

“Go West, young man!” —An Elusive Slogan

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It was the motto of nineteenth-century America, the watchword of Manifest Destiny: “Go West, young man!” Although it is commonly attributed to New York newspaper editor Horace Greeley, works of reference give the exhortation confusing and contradictory origins.¹ One of our most familiar historical slogans surely deserves more careful docu-

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Research for this article was inspired by a request from Fred Shapiro for verification of an entry in his forthcoming book, “The Yale Dictionary of Quotations.” He has graciously agreed to publish the article’s findings in his book.

¹See, for example, Justin Kaplan, gen. ed., *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* (New York, 2002), 489, 503 (espousing the John B.L. Soule theory discussed herein); Elizabeth Knowles, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford, 1999), 351, 544 (Horace Greeley’s *Hints Toward Reforms*, and Soule); Stuart Berg Flexner, *I Hear America Talking* (New York, 1976), 180 (Greeley in an 1865 *New York Tribune* article, and Soule); Henry Luther Stoddard, *Horace Greeley: Printer, Editor, Crusader* (New York, 1946), 93 (Greeley editorial in *The New-Yorker*). Instances could be multiplied.



Horace Greeley

Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, is widely credited with coining the phrase, "Go West, young man!" in an 1865 editorial.

Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

mentation than it has yet received. To that end, I have thoroughly investigated the history of the phrase. This article briefly describes one aspect of my research that may interest Indiana historians: the truth behind a widely held belief that the phrase was originally written by John Babson Lane Soule (1815–1891), an Indiana newspaper editor, in an editorial in the *Terre Haute Daily Express* in 1851.² I have examined this assertion with some care and have concluded that it is a fiction dating in print to no earlier than 1890. Before that date, the primary-source historical

²Anyone with evidence bearing directly on the Soule attribution is encouraged to contact the author in care of the editor. I would, of course, gladly receive communications and inquiries on other aspects of the research as well.



John Babson Lane Soule

Some claimed that Soule, rather than Greeley, first uttered “Go West, young man!” while serving as editor of the *Terre Haute Daily Express*. Soule later became a professor of ancient languages at Blackburn University (now Blackburn College) in Carlinville, Illinois, where he was also a Presbyterian minister.

Courtesy Blackburn College Archives

record contains not a shred of evidence that Soule had anything to do with the phrase.

The earliest printed account of the Soule story yet found appears on page two of the June 30, 1890, issue of the *Chicago Mail*. The story bears no headline and no byline. It is the third of three short articles under the general column heading “Club Man’s Gossip,” a daily collection of unat- tested but entertaining tales. In its entirety, the item reads:

“Do you know,” said an old-timer at the Chicago club, “that that epigrammatic bit of advice to young men, ‘Go west,’ so generally attributed to Horace Greeley, was not original with him? No? Well,

it wasn't. It all came about this way: John L.B. Soule was the editor of the *Terre Haute Express* back in the 50's, and one day in '51, if I remember right, he and Dick Thompson were conversing in the former's sanctum. Thompson had just finished advising Soule to go west and grow up with the country and was praising his talents as a writer.³

"'Why, John,' he said, 'you could write an article that would be attributed to Horace Greeley if you tried.'

"'No, I couldn't,' responded Mr. Soule, modestly, 'I'll bet I couldn't.'

"'I'll bet a barrel of flour you can if you'll promise to try your best, the flour to go to some deserving poor person.'

"'All right. I'll try,' responded Soule.

"He did try, writing a column editorial on the subject of discussion—the opportunities offered to young men by the west. He started in by saying that Horace Greeley could never have given a young man better advice than that contained in the words, 'Go West, young man.'

"Of course, the advice wasn't quoted from Greeley, merely compared to what he might have said. But in a few weeks the exchanges began coming into the *Express* office with the epigram reprinted and accredited to Greeley almost universally. So wide a circulation did it obtain that at last the *New York Tribune* came out editorially, reprinted the *Express* article, and said in a foot note:

"'The expression of this sentiment has been attributed to the editor of the *Tribune* erroneously. But so heartily does he concur in the advice it gives that he indorses most heartily the epigrammatic advice of the *Terre Haute Express* and joins in saying, 'Go west, young man, go west.'"⁴

³Thompson (1809–1900) was a member of the U. S. House of Representatives from Indiana, 1840–1843, and 1847–1849. He also served as U. S. Secretary of the Navy, 1877–1881.

