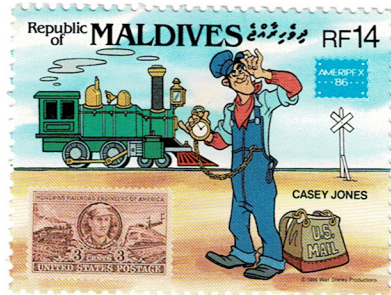


AMERICAN HERO FOLKLORE

Some American Folktales were actually about people who really lived. As an example, take Jonathan Luther "Casey" Jones (1863-1900) and John Henry (1848-1887). These were men who worked on the railroad in one capacity or another.

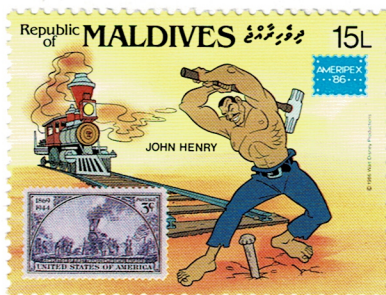
Casey Jones



Casey Jones worked for the Illinois Central Railroad as an engineer. He liked to always be on time with the trains and so would speed to make sure that happened. Unfortunately, he actually died in a train wreck when he plowed into the back of a stalled train. He tried to slow down but was going too fast, but he managed to get everyone safely off the train except himself. He was found with the throttle in his hand with the train trying to go in reverse.

Casey Jones was a hero and people like Wallace Sanders, an African-American railroad worker in Mississippi, developed a ballad about Casey Jones, the fallen engineer. Others also wrote songs about him, making him a true folk hero. His story was dramatized on radio and Television. In the 1950's his house was made into a museum about him.

John Henry



John Henry was born in 1848 and died in 1887. He was an African-American railroad worker. His job was to be a steel driving man. John Henry had been incarcerated in prison for theft and the prison would farm out the inmates to work for the railroads to help them build tunnels through the mountains. His job was to hammer a steel drill into rock for explosives to blast the rock in constructing these tunnels. He worked with the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad. He was a big man and very strong and could do more than any of the other steel-driving men.

On one particular occasion, a salesman came to the railroad trying to sell machines to them that would do this work faster. Henry realized that if the company bought the machines he and his co-workers would be out of work. He was challenged by the salesman to see if he could actually beat the machine and John Henry took up the challenge. At first the machine was two times faster, but then John Henry grabbed up two hammers and began digging. He beat the machine but at the cost of his life. Many songs were written about the incident, making John Henry a folk hero.