Introduction

Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, wrote this letter in 1871 to R. L. Sanderson, a young correspondent who had requested career advice. Greeley, a great supporter of westward expansion, shared the national conviction that it was the manifest destiny of America to conquer and civilize the land between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans.

Greeley wrote, “So many people ask me what they shall do; so few tell me what they can do. Yet this is the pivot wherein all must turn. I believe that each of us who has his place to make should go where men are wanted, and where employment is not bestowed as alms. Of course, I say to all who are in want of work, Go West!” He tempered his advice with specific recommendations regarding preparations for the journey asking, “Can you chop? Can you plow? Can you mow?” Greeley concluded, “Having mastered these, gather up your family, and Go West!”

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. What did Horace Greeley mean when he wrote that in the West “employment is not bestowed as alms”?
2. According to Greeley what type of person and what skills were necessary for success in the West?
3. If you had received Greeley’s letter in 1871, how would you have reacted? Explain your answer.
4. America today is a mobile society and people frequently relocate. To what extent do they face similar or different challenges?
New York, Nov. 15, 1871.

My dear Sir: 

As many people ask me what I would do to save their business, I say, "Go West!" Not only to save your business, but to save yourselves. I do not think your business, in the West, can save itself. It must save itself by going West. If you believe that each of us who owns his place deems it wise to move there, it will be as well for me as well as for you. Of course, I say to all who are in country work, "Go West!"

But what can you do? and how can your society help you? Your mother, by coming to be concentrated out as an effective writer, but what of the best? And you too.
Go West! Can you blow? Can you move? Can you eat? Can you jump? Can you run? If you can not find such work or you have been accustomed to the conditions of living over you need these. On the whole I say step where you may; do as well as you can and devote every thing you have to moulding yourself familiar with the conditions and the duties required for the efficient prosecution of our daily industry in a new country. By having mastered these, go then up your country road. West! Emancipate Greeley.

R.L. Sanderson
[Signature]
dear Sir:

So many people ask me what they shall do; so few tell me what they can do. Yet this is the pivot wherein all must turn.

I believe that each of us who has his place to make should go where men are wanted and where employment is not bestowed as alms. Of course, I say to all who are in want of work, Go West!

But what can you do? and how can your family help you? Your mother, I infer, is to be counted out as an effective worker. But what of the rest? And you – can you chop? Can you plow? Can you mow? Can you cut up Indian corn? I reckon not. And in the West it is hard to find such work as you have been accustomed to. The conditions of living are very crude there.

On the whole I say, stay where you are; do as well as you can; and devote every spare hour to making yourself familiar with the conditions and dexterity required for the efficient conservation of out-door industry in a new country. Having mastered these, gather up your family and Go West!

Yours,

Horace Greeley

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