Reasons for Migrating West

During the 1840s and 1850s people read newspaper stories about a wonderful land in the Northwest called Oregon. Oregon was supposed to have mild weather and rich soil. Missionaries that had visited Oregon to bring Christianity to the Indians praised Oregon in letters they sent back east. Publications that painted enticing pictures of lush, available western lands put thousands on the trail. Overcrowded cities in the East caused others to flee westward.

One writer claimed that beets grew up to "three feet in diameter, while turnips were five feet around". From stories like this, people caught the ‘Oregon Fever’ – a longing to go west and start a new life. Some hoped to find cheap fertile land while other settlers made money in the logging business. There were plenty of trees in the Pacific Northwest and great demand for them in the East. The emigrants, as they were called, came from every segment of American society. Many were farmers, cattlemen and homesteaders who went west to build a ranch or farm in this new land of opportunity. The emigrants also included tradesmen, businessmen, journalists, adventurers, missionaries, gamblers, and miners. They were motivated by a variety of reasons.

Another group, African American slaves, traveled West to get their freedom. Runaway slaves were given freedom if they made it to these new western lands. There, they could start a new life as farmers or loggers.

A newsletter from a tiny settlement in San Francisco on March 15, 1848 proclaimed: GOLD MINE FOUND! By May, 1848, a few hundred gold seekers came to California. By the end of the year, they numbered in the thousands. Before long, people from throughout the United States and other countries flocked to California to make their riches in gold. Boom towns grew up very quickly. By the end of the gold rush, more than 300,000 people had migrated to California. The gold seekers were called forty-niners for the year 1849 when the Gold Rush was at its peak. Not everyone who came to California wanted to work in the Gold fields. Many men and women came to start a business. Some sold clothing to the miners. Others sold food or mining equipment. Others cooked and ran hotels. The gold rush lasted just 4 years. By 1852, forty-niners had mined gold worth more than $80 million!

Moving west become easier. The Oregon and Sante Fe trails were overland trails pioneers could travel. Canals were being built in the East and river transportation was improved when the steamboat was invented. Settlers could easily navigate the harsh rivers west.

Finally, many settlers wanted to go West because they believed America was meant, or destined, to expand to the Pacific Ocean. This belief was called Manifest Destiny.

Between 1801 and 1861, America underwent vast territorial expansion and settlement. Westward migration was influenced by geography and economic opportunity and the belief in Manifest Destiny.
Directions: In each box write one reason for migrating west and create an illustration to represent that reason.

1. ____________________
2. ____________________
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