⁴This version was reprinted almost verbatim in William S. Walsh, *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities* (Philadelphia, 1892), 1083–84, apparently its earliest appearance in book form. The quotation marks in the quoted passage are as they appear in the original, as is the reversal of Soule's middle initials.

The *Terre Haute Wabash Weekly Express*, one of the papers that Soule had edited in 1851, reprinted the tale in its July 18, 1890, edition, beneath the headlines: “NEWS ROUND ABOUT TOWN. The Express Originated the Phrase Generally Credited to Greeley. JOHN L. B. SOULE WROTE ‘GO WEST YOUNG MAN.’ Colonel Thompson’s Part in the Incident—Other Local News.”

At the conclusion of the story, which the paper correctly attributed to the *Mail*, the editors added:

Colonel Thompson was shown the above last night. He said that he did not remember the incident, but frequently he advised Mr. Soule to seek a wider field for his abilities. Mr. Soule is now living at Evanston, Ill., where for a number of years he was professor in the college there.⁵

If this story is true (a proposition that Thompson’s recollection gives ample reason to doubt), we ought to be able to find both the original editorial and Greeley’s reprint. There is no independent evidence, however, that either ever existed.

The *Terre Haute Daily Express* and its sister publication the *Wabash Weekly Express*, including the issues published during 1851, are held by the Indiana State Library (ISL). Some issues are also available on microfilm in the Library of Congress. Both were edited by Soule in 1851. On two separate occasions the 1851 issues at the ISL were searched for Soule’s editorial; both searches proved fruitless. The first, undertaken in 1948, is evidenced only by a note in the library’s files from an unnamed researcher that he or she could find no evidence of the phrase in that year’s issues. The second was undertaken in 1988 by John L. Selch, then the ISL’s newspaper librarian. A memo by Selch in the library’s files reads as follows (the bracketed *sic* insert is mine; the bracketed “are” insert is Selch’s):

John B.L. Soule served as editor of the *Terre Haute Daily Express* Aug. 25, 1851 (V. 1 # 91) to Aug. 31, 1851 (V. 1 #149) [*sic*—probably October 31] and *Weekly Wabash Express* Aug. 27, 1851

⁵*Terre Haute Wabash Weekly Express*, July 18, 1890.

(V. 10 #37) to Nov. 5, 1851 (V. 10 #46). Mr. David Danaldson owned the papers and employed Mr. Soule as editor and Isaac Brown as printer. The daily edition was not a success financially and Mr. Danaldson closed the daily edition on Oct. 31, 1851, but continued to publish the Weekly Wabash Express.⁶

The citation I believe to be the origin of Greeley's reputed remark is as follows:

The Oregon fever has broken out in Iowa and large numbers of Iowa farmers there [are] anxious to sell out and "go west."

This item appears as one in a column of short items that can best be described as "filler." The item immediately preceding it reads: "J. Smead, Esq., of Cincinnati, has contributed a thousand dollars to the 'Kossuth Fund.'" Following it one reads that "The widow of Lopez is at present in Paris, having been separated from him for a long time. She belongs to a wealthy family in Cuba."⁷

By no stretch of the imagination could this be described as a "column editorial," as the *Chicago Mail* story suggests. Greeley is absent, though the original story says he was mentioned. There is no discussion of "the opportunities offered to young men by the West," nor is "go west" followed by the crucial "young man." Finally, it is hard to imagine that this sentence was anywhere near Greeley-ish enough to win the bet with Thompson.

It is implausible that a single-sentence item in the *Terre Haute Daily Express* and the *Wabash Weekly Express*, which happens to include the words "go west," is the true origin of the phrase "Go west, young man!" or one of its variations. It is inconceivable that Greeley would reprint this single sentence and then append the supposed footnote. This item bears little resemblance to the scenario described in the original story and cannot be what the author of that story was referring to. And there is no other candidate.⁸

⁶"Vigo County Newspaper History," in the custody of Darrol Pierson, Indiana State Library.

