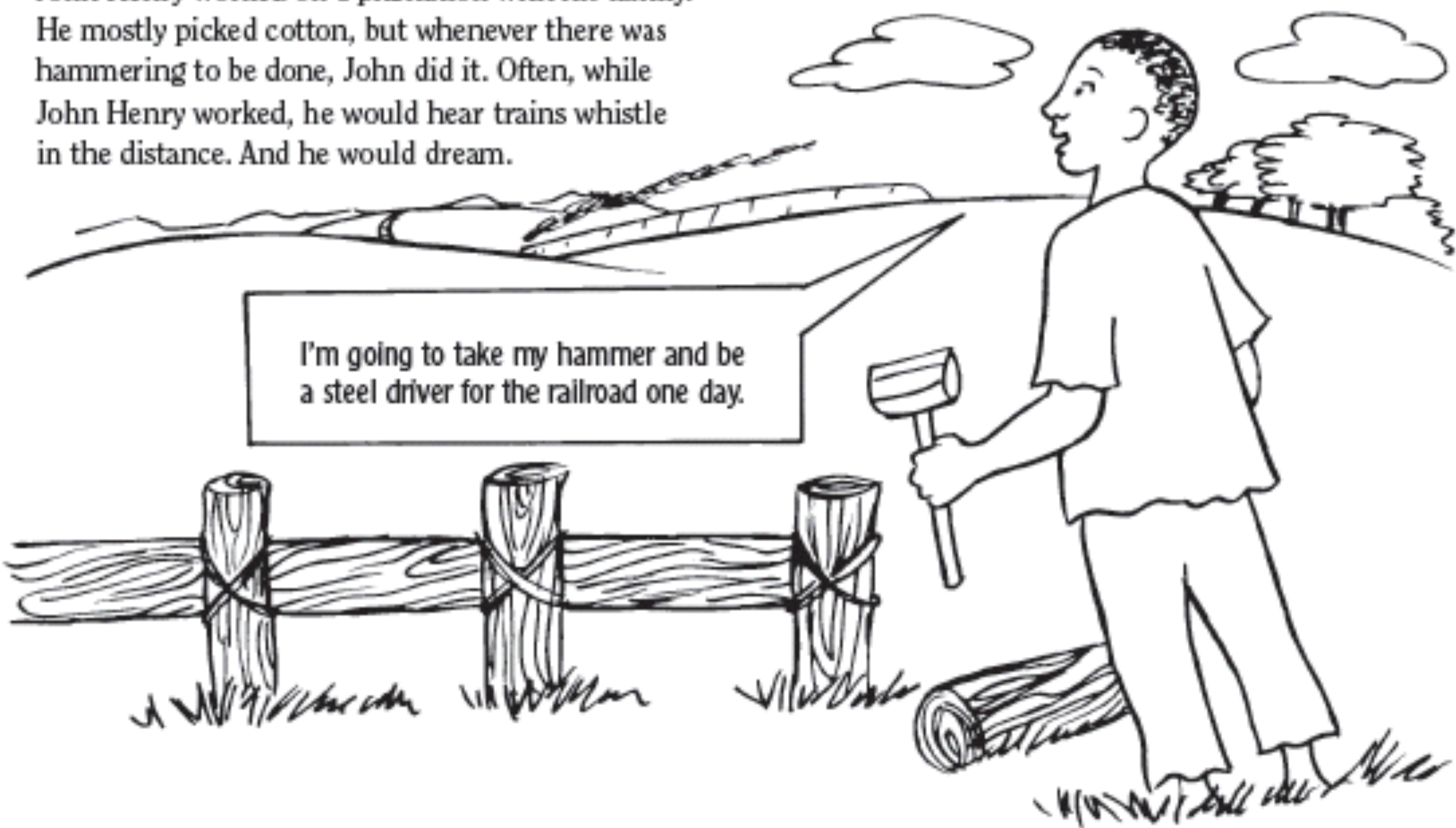
No wonder! Look—he was born with a hammer in his hand!



John Henry was an easy baby. All he needed to keep happy was a pile of food to eat and a pile of rocks to hammer. Johnny wasn't two years old when he was hammering rocks into powder finer than cornmeal!



John Henry worked on a plantation with his family. He mostly picked cotton, but whenever there was hammering to be done, John did it. Often, while John Henry worked, he would hear trains whistle in the distance. And he would dream.



I'm going to take my hammer and be a steel driver for the railroad one day.

