

Sally Blue Eyes Meets John Henry



by Emmett Spinks

(Editor's note: Emmett Spinks is an airline captain by profession, a very funny guy to his friends, and a historian by his own claim. Around our airline, he's known as "Frontier's Mark Twain" — which is another way of saying that we question his historian label. Anyway, it is with pride but considerable misgivings as to its historical accuracy that we present another epic from Emmett.)



There have been some mighty tests of strength since this old world began. There was David and Goliath, World War II, the playoff game between Dallas and Green Bay and the fuel crisis, to name a few. But the one that always stands out in my memory was the battle between Sally Blue Eyes and John Henry.

The thing that really made this struggle so outstanding was the combatants themselves. John Henry was a huge, mean old dog of boxer and bulldog ancestry. One of the wags around town said you could tell he was a boxer 'cause his shorts didn't fit. I laughed the first time I heard this, but then it got kinda' old. Sally Blue Eyes was a large, good looking girl monkey with long eyelashes. She wasn't as big as John Henry, but you could tell she had a lot more class.

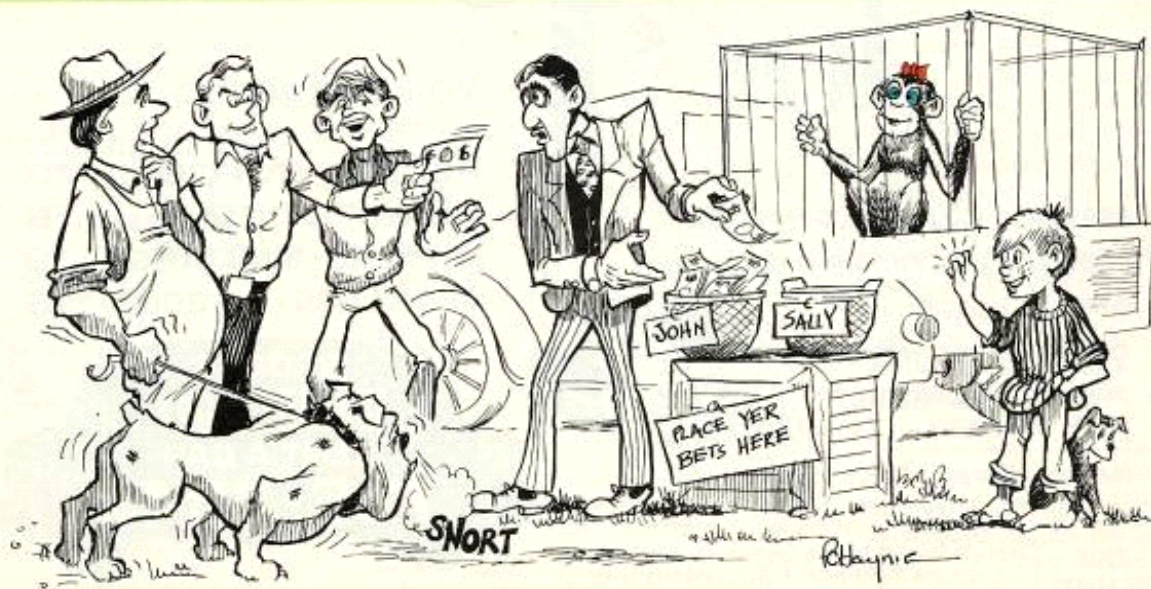
Weatherford, Texas, is located about twenty five miles west of Fort Worth, and Fort Worth, is about thirty miles west of

Dallas, which is the home of Neiman Marcus. Its not important that you know where Weatherford, Texas, is located, but just in case you are curious, that's where it is. Weatherford, never has been famous for much of anything, as far as I know, except it's the birthplace of Mary Martin, the famous Broadway and Hollywood star. Weatherford also claimed to be the home of "the world's biggest watermelons." They were mighty big all right but may not have been the world's biggest.

