

Horace Greeley: "Go West," 1871

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?

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Image

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 New-York  Tribune.

New York, Nov. 15, 1871.

Dear Sir:

So many people ask me what they shall do; so few tell me what they can do. Yet this is the first we begin all must know.

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 scraps. Of course, I say to all who are in country walk, Go West!

But what can you do? and how can your bowing help you? Your mother, I infer, is to be counted out as an effective worker. But what of the rest? And you - how

Horace Greeley to R. L. Sanderson, November 15, 1871 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00608)

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you cook? Can you plow? Can
 you mow? Can you catch
 Indian corn? I need not
 And in the West it is hard
 to find such work as you
 have been accustomed to.
 The conditions of living
 are very rude 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 con-
 ditions and the desirability
 required for the efficient
 prosecution of our new
 industry in a new coun-
 try. Having mastered these,
 go then up your country and
 go West! Yours,
 Horace Greeley.

A. L. Sanderson,
 Westbury, Mass.

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Transcript

Horace Greeley to R. L. Sanderson, November 15, 1871 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00608)

New York, Nov. 15, 1871.

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

[*docket*]

R.L. Sanderson,

[*illegible*]bury, MA