⁷*Terre Haute Daily Express*, Oct. 23, 1851, p. 2, c. 4, and the *Weekly Wabash Express*, Oct. 24, 1851, p. 2, c. 3.

⁸It is worth adding that both the Indiana State Library in Indianapolis and the Vigo County Library in Terre Haute maintain a file of items relating to this editorial. Librarians and researchers at both sites have searched their records off and on for many years, and neither library has located anything about the Soule story that predates 1890.

The other end of the trail has also proved fruitless. Only one of the fourteen biographies of Greeley and numerous reference works that I scoured even purports to give a primary-source citation to Greeley's supposed protestations in the *New York Tribune*: Glyndon van Deusen's *Horace Greeley: Nineteenth-Century Crusader* (Philadelphia, 1953). Van Deusen briefly asserts (p. 173) that an 1851 Soule editorial in the *Terre Haute Daily Express* was the original source of "Go West, young man!" His footnote (p. 176, n. 44) cites the September 1853 issues of the *New York Tribune*, "passim." Two careful searches through every September 1853 issue of the *Tribune* have yielded no mention of Soule, "Go West, young man!," the *Terre Haute Daily Express*, the *Wabash Weekly Express*, or anything else remotely relevant to the topic.⁹

I submit that the 1890 article is most plausibly interpreted as a fiction intended to entertain the readers of the *Chicago Mail*. That article is the only known source of the Soule theory outside of a secondary work of reference. To put the matter in the starkest possible terms, we have on the one hand a mass of primary authority from which Soule is consistently and conspicuously absent, and on the other hand a single anonymous account of an unnamed individual telling the Soule story (with verbatim quotations from a conversation and two newspaper articles) in an unnamed bar somewhere in Chicago forty years after the fact. It is also a story that one of its two principal actors did not confirm.

So is Greeley the source after all? Probably, but proof is maddeningly elusive. I have not been able to find any writing by Greeley where this exact phrase appears. Suzanne Schulze, author of *Horace Greeley: A Bio-Bibliography*, who has read perhaps more of Greeley's writings than any person alive, told me that she might have seen the phrase somewhere therein, but was not sure; and she could not give a citation to any particular work.¹⁰

Part of the reason for the endurance of the attribution of this well-

⁹Van Deusen also cites *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and the "Harrison Howard correspondence," also "passim." Greeley's correspondence with Harrison Howard is in the Collection of Regional History at Cornell University, with copies at the University of Rochester. These letters are also devoid of anything relevant. It is significant that Soule finds no mention in Greeley's autobiography, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York, 1868). Biographies of Soule are also silent about the slogan. See George Bancroft Griffith, ed., *The Poets of Maine* (Portland, Maine, 1888), 183; G. T. Ridlon Sr., *A Contribution to the History, Biography and Genealogy of the Families Named Soule, Sowle and Soulis* (2 vols., Lewiston, Maine, 1926), vol. 1.

¹⁰Suzanne Schulze, *Horace Greeley: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York, 1992); Schulze, telephone conversation with author, October 19, 2002.

worn phrase to Greeley is its closeness to his actual writings. Among the quotes that most nearly match it are the following, all written by Greeley:

We earnestly urge upon all such [returning Civil War veterans] to turn their faces Westward and colonize the public lands.¹¹

O, deceive not yourselves thus, young men! To the rightly constituted Man, there always is, there always must be, opportunity.¹²

Fly, scatter through the country—go to the Great West.¹³

I hold that tens of thousands, who are now barely holding on at the East, might thus place themselves on the high road to competence and ultimate independence at the West.¹⁴

Finally, James Parton's *The Life of Horace Greeley, Editor of the New York Tribune* (1855) quotes the editor (without citation) as saying:

'I want to go into business,' is the aspiration of our young men. . . . 'Friend,' we answer to many, . . . 'turn your face to the Great West, and there build up a home and fortune.'¹⁵

The earliest printed occurrence of the actual phrase so far discovered is found in the August 20, 1870, issue of the magazine *Pulchinello*, in a piece titled "The Mystery of Mr. E. Drood: An Adaptation," by Orpheus C. Kerr:

As for you, an American boy, why don't you go to h—I mean to the West. Go West, young man! Buy a good, stout farming outfit, two

¹¹"The Homestead Act" (editorial), *New York Tribune*, July 13, 1865.