One evening, as John Henry was hammering down a few loose nails on the porch, a stranger named Little Bill stopped by. John's mother gave the man something to eat and asked him why he was traveling in their neck of the woods. Little Bill told them he was on his way to work for the railroad. When John Henry heard where Little Bill was headed, he nearly dropped his hammer! This was his chance to do what he'd been dreaming of all his life.

I've dreamed of being a steel driver on the railroad my whole life.

You can't go, John Henry!

We must let him go. John Henry is a steel-driving man.

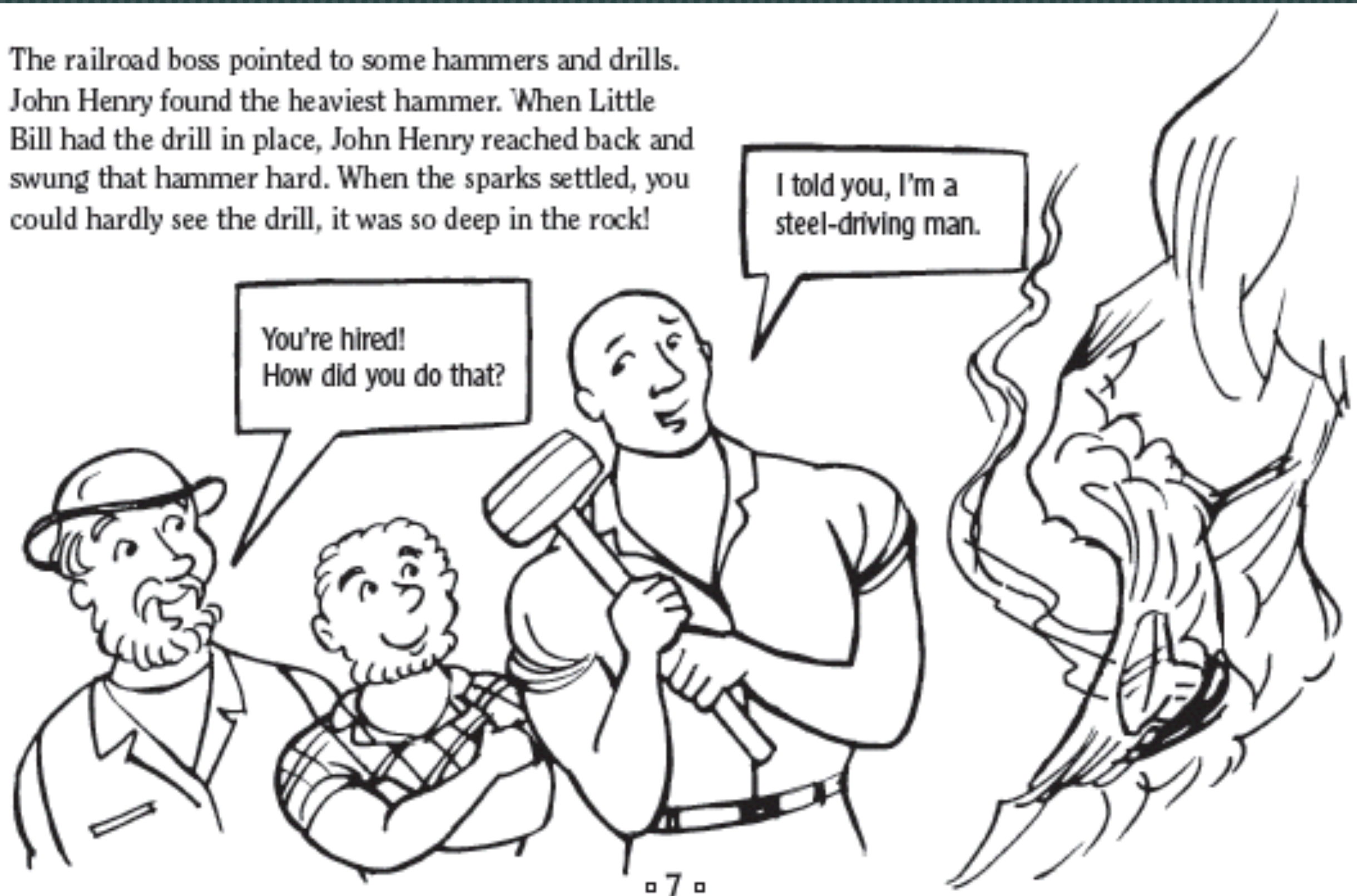
Little Bill took John Henry to West Virginia, where the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad was cutting straight through a mountain to make the Big Bend Tunnel. John Henry and Little Bill went to the railroad boss to ask for work.



