

# **AMERICAN CALLERS' ASSOCIATION VIEWPOINTS**

**By**

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## **The Lesson behind John Henry**

### **“The Steel Drivin Man”**

The American Callers' Association in its attempt to be of service to all callers, dancers, and associations has provided current, timely, and effective information on new dancer recruitment, winning ways to retain club dancers, and pitfalls that drive square dancers away. ACA really appreciates the positive comments, encouragement to continue, and contributions from callers and dancers all over North America and abroad to continue these initiatives. ACA will continue to provide information that will help the square dance community recruit, retain and retrieve square dancers as well as encourage the dancers to speak out on the cumbersome dance programs.

This month's article is from Mr. Don Feenerty, founder of the very successful “Heritage Dance Association” and “**SQUARE4LIFE**” in West Virginia and **Ohio**. Don relates the story of John Henry- “The Steel Drivin Man” and points out how and why resistance to change is severely damaging square dancing. Don offers this anecdotal story to point out that unless square dance leaders learn to change with society, square dancing will continue to decline. ACA advocates that square dancing has the potential to be of

interest to all dancers and does not have to fail if we all begin to change our ways.

One of Don's favorite folk songs has always been John Henry. "He was a steel driving man, Lord! Lord! John Henry was a steel driving man." Don likes that song so much that over the years he has collected many versions, recorded by artists ranging from Pete Segar to Johnny Cash and even Bruce Springsteen. The song tells the tale of a giant of a man who drove steel spikes into the ground for the rapidly expanding rail road. He could swing a hammer faster and longer than any ten men according to early versions.

Eventually modern times caught up with John Henry. He was asked to make way for the new steam hammer. John refused. He also refused to accept that his hammer swinging may be obsolete; after all he was a steel driving man. The song goes on to tell how he challenged the steam hammer to a contest, saying that he will either drive the most spikes in a day or he will die with a hammer in his hands. He does, die that is, with a hammer in his hands, and we still sing of his glory today.

Where would the world be without the hard work of people like John Henry? In every aspect of life we need hard workers who are good at what they do, and who can lead. We look up to them, and we march to the ring of their hammers. The same is true with square dancing. On every level starting from club level to national and global associations, square dancing has depended on those who have taken up that old hammer and pounded out the way. They should be applauded as courageous leaders of square dancing. Yet

maybe it is time for them to lay their hammers down.

Don continues and argues that just like in the song times have changed. *Square dance leaders can stick to the old ways* of doing things and refuse to accept that things are different, or they can change with the times. It used to be that clubs could refuse singles. Clubs could insist that dancers had to wear square dance costumes, or be refused entrance. There are many rules of the past that the old guard still insists that we follow. These old rules caused Don and his wife and me to finally quit the club they started with. Don states that “it’s not just the rules; it’s the old way of doing things” that are hurting square dancing.

Don argues that the future is here. The future offers square dance leaders new tools and techniques of the day. It does not disrespect or dislike the old guard anymore than the steam hammer disliked John Henry. The future is simply here, and it will take over. The question is will we square dancers be part of it? That old steam hammer came on the spot exactly when it was needed. It took over, but John Henry would rather have died than to step aside and let it do its job. When we sing the song of John Henry, we do not praise his unnecessary death, but we do sing of it. We do this more so to let people know the futility of fighting progress. Don argues that peasants attacked machinery with pitchforks in the beginning of the industrial revolution. Don Quixote fought the windmill.

Is this how we want to be remembered? Do we want to be known as one of the ones who tried to hold back progress? Or would we prefer to be remembered for all the great work we did for our clubs and associations as well as, for square dancing? It's really not all that hard.

Let's sit down with those who want to do more for our clubs and associations and listen when they make suggestions. Never, never, never allow ourselves to say "that's not how we do it here." Give their ideas a shot. Try new things. Face it; it is time to drop our dress code. You can dress that way if you want to, but don't tell others they have to. Consider that people today may want to dance for different reasons than we did. Consider that they may not want to dance to country and western music. Here's a thought, disco dancers are in their fifties now. How about hosting a square dance disco? Sound silly? So did the concept of the steam hammer.

Lets all keep one thing in mind. We just want to square dance. We are all passionate about square dancing. We are not that far apart. Many of us grew up in a world without personal computers, but we have them now.

Younger generations don't care anymore about the old rules of square dance than they care about steam hammers or railroad spikes. They want to dance though. And after all

shouldn't it be about the dance, and not the rules. The next time you are presented with a new idea or new ways of doing something remember John Henry. He was a steel driving man who died with a hammer in his hand.

The American Caller's Association is very grateful to Mr. Don Feenerty for presenting this anecdotal lesson in square dancing. Don's willingness and desire to revitalize square dancing is praise-worthy. ACA thanks him for taking the time to communicate to us.

Any individual, club, caller, or association who wishes to communicate his/her opinions on this subject is encouraged to contact the American Callers' Association [Loulet@aol.com](mailto:Loulet@aol.com) or Dr. Patrick Demerath at [pdemerath@troy.edu](mailto:pdemerath@troy.edu). Please visit our website and newsletters [@American Callers.com/news](http://@American Callers.com/news).

Until next time, happy dancing, see you in a square.