The Lure of the West

When scholars study the reasons for major migrations, they look at what they call push-pull factors, or events and conditions that either force (push) people to move elsewhere or strongly attract (pull) them to do so.

**Push Factors**

Various conditions urged settlers westward. The Civil War had displaced thousands of farmers, former slaves, and other workers. Eastern farmland was increasingly costly, certainly for many African Americans or for impoverished immigrants. Failed entrepreneurs sought a second chance in a new location. Ethnic and religious repression caused both Americans (such as the Mormons) and Europeans to seek freedom in the West. The open spaces also sheltered outlaws on the run.

Yet the West was more than just a refuge for discouraged people and shady characters. The region offered temptations and adventures that lured (pulled) settlers westward.

**Pull Factor: Government Incentive**

Before the Civil War, the North and South had fought bitterly over whether the new territories of the West would allow or prohibit slavery. After the war, with those issues behind it, the federal government opened the way to western migration by giving away public lands—or selling them at rock-bottom prices.

Under the **Pacific Railway Acts** of 1862 and 1864, the government gave large land grants to the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads. The original act granted 10 square miles of public land on each side of the track for every mile of track laid. From 1850 to 1871, the railroads received more than 175 million acres of public land—an area more than one tenth the size of the whole United States and larger than the state of Texas.

Railroad expansion provided new avenues of migration into the American interior. The railroads sold portions of their land to arriving settlers at a handsome profit. Lands closest to the tracks drew the highest prices, because farmers and ranchers wanted to locate near railway stations.

To further encourage western settlement, Congress passed the **Morrill Land-Grant Act** of 1862. It gave state governments millions of acres of western lands, which the states could then sell to raise money for the creation of “land grant” colleges specializing in agriculture and mechanical arts. The states sold their land grants to bankers and land speculators or people who bought up large areas later selling it later for a profit.

The government program that really set the wagons rolling west was the **Homestead Act**, signed by President Lincoln in 1862. Under the act, for a small fee settlers could have 160 acres of land if they met certain conditions:

1. Be at least 21 years old or the heads of families.
2. American citizens or immigrants filing for citizenship.
3. Build a home (at least 12’ by 14’) on their claim and copy by it at least six months a year.
4. Farm the land for five years consecutively before claiming ownership.
The act created more than 372,000 farms. By 1900, settlers had filed 600,000 claims for more than 80 million acres under the Homestead Act.

**Pull Factor:** Private Property

A key incentive to western settlement was the availability of legally enforceable, transferable property rights. The Homestead Act and state and local laws helped to limit settlers' risks and avoid a total free-for-all. Miners, cattle ranchers, and farmers all received certain rights to land and possessions. Land parcels were measured, registered, and deeded. Cattle branding established ownership. Enforcement of water rights provided stable water sources for crops and for human and animal consumption.

In time, established American economic concepts of private property, private enterprise, and a free market extended across the continent. One editor, hoping to raise the standards of a rather lawless town, reminded his readers that “people who have money to invest go where they are protected by law.”

1. Use your textbook to fill in the following graphic organizer. List 3 Push or Pull

   ![Graphic Organizer](image)

   **Westward Migration**

   **“Push” Factors**
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   **“Pull Factors”**
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2. Identify the Homestead Act and its impact of westward migration.

3. Identify the Pacific Railway and its influence on western settlement.

4. Identify the Morrill Land-Grant Act and what was so significant.