All these watermelons are in a way kinda' what-got that big confrontation under way. This happened back in the early thirties when I was just a youngster, but I'll never forget those Saturdays in Weatherford, Texas. The courthouse, which was the county seat of Parker County, was in the center of the town and formed a square with all the buildings built around it, forming a larger square.

If you have ever lived on a farm, you know that Saturday is the day you go to town and Weatherford, Texas, was no exception. Today there is an inter-state highway that goes through Weatherford, but in those days it was just a semi-paved road and more gravel than pavement and everybody drove a wagon with a team of mules. There weren't any pick-up trucks in those days for the simple reason that not a single farmer in Parker County could afford one.

All the farmers would bring in a load of watermelons and cantaloupes and maybe vegetables and would back their wagons up around the courthouse. Then they'd lead the mules over to a nearby pasture and turn them out. The wives and kids were left to sell the merchandise which meant they could visit the other wagons and talk and play, making it a pretty nice day for everyone.



The menfolk would gather under a shaded area nearby and would whittle and spit and scratch and swap lies and talk about what a mess Herbert Hoover had the country in. This was also the day they had the dog fights and I can tell you that they really had some humdingers. Nobody had much money but what money they did have was really bet on those dog fights. There were a lot of really fine fighters but it wasn't too long until all agreed that old John Henry was the undisputed champion. The farmer that owned old John Henry was mighty proud to have a champion in the family, but eventually he couldn't win any more money on John Henry because nobody in Parker County would bet against him.

This all changed one Saturday afternoon in what most folks thought was rather dramatic fashion. This was when the City Slicker drove over to Weatherford in the pick-up truck. And they still refer to Saturdays in Weatherford as "City Slicker Day." We knew right off he was a slicker before he ever got out of the truck. In the first place, he had a Tarrant County license plate which is where Fort Worth is, and it was a mighty big city even in those days. There were other things too, like his pickup didn't have any mud on it. It didn't have a gun rack or lariat in the cab. It also didn't have a German Shepherd or collie in the back but did have something else that really caused everyone to get to their feet in a hurry.

In the bed of the truck was a big steel cage, and in this cage was this large, pretty girl monkey with long eyelashes, which we learned later was named Sally Blue Eyes. Well sir, this city slicker swings outa' that cab with a big smile on his face and walks over to Grampa Hubert and asks, "Lived here all your life, old timer?" Old Grampa Hubert wipes the blade of his whittlin' knife on his overalls, spits, and replies, "Not yet, Sonny."

The city slicker slaps his leg and really laughs at this. After a bit he quits laughing and in a conspiratorial tone he tells a few traveling salesman jokes which I didn't get because I was only ten years old at the time. But everybody else was laughing and talking real friendly and then the city slicker says he hears they got some fine fighting dogs in Parker County, and he says he hears they got one especially fine fighting dog by the name of John Henry. Everybody agrees they got some fine fighting dogs and all of them agree that old John Henry is the best fighter of them all. The city slicker rubs his hands together and allows as how he sure would like to see John Henry in action. John Henry's owner kicks the dirt with his foot and tells the slicker that won't be possible. "How come," the slicker asks? "Because they ain't no dog that will challenge him", replies John Henry's owner.



