

The Legend of Old Pete

A FLORIDA GEOGRAPHY AWARENESS WEEK UNIT

Florida history is full of larger than life characters, each of whom contributed to the creation of the panorama that is modern Florida. One of the least known is Henry Peterson (1854-1934) who became the genesis of the folk character known as Old Pete.

According to what little is known historically of Henry Peterson, he was an African-American railroad worker employed by the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad in Port Tampa. Known locally as Ole Pete, Peterson was a giant of a man renowned for his strength and the alleged thickness of his skull. Pete regularly performed exhibitions of his talents for money. Some of his popular stunts included cracking coconuts with his bare hands and engaging in head butting contests with goats and bulls!

Out of his feats tall tales inevitably sprang up. The most well known was the one in which Old Pete decided to take a nap in the railcar shed and—probably unwisely—use the rail as a pillow. While Pete was snoozing, a switch engine pushed a couple of cars into the shed, one of which ran over Pete’s head forcing the railcar off the rail! When his coworkers ran in a panic to what they were sure was going to be the ex-old Pete, to their amazement they discovered a groggy Pete lifting the railcar back onto the rail. When his coworkers in astonishment asked how he was, he shook his head and declared that his head, “felt a little funny.”

Pete was also reputed to have used a ship’s anchor for a pickax, and to have once uprooted a large tree, dragged it home, and chopped it into firewood.

The real Henry Peterson lived to be 80 years old, and died in 1934.

Suggestions for puppets:

Old Pete normal and Old Pete concussed
Random spectators (which could all be one puppet)
A goat and maybe a coconut
Random freaked out railroad workers

Using the Legend of Old Pete as Reader's Theatre

The use of Reader's Theatre in the classroom is a valuable and delightful way to promote reading fluency while teaching and learning little known aspects of our state's folklore. The wider American vista has the well-known Paul Bunyan, and John Henry the mighty railroad man. Few know about Old Pete, Florida's own strong man.

Using the the text of the legend and the character templates provided in the lesson plan, the teacher will print on card stock each of the illustrations to be colored and cut out by the students. Extra card stock can be available for students to add extras such as scenery, etc.

When the illustrations have been colored and cut out, students can mount them on paint stirrers, which might well be donated by your local friendly hardware and paint outlet. Once they are affixed to the paint stirrers, you now have stick puppets.

For the text, some form of script should be utilized that students may practice reading aloud, although improvisation—especially for younger students—would be entirely appropriate. The script might be written as a collaboration among the students.

When the text is decided upon, students may take turns reading the parts as their “audition.” Everyone should get at least one spoken line, even if it's as an enthusiastic townsman. (“Wow! That had to hurt!”)

The performance can be as low key or as elaborate as you like. Performances can be kept in class with students swapping roles, or the class may decide to perform for other classes in the school. Music could be a delightful addition.

The legend of Old Pete can provide opportunity to explore an era in Florida history associated with larger than life personalities and deeds, and even a link into the history of Florida railroading.



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