I'm a steel-driving man
and I want a job.

First you have to show
me what you can do.

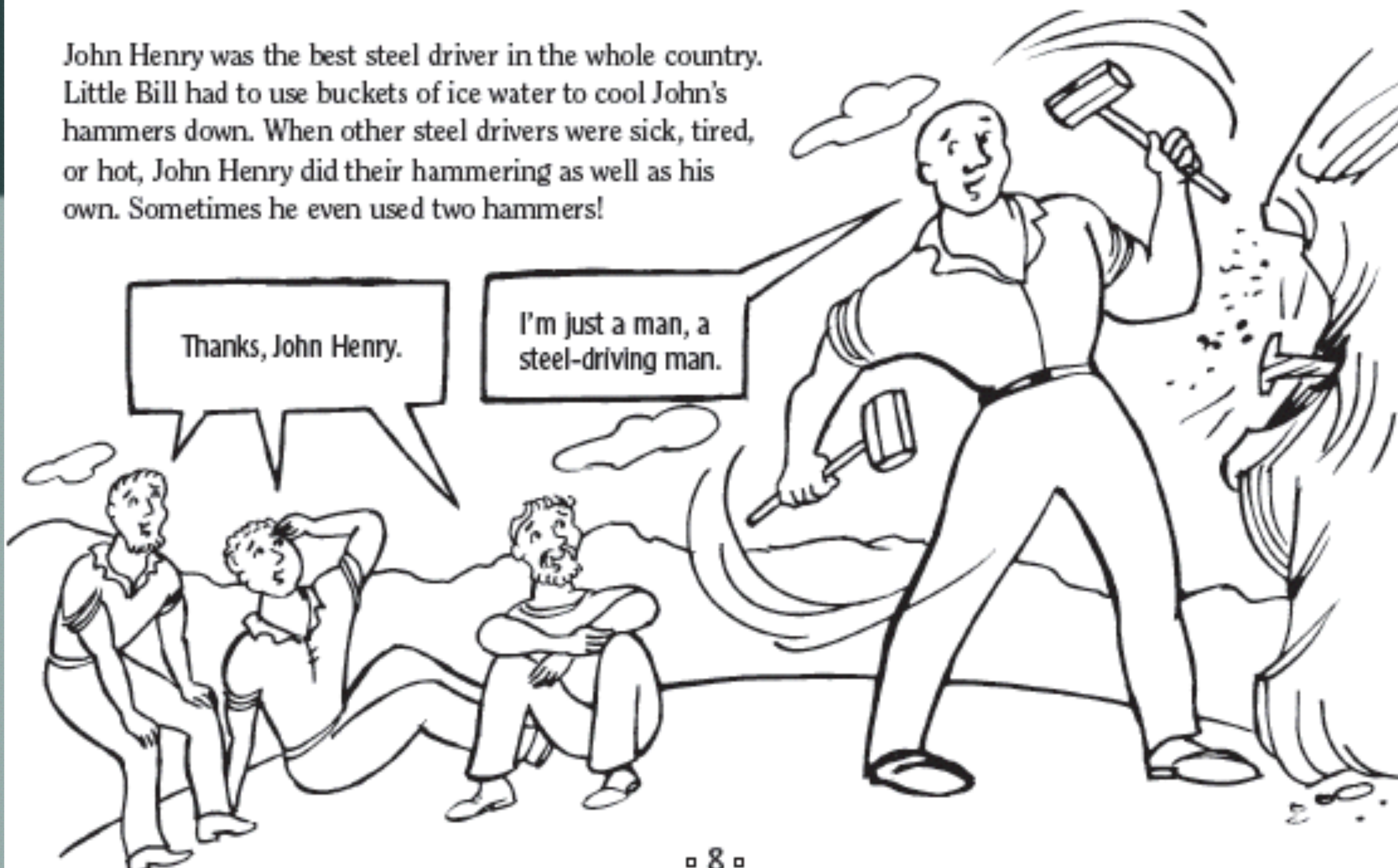
The railroad boss pointed to some hammers and drills. John Henry found the heaviest hammer. When Little Bill had the drill in place, John Henry reached back and swung that hammer hard. When the sparks settled, you could hardly see the drill, it was so deep in the rock!