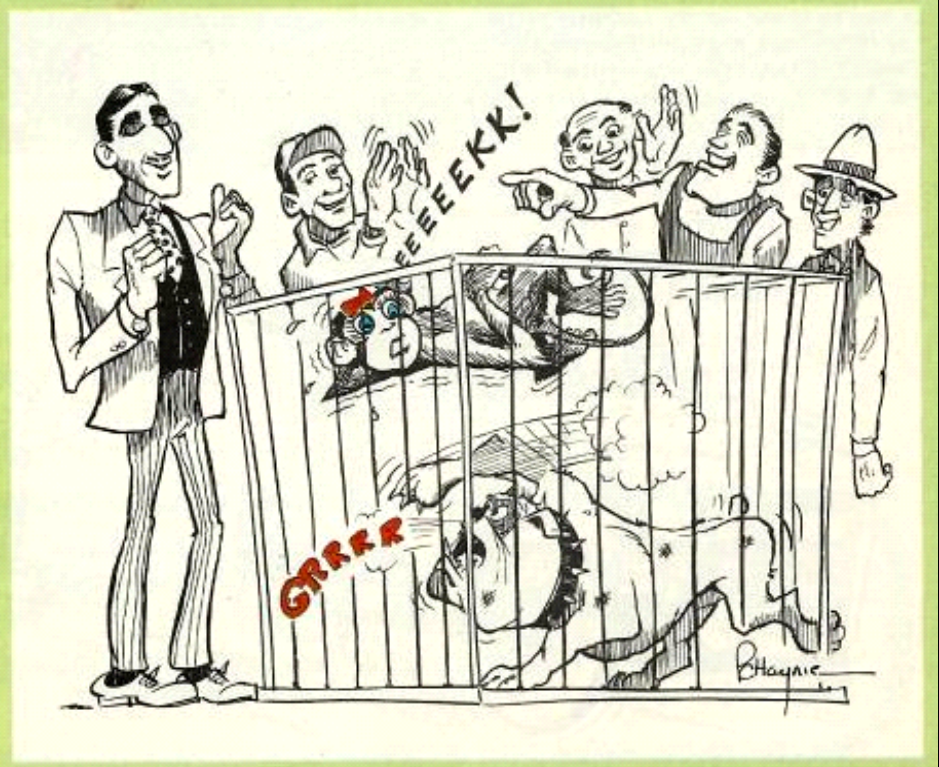
Emmett — "And he was only 10 years old," with his dad and sister.

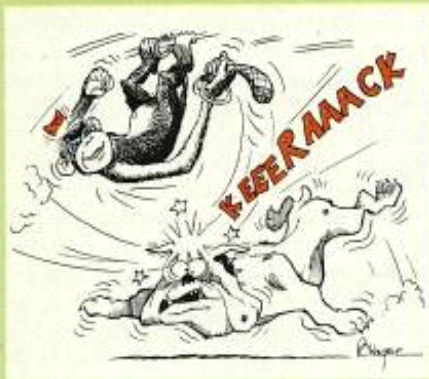
The slicker pushes his Stetson back, scratches his head, and scuffs the dirt with his toe and then he says, "I'll bet my monkey could lick John Henry." All the farmers look startled and then they look at John Henry who's just been lying there fast asleep and then they look at Sally Blue Eyes with the long eyelashes. They chat among themselves for a bit and then John Henry's owner says, "Sally Blue Eyes is a girl and it wouldn't be a fair fight for a boy to fight a girl." "And besides," he says, "old John Henry outweighs Sally Blue Eyes considerably, and he probably would just tear her into small pieces."

The city slicker says he's prepared to take this chance and not only that, but he is prepared to wager a modest amount on

the outcome. Well, I don't have to tell you that even I who was only ten years old can see it's the chance of a lifetime to make some money. All of the farmers are thinking the same thing and they are trying to act nonchalant and a bit disinterested so this slicker won't change his mind and jump in his pickup and run back to Fort Worth. They let the slicker coax them a bit more until the fight is agreed to and then everybody starts putting up his money. The slicker says he doesn't think it's fair for everybody to bet against his monkey. They remind him it was his idea and he just sighs and looks sad and says he guesses the only honorable thing to do is to cover all bets regardless of how large they might be. The word spreads like wildfire and in a matter of seconds, there is a big crowd and all of them want to bet on John Henry. The slicker says he doesn't have much money left to bet but since it was his idea, he will cover all bets until his money runs out which is the only honorable thing to do.