¹²Horace Greeley, *Hints Toward Reforms in Lectures, Addresses, and Other Writings* (New York, 1850), 146.

¹³Horace Greeley, "The Prospects of Industry," *The New-Yorker* (June 3, 1837), 169. The context of the advice was not opportunities in the West but the collapse of New York City's economy.

¹⁴Horace Greeley, "Migration—Colonization—Homes," *Wood's Household Magazine* (May 1872), 209–11.

¹⁵James Parton, *The Life of Horace Greeley, Editor of the New York Tribune* (New York, 1855), 413–14.

or three serviceable horses, or mules, a portable house made in sections, a few cattle, a case of fever medicine and then go out to the far West upon Government-land. You'd better go to one of the hotels for to-night, and then purchase Mr. GREELEY's What I Know About Farming, and start as soon as the snow permits in the morning.¹⁶

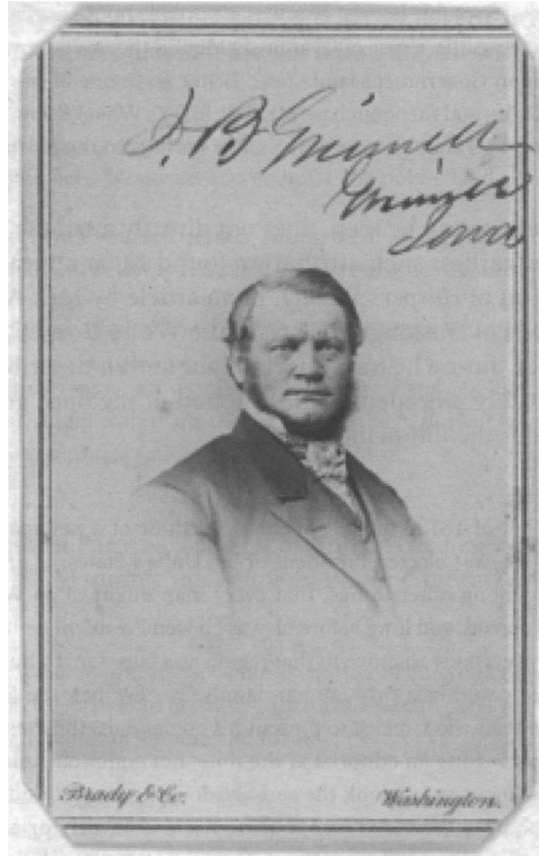
This source, as can be seen, does not directly attribute the quotation to Greeley. The earliest such attribution found so far appears in the June 29, 1872, edition of *Harper's Weekly*, in an article by Max Adeler entitled “America's Battle of Dorking; or, H.G. at the White House.” The article, a satirical piece of “future history” in which the author describes “the events which immediately preceded the destruction of the once great American Union,” includes the following passage:

In the fall of 1872 Horace Greeley, the editor of a newspaper in New York, was elected President of the United States. . . . He believed, among other things, that every man ought to go West to earn his bread, and long before he was chosen President he used to advise everybody to move to that region as a cure for all the disasters that could befall the human family. . . . [W]hen the French Minister came to Greeley to present his credentials, the President, who was writing an editorial at the time, not comprehending the French language, mistook the ambassador for a beggar, and without looking up, handed him a quarter and an order for a clean shirt, and said to him, “Go West, young man—go West!”¹⁷

In my view, the earliest reliably documented instance in which Greeley appears to have used the phrase was September 1853, as recorded by Josiah Bushnell Grinnell (1821–1891). Grinnell was an abolitionist Congregational minister who preached for a time in Washington, D. C., where he met Greeley. The two became lifelong friends and correspondents. In 1854, Grinnell went to Iowa and founded the town that is named for him. He also served as a U. S. representative from Iowa from 1863 to 1867.

¹⁶Orpheus C. Kerr, “The Mystery of Mr. E. Drood: An Adaptation,” *Pulchinello* (August 20, 1870), 323.

¹⁷Max Adeler (pen name for Charles Heber Clark), “America's Battle of Dorking; or, H.G. at the White House,” *Harper's Weekly* (June 29, 1872), 517. I am indebted to Fred Shapiro for locating these *Pulchinello* and *Harper's Weekly* references.