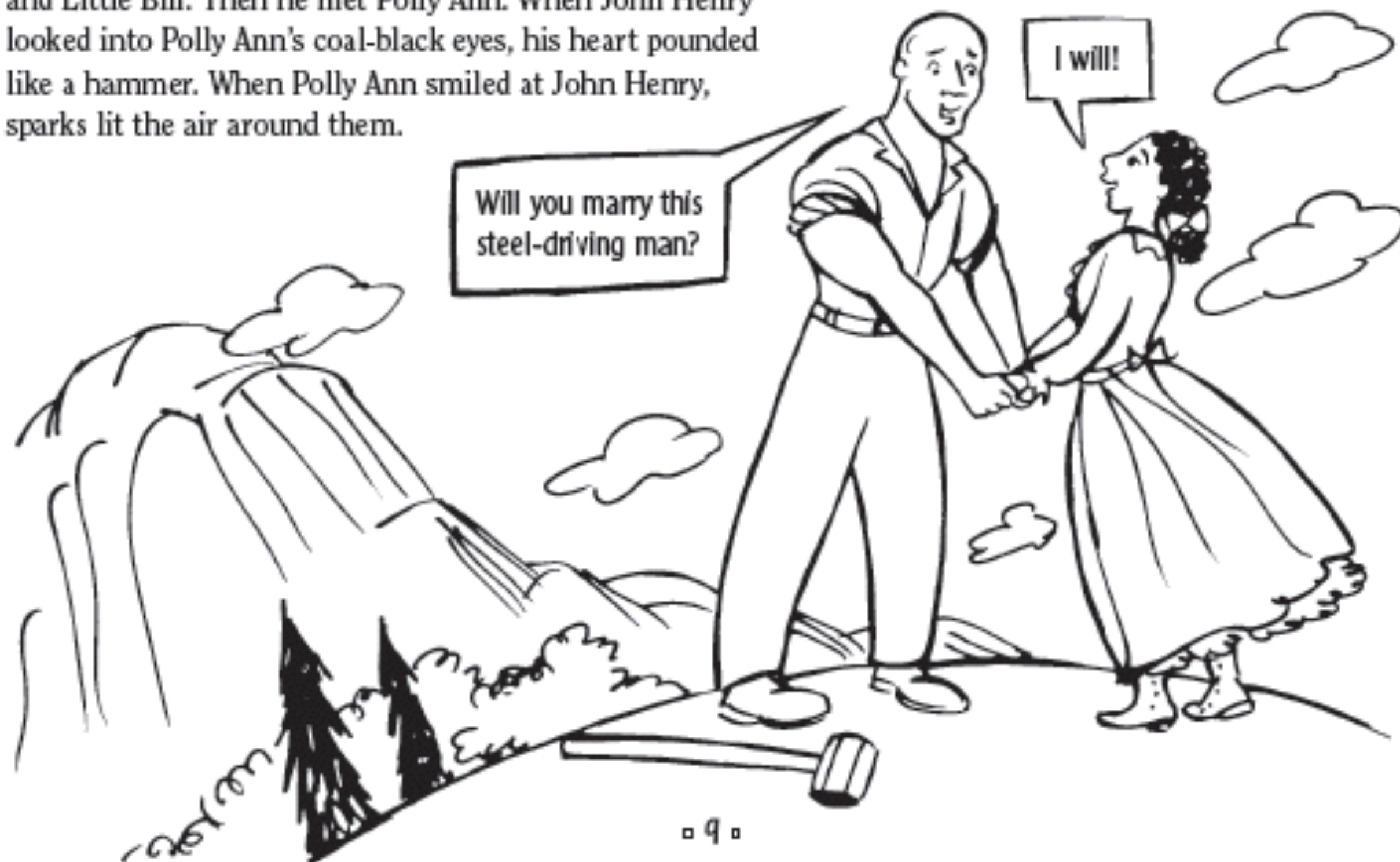
John Henry was the best steel driver in the whole country. Little Bill had to use buckets of ice water to cool John's hammers down. When other steel drivers were sick, tired, or hot, John Henry did their hammering as well as his own. Sometimes he even used two hammers!

Thanks, John Henry.