Well, the bets all finally get covered and I can tell you it was the biggest amount ever bet in Parker County. John Henry's owner rubs old John Henry down really good and then starts ragging John Henry to get him in the mood to fight. Old John Henry has slept through most of this excitement and hasn't figured out yet which dog he is supposed to fight. Pretty soon John Henry's owner takes him over and shows him that pretty monkey in the cage. Even I can tell that old John Henry is pretty doggoned surprised at this turn of events. Being the champion he is though, he re-





covers right smartly and lunges at Sally Blue Eyes' cage so his owner really has to haul back on old John Henry. Old John Henry has been fighting long enough that he has picked up some tricks of showmanship and he knew this premature lunging always excited the crowd. With John Henry lunging at the cage and his owner holding onto his collar, he finally tells the slicker he can let the monkey out of the cage.

"I can't do that," the slicker says.

"Why not," the crowd asks?

"Because my monkey might run away and not fight. We'll have to put John Henry in the cage."

They think about this a bit and even I who was only ten years old can see that John Henry will have an even better advantage in the cage. Sally Blue Eyes with the long eyelashes sees what's about to happen to her and she jumps up to the top of the cage and goes EeeeeeeEEEK, EeeeeEEEEKKK. I feel downright sorry for her since it sounds like she might be

crying. I don't really know since I have never heard a monkey cry. But I figure if I was in that cage with old John Henry fixin' to come after me that I would be crying, so I can understand how she feels.

They open the door of the cage and put old John Henry in and he just stands there real still getting his bearings, with a low, mean growl coming from his throat. In about two seconds, old John Henry lets out a blood curdling snarl and lunges with all his might and meanness right toward Sally Blue Eyes. She lets out a scream and hangs onto the top of her cage with her arms, legs, and tail. Old John Henry lunges again and she screams again. Every time John Henry lunges, it seems like he is getting a little closer. The crowd is yelling and hollering for John Henry to get higher and you can tell it's just a matter of time until we all collect our money including me who was only ten years old but who has had the foresight to bet fifty cents which is what I earned the past week picking black-eyed peas for old Mrs. Higgins.

Old John Henry lunges one more time and then the slicker does something that I still don't believe to this day. He reaches through the cage and hands Sally Blue Eyes a blackjack.

Everybody, as soon as they recover a bit, start yelling foul, foul. The slicker says there wasn't nothing said about Sally Blue Eyes not using a blackjack. "Besides," he says, "why don't you give John Henry a blackjack? It's perfectly all right with me." Everybody is just absolutely stunned. That is, everybody but the monkey is stunned. She has changed from a whimpering female to a tower of strength. There is a

look in her eye that can only be described as downright bloodthirsty. Old John Henry ain't nobody's fool and he can sense that everything ain't kosher, especially when he sees that Sally Blue Eyes is hanging by her tail and two hind legs. She's got that blackjack in one hand and is slapping it against the palm of her other hand.

Old John Henry recovers about as soon as anybody. You don't get to be a champion without pride, and old John Henry has plenty of pride, even when he figures it might end up in disaster. He growls one more pitiful, half-hearted growl and starts up on his last and final lunge. I, who am only ten years old, really feel kinda' sick when I see what's coming. That blackjack is just a blur 'til it stops right smack between John Henry's two big, brown eyeballs. KKEEERRAAACK, it went! I can tell you that if it had been mountainous country around there, that blow woulda' echo'd for at least two days. John Henry's eyes glaze over and just like in slow motion, he sinks to the bottom of the cage in a quivering ball.

The city slicker said he reckoned as how the fight was over and how he wished more people had of bet on Sally Blue Eyes. They pulled old John Henry out of the cage while the slicker was counting his money. Everyone was too stunned to open their mouths as the slicker got in his pickup and drove away. It was Sally Blue Eyes, with the long eyelashes, though, who added insult to injury. She was waving that blackjack with one hand and thumbing her nose at old John Henry with the other. Even I, who was only ten years old, thought it was just as well that old John Henry still had his eyes closed.

