

HENRY BUILDS A CABIN

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by D.B. Johnson
(Houghton Mifflin)

Themes: Environment, History, Literature, Nature

Grade Level: K–3 (ages 4–8)

Running Time: 8 minutes

SUMMARY

A bear named Henry is the hero of this story, which describes how Henry David Thoreau built his cabin at Walden. The simple words and bright pictures show Henry planning his cabin, cutting trees, fashioning logs, and assembling the structure. When Henry's friends Emerson, Alcott, and Miss Lydia object that the cabin is too small, Henry shows them the garden (his dining room), a sunny outdoor spot (his library) and a place by the pond (his ballroom). The finished cabin, as Henry promised his friends, is "bigger than it looks." Younger children will especially enjoy the colorful drawings with many details from nature. Older children will appreciate the end of the program, "About Henry's Cabin," about Thoreau and Walden Pond.

OBJECTIVES

- Children will watch and listen to an imaginative adaptation of a true story.
- Children will describe the sights, sounds and activities of nature.
- Children will define what a home is and describe activities that take place in it.
- Children will meet Henry David Thoreau and his friends.

BEFORE VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Ask children to discuss the title and to define the word

cabin. Have them share what they know about cabins, such as where, when, and why cabins are used.

Encourage them to describe how they would feel about living in a cabin instead of the houses or apartments where they now live. Then explain that this story is about a man who chooses to live in a cabin in the woods. In fact, his cabin is one of the most famous houses in history. With older students, relate the opening discussion more directly to Thoreau.

AFTER VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Ask children to discuss why Henry's cabin was so small and whether they think it was too small or just the right size. Children should recognize that the cabin was cheap to build, that it used recycled materials, and that it could be built by hand, with one person doing most of the work. Compare Henry's attitudes toward eating, reading, and dancing with those of his friends. Discuss how Henry felt about nature and how nature helped make his home bigger than it looked.

This program is an excellent introduction to environmental science. With younger students, go back over the program, stopping the frames to notice details from nature. Pay special attention to how nature changes from season to season. Compare Henry's cabin to the animal homes they see in the pictures, which include birds' nests, rocks for snakes, hollow logs for turtles and chipmunks, and even a beaver's lodge. Encourage children to make science reports about these and other animals and their homes.

Encourage older children do research in the library or online to find out more about Henry David Thoreau and Walden Pond. Have them write reports and draw pictures about what they have learned and share them with the class.

Connect the story to art, history and the environment by having students draw a mural of the landscape in the book and then to fill the landscape with objects they would find in the same landscape today. To get them thinking, have them study a map of the Boston area and locate Walden.

Connect the story to writing by asking children to imagine living alone in a small cabin out in nature and writing poems or stories about their experiences. Encourage children to include details from their own experiences in scouting, hiking, or camping. Remind them to use all their senses—smell, sight, touch, hearing, taste—to give their work a sense of reality.

Connect the story to art, math, and technology by having them design cabins or houses of their own. The designs should include lists of materials and calculations of costs, including the cost of labor. Visit construction sites or ask builders to visit your classroom to help children understand what goes into building a modern house, even a very small one.

Connect the story to American history and literature by having students research the biographies of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott.

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