**Vasco Balboa Biography**

Balboa was the first European to see (and stand in the waters of) the eastern shore of the Pacific Ocean, on September 13, 1513. He accomplished this feat after an arduous trek through the jungles of what is now Panama. He claimed the Pacific Ocean and all its shores for Spain, which opened the way for Spanish exploration and conquest along the western coast of South America. But it was the Portuguese explorer, Magellen (not Balboa), who, because its waters seemed so calm, gave this ocean the name "Pacifica" (meaning peaceful).

**Early Life**

Balboa was born in Jerez de los Caballeros, Spain. His father, though perhaps a nobleman, was not wealthy or influential, so young Vasco had to work in the household of a rich nobleman in the port city of Moguer, which was on the Atlantic coast of southwest Spain. After Columbus reached America in 1492 (when Balboa was only 17 years old), many ships heading for the New World took on supplies and sailors from the port city of Moguer. Sailors returning from these voyages told stories about the new lands across the sea, and the opportunity for wealth and fame attracted Balboa.

**Balboa becomes an explorer**

In 1501, at age 26, he joined a Spanish expedition to South America. The expedition explored the northern coast of what is now Columbia, but because they did not have enough men, food or supplies, they were unable to start settlement there. Balboa returned to the island of Hispaniola (Cuba), and had to settle for raising pigs for a living there.

In 1509, the first Spanish expedition to colonize the mainland of South America left Hispaniola. Balboa tried to join the expedition, but because he was deeply in debt, the men to whom he owed money prevented him from leaving. The next year, however, Balboa stowed away on a ship which was carrying supplies to the new settlement. Balboa was discovered and the expedition leader threatened to leave Balboa on a deserted island, but Balboa talked his way out of this fate. Apparently, Balboa knew a great deal about the region and his local knowledge was invaluable.

After reaching the mainland, though, the new settlers found that the previous Spanish settlement had abandoned it because of dangerous Indians and a lack of food. Balboa suggested they move to the Western side of the Gulf because the Indians were more peaceful there, and so the Spaniards established the city of Darién.

Balboa became the unofficial, acting governor of Darién and led expeditions into Panama while conquering some Indians and making agreements with others in the area. In 1511, Indians told him of a sea on the other side of the Isthmus of Panama, as well as stories of gold and other wealth in an area farther to the south (referring to the Incas of Peru).

**Impressing the King?**

Knowing his claim to the governorship of Darien was weak (it had not been approved by the King of Spain), Balboa needed to do something spectacular that would win the King's approval. Therefore, early in September 1513, Balboa led an expedition of about 90 Spaniards and a large number of Indians to find this large ocean the Indians had told him about. Three weeks later, his Indian guides told Balboa he would be able to see the ocean from a nearby mountain, so Balboa instructed his men to stay behind as he climbed the mountain peak. From there, he sighted the Pacific Ocean for the first time.

Once they reached the Pacific Ocean, Balboa and his men found gold and pearls, which Balboa decided to send back to the King Ferdinand of Spain. However, before news of Balboa's accomplishment reached the King, Ferdinand appointed an elderly nobleman named Pedro Arias Dávila to be the new governor of Darién. Once the King learned of Balboa's discovery of the Pacific Ocean, he appointed Balboa to serve under Dévila as governor of Panama. Unfortunately for Balboa, Dávila was a jealous man who did not like seeing the growing popularity and influence which Balboa was developing. In 1518, Governor Dávila falsely accused Balboa of treason, had him arrested, ordered a speedy trial and sentenced Balboa to death. In January 1519, Balboa and four friends were beheaded.

**Vasco Balboa biography**

1. What is the Island of Hispanola called today?
2. Why did he come to Hispanola?
3. When he didn't find gold in Hispanola, what did he do for a living?
4. Why did he stow away on board a ship bound for South America?
5. What was the name of the Spanish colony founded in Panama?
6. How did Balboa become the leader of that colony?
7. How did Balboa find out about the existence of a great ocean?
8. When did Balboa leave in search of this ocean?
9. How long was his trip?
10. What did Balboa name the ocean?
11. What would this ocean be called later?
12. What eventually happened to Balboa?