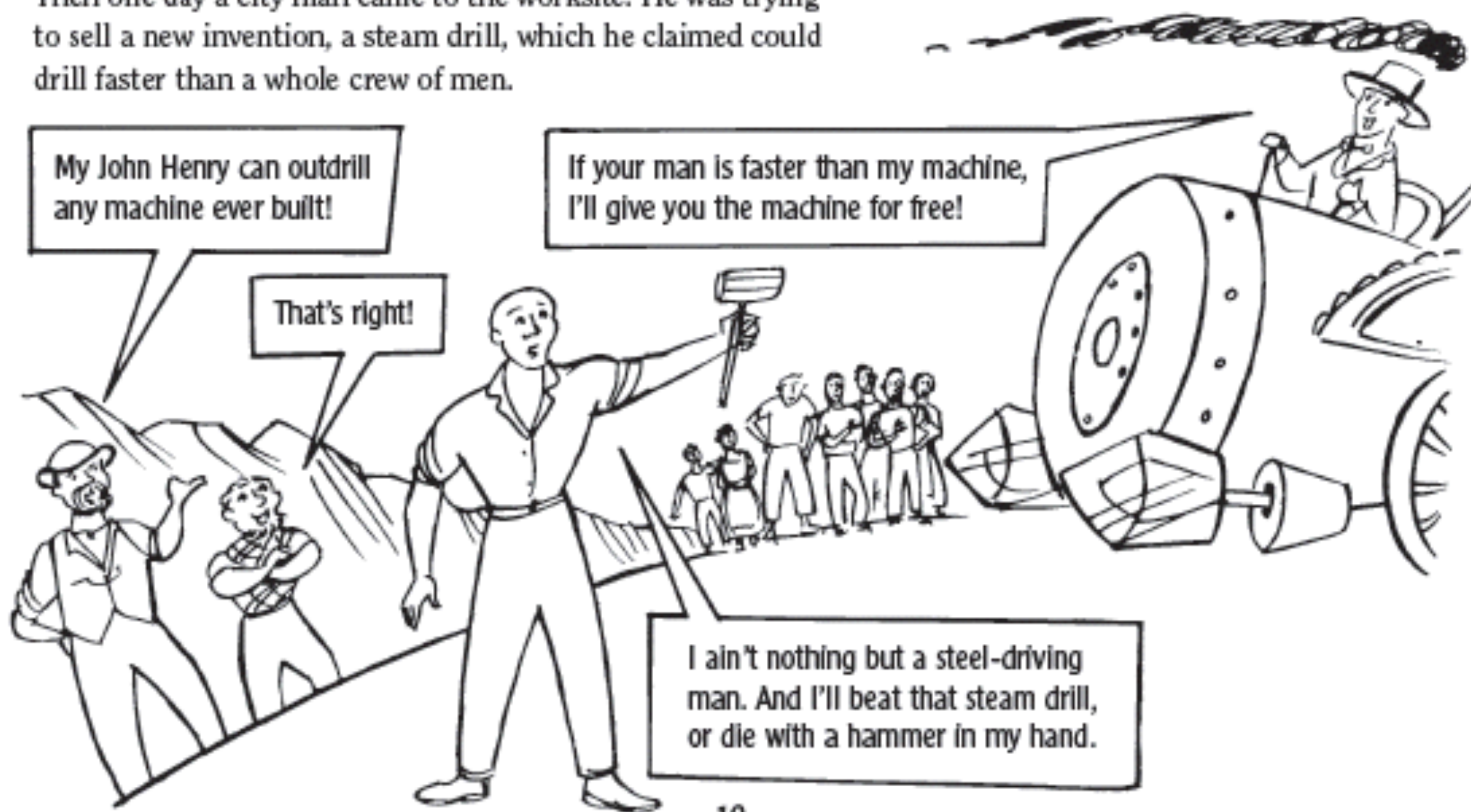
I'm just a man, a
steel-driving man.



For a long time, John Henry's best friends were his hammer and Little Bill. Then he met Polly Ann. When John Henry looked into Polly Ann's coal-black eyes, his heart pounded like a hammer. When Polly Ann smiled at John Henry, sparks lit the air around them.

