Traveling West
By Barbara Radner
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During the 19th century in America, the idea of “manifest destiny” became very popular. Under this idea, many Americans believed that they were meant to expand throughout the North American continent. The idea of traveling westward to reach new land for farming, as well as to bring American customs and practices to newly acquired parts of the country, became very popular. As you read, take notes on the reasons why Americans moved westward during the 1800s and the struggles that they faced along the way.

Long ago, when people settled the United States, most lived in the East, and it was hard to travel west. There were no planes, trains, or automobiles. People traveled by wagon or boat, and it took many days to reach a destination. Although it was difficult, in the 1840s, many people traveled far across the United States from the East to the West. They were pioneers. They would settle in the western part of the country after a challenging journey to a new life.

Getting to the West was very difficult because there were no roads and there were many obstacles to travel. People traveled in groups, and each family would buy a covered wagon, which is a big wooden wagon with a kind of tent on it. It was small, about the size of an automobile, but it would be home for the whole family while they traveled to their new home. Each family would pack the tools and supplies they needed to build a new life in the West. They would have to fit all they took in their wagon, so they would bring only the items that were essential. It was dangerous to try to travel west without protection, so families would travel together, combining their wagons into what was called a wagon train. It was a group of wagons all going the same way. To prepare, they would meet with other families to plan their trip, choosing a route based on the travels of others. When the families started the trip, they did not know each other, they only had in common that they were leaving the East to start a new life in the West. They met when the trip began, and they would spend more than a year together, so they got to know each other well. Sometimes they would borrow tools from each other, and sometimes they shared food. When the wagons encountered a problem, such as a storm that caused wagons to stick in muddy holes, they would solve it together.

1. cars
2. absolutely necessary
3. Encounter (verb): to have or experience (problems, difficulties, etc.)
It would take more than a year to reach the West, and many things happened along the route. The families sometimes had babies along the way, which delayed the progress as the wagon train would stop for a few days to help the mother with the baby. Then they would keep going, persisting\(^4\) whatever the weather, because they knew they had a long way to travel and could not delay long.

When the wagon train got to the West, the families would settle there, building homes, starting farms. They would create communities, and instead of being partners in a trip they were collaborators\(^5\) in community. Those communities would grow into towns, and then some would expand into cities, from a wagon train to a metropolis.

In the next century, people built a railroad that crossed the United States. By 1900, there were many more people in the West, and thousands of people came west by train. A trip that had taken months now took passengers a few days of comfortable transit. The railroad brought many changes, and the pioneers became legends as the country developed into the nation of today.

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4. **Persist (verb):** to continue in spite of opposition or problems
5. **Collaborator (noun):** a person who works with others on a project or task
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies the central idea of this article? [RI.2]
   A. Many people traveled West to escape the dangers that they faced in the East.
   B. The Americans who first traveled to the West to seek out a better life paved the way for the many people who followed.
   C. The risks taken by people traveling West were dangerous and unnecessary.
   D. Traveling to the West was difficult and time-consuming in the 1840s, just as it is today.

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “Although it was difficult, in the 1840s, many people traveled far across the United States from the East to the West.” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “It would take more than a year to reach the West, and many things happened along the route.” (Paragraph 3)
   C. “They would create communities, and instead of being partners in a trip they were collaborators in community.” (Paragraph 4)
   D. “...and the pioneers became legends as the country developed into the nation of today.” (Paragraph 5)

3. PART A: Which of the following most closely matches the definition of the word “metropolis” as it is used in Paragraph 4? [RI.4]
   A. a society that contains mostly families
   B. an active, bustling city with a large population
   C. a city that does not include new technologies
   D. a deserted or empty piece of land

4. PART B: Which phrase from paragraph 4 of the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “they were collaborators in community”
   B. “communities would grow into towns”
   C. “some would expand into cities”
   D. “from a wagon train”
5. How does the author describe the relationship between the pioneers and the Americans who traveled westward after the railroad was invented? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

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Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Would you have participated in this type of voyage if you had been alive in the 1840s? As mentioned in the text, there were certain risks associated with this type of travel, such as a lack of easy access to medical care. Do you think the danger would have been worth the adventure?

2. What do you make of the fact that families often traveled together, which helped them get to know each other and forced them to work together to fix problems? Do you think that encouraged a greater sense of community among the travelers?

3. Based on the text and your knowledge of historical events, how did the American West develop over time? What factors contributed to these changes?

4. Why do you think some Americans felt the urge to travel to the west and be the first to settle there? What was attractive about the idea of being a pioneer? Do you think this idea is unique to Americans, or is it shared by all people?

5. The author emphasizes that it used to “take more than a year to reach the West” (Paragraph 3), whereas nowadays people living in the eastern United States can make the trip in a few hours by plane. In the context of this article, how has America changed over time? How have technological innovations led to those changes? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.