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The Americans In Panama

Story of the Panama Canal From Start to Finish

By Wm. R. Scott

CHAPTER III. The Spanish in Panama.

On the fourth attempt Columbus made to find a passage to the East Indies he cruised along the Isthmian coast from September, 1502, to January, 1503, entering and naming the harbor of Porto Bello on Nov. 2, 1502, and visiting Nombre de Dios on Nov. 9, in what is now the republic of Panama.

Columbus, however, was not the discoverer of Panama, as a Spaniard, named Rodrigo de Bastides, had preceded him to this coast, in 1501, so that the period of the Spanish in Panama dates from that year. Bastides visited Nombre de Dios, where eight years later the first Spanish settlement on the Isthmus was planted, in 1509, as a base for the search for gold.

Vasco Nunez de Balboa had been with Bastides on his trip of exploration, and he became the head of the new colony at Panama. For a few years the mountains with their dense jungle growth stood as a barrier to explorations farther inland, but the stories of the marvelous wealth of the inhabitants on the other side, told to Balboa by the Indians, so excited his avidity that, in 1513, he gathered a band of 190 men and started across.

Balboa discovered the Pacific on Sept. 25, 1513. Calling his men to him, they had a religious ceremony, claiming all they surveyed as the dominions of his majesty the king of Spain.

Gold he found in abundance and pearls of fabulous size and value. After five months' absence he returned to Nombre de Dios by a more direct course and found that he had been succeeded as governor at Nombre de Dios by a soldier named Pedrarias. Between them a hatred sprang up which, in 1517, resulted in the untimely and unjust execution of Balboa on trumped up charges. Prior to this, Balboa had made other trips to the Pacific, carrying across with incredible labor the parts of ships which were rebuilt in the Pacific. In 1511 the Americans found a cannon of immense weight about halfway across, which evidently had been abandoned by Balboa, and an anchor of great size also has been found.

Pedrarias in 1515 had sent exploring parties to the Pacific side to select a site for a settlement on that coast. The San Francisco expedition therefore in 1515 will be exactly 400 years after this event. It was not until 1519 that the settlement was started, and the founding of the city of Panama



CULEBRA CUT, THROUGH WHICH THE CANAL RUNS.

gates" discovered from that year.

With the founding of a town on the Pacific side began the inter-oceanic traffic which ever since has emphasized the need of easier and swifter communication between the Atlantic and Pacific. At a huge expense of labor and life a paved road was constructed from Nombre de Dios to Panama, portions of which may be seen in the canal zone today.

It may be noted that Panama was founded a full hundred years before the landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth. Nombre de Dios was a town ninety-eight years before the first English settlement in North America, at Jamestown, in 1607. St. Augustine, Fla., the oldest town in North America, was not founded until forty-six years after Panama.

After nearly a century at Nombre de Dios the Spanish in the year 1584 found Porto Bello a healthier site for a settlement and moved bag and baggage to that incomparable port.

Porto Bello at once became the depot of Spanish treasure accumulated from Peru or other South and Central American countries and brought across the Isthmus from Panama with incredible hardship. From this port the Spanish galleons ran the gantlet of English pirates to Spain. Drake had been one of the most intrepid of this crew. Henry Morgan, a century later, was another.

In 1668 Henry Morgan collected a motley crew of sea vagabonds with the object of capturing Porto Bello. The operations of the English buccanniers usually were plain piracy, but they justified themselves in their own minds by the quarrelsome state of the relations that existed between England and Spain.

Porto Bello was captured after a fight not surpassed in history for inhumanities. The treasure they found here whetted their lust for gold, with the result that three years later a still bolder enterprise, that of traversing the Isthmus and taking Panama, was planned. In 1671 Morgan started up the Chagres river with 1,000 men, and after abandoning that stream, they struck out overland to Panama. Nine days were consumed in the journey, with hardships from hunger and the labor of penetrating the jungle the like of which have not been exceeded by soldiers anywhere.

A desperate defense was unavailing. The city was captured, but found to be barren of treasure, as the Spanish had loaded a ship with their gold and silver before the attack began, and the ship could not be found. It was an unwise move, because the infuriated crews proceeded to torture the people

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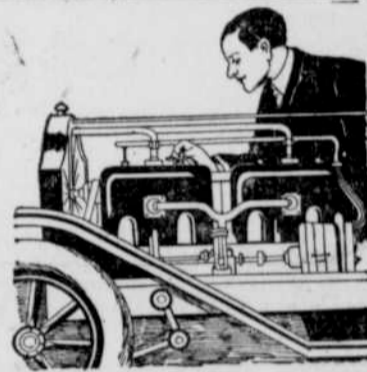
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