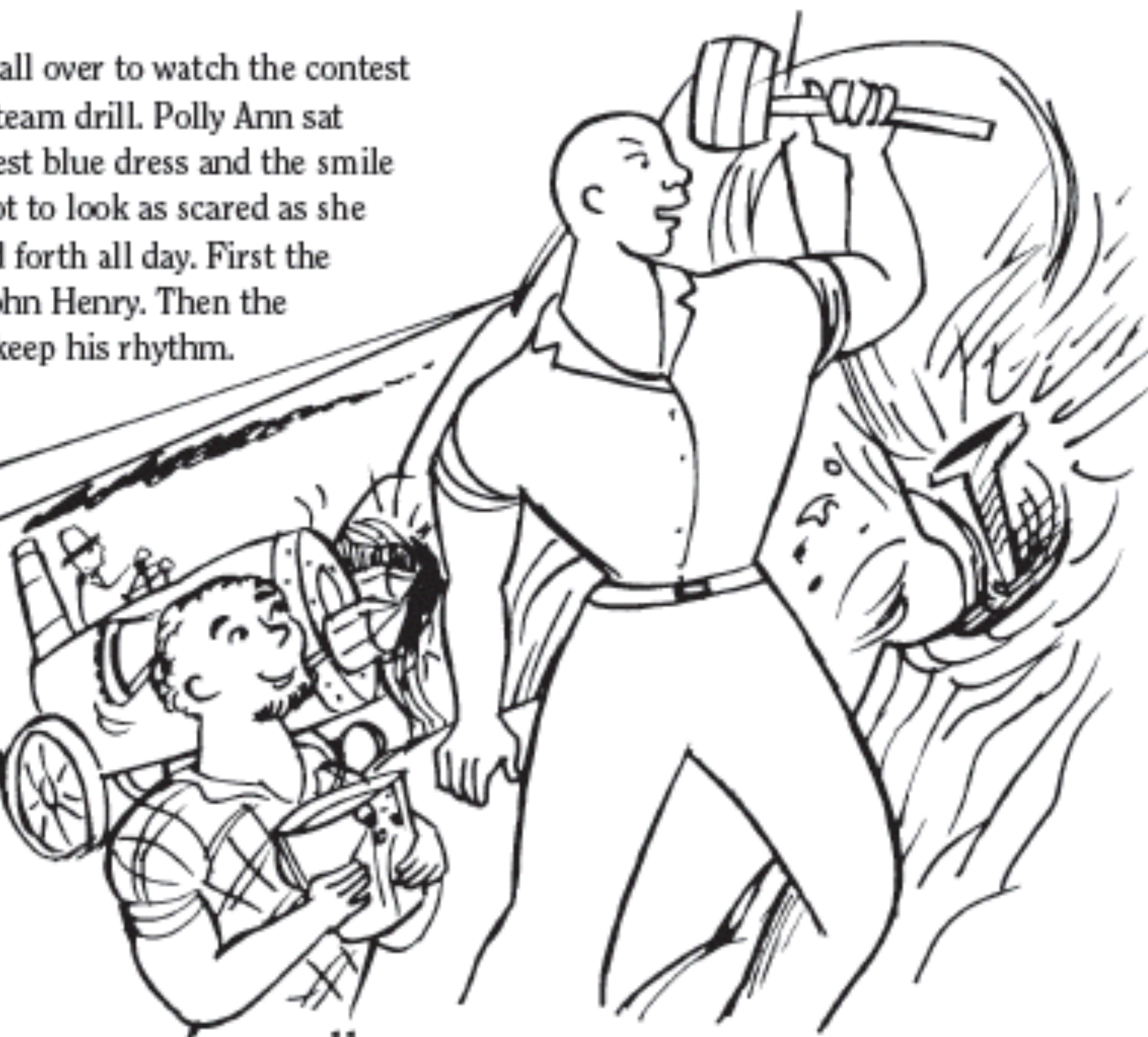


John Henry was very happy—he had work and a wife he loved. Then one day a city man came to the worksite. He was trying to sell a new invention, a steam drill, which he claimed could drill faster than a whole crew of men.



The next day, folks came from all over to watch the contest between John Henry and the steam drill. Polly Ann sat right up front. She wore her best blue dress and the smile John Henry loved. She tried not to look as scared as she felt. The contest went back and forth all day. First the machine was winning. Then John Henry. Then the machine. John Henry sang to keep his rhythm.

The hammer am a-ringin'
And the steel am a-singin'
I'll put the hole
On down, boys,
I'll put the hole on down.



Just before the sun set, the steam drill sputtered to a stop. John Henry gave one final swing with his hammer, then collapsed to the ground. While Polly Ann rushed to John Henry, the railroad boss and the city man measured the holes: John Henry's was 20 feet deep, the steam drill's was 19!



Little Bill handed John Henry his hammer. John Henry smiled one last time and died. Polly Ann, Little Bill, and the whole crew wept as the four strongest men carried John Henry's body to a hillside overlooking the train tracks. There they buried John Henry just as he'd lived and died: with a hammer in his hand.