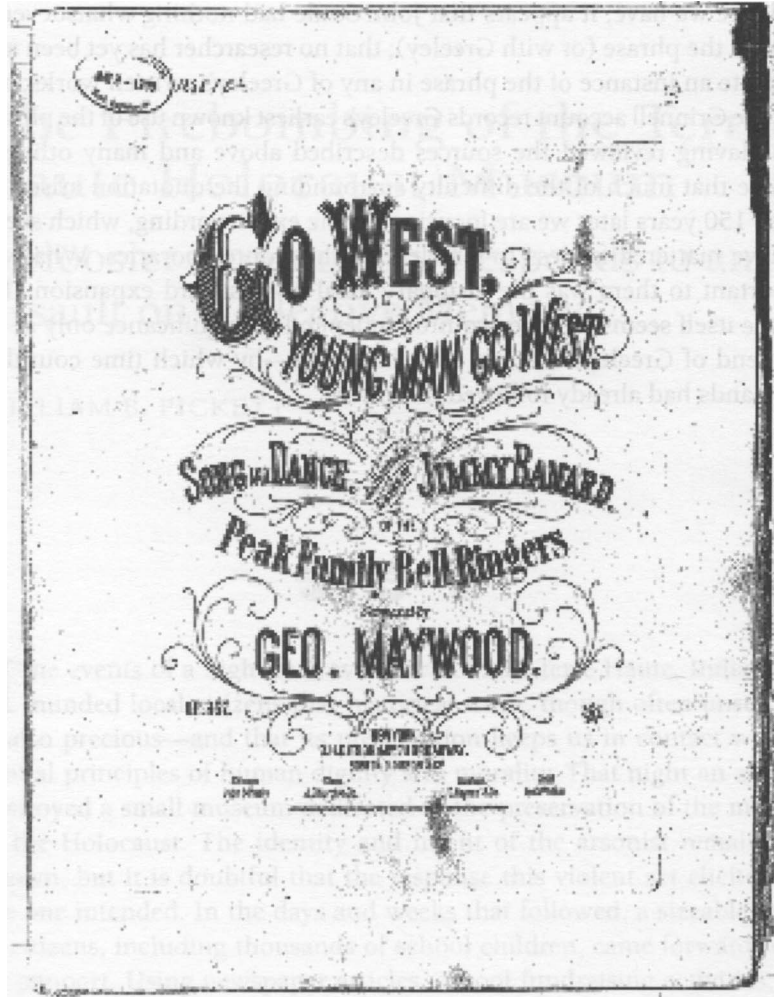
Josiah Bushnell Grinnell

Grinnell, an abolitionist Congregational minister, claimed that Greeley first exhorted young men to go west in September 1853.

Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Grinnell claimed all his life that he had moved to Iowa in response to Greeley's express urging to "Go West, young man!" He first recorded the claim for the date of September 1853 in writing in his autobiography, *Men and Events of Forty Years* (1891).¹⁸ I have looked extensively into the facts surrounding this claim, and while the details of that research are beyond

¹⁸Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, *Men and Events of Forty Years* (Boston, 1891), 86–87 and 220.



Sheet music for “Go West, Young Man Go West,” by George Maywood, published by Ditson and Company of New York City in 1872. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

the scope of this article, I have satisfied myself that Grinnell’s account should be credited.

“Go West, young man!” is associated so firmly with Horace Greeley that it is impossible to suppose that he did not repeat it many times over and in many contexts. The *Harper’s Weekly* article quoted above strongly suggests that by 1872 he had been saying it for many years. From the

evidence we have, it appears that John Soule had nothing whatsoever to do with the phrase (or with Greeley); that no researcher has yet been able to locate an instance of the phrase in any of Greeley's written works; and that the Grinnell account records Greeley's earliest known use of the phrase.

Having reviewed the sources described above and many others, I believe that much of the difficulty surrounding the quotation arises because 150 years later we are focusing on the exact wording, which seems to have mattered far less to Greeley and his contemporaries. What was important to them was the visionary ideal of westward expansion. The phrase itself seems to have acquired independent significance only at the very end of Greeley's life and after his death—by which time countless thousands had already followed his advice.

