



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Making the World Smaller

The sun burned down. Heat rose from the desert sand, but the crowd standing in the sun did not seem to mind. A man in a dark coat picked up a shovel. With a smile he dug it into the sand at his feet and tossed the sand behind him. The people standing around cheered. Work on the Suez Canal had begun. The year was 1859. The man in the coat was Ferdinand de Lesseps. For years it had been his dream to dig this canal. In 1854, he got permission for the project from Mohammed Said, the viceroy of Egypt. The canal was to run from Port Said on the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Suez in the Red Sea. This meant digging through 160 kilometers of desert.

World trade was growing in 1859. Mills in Europe needed more raw materials from the East. They needed more cotton from India, and they needed it faster. The canal would more than cut in half the distance from India to Europe. Ships would not have to sail all the way around South Africa. Weeks at sea would be saved. In a way the world would be made smaller. It took thousands of people ten years to dig the canal. De Lesseps had to face many problems. There was the heat. There were sandstorms. There were great rocks that had to be blown up.

At first, the men had only shovels and small baskets. The baskets were filled with sand. Then, the baskets were carried off on the backs of camels and emptied. Later the men used steam shovels. Some people said the canal could not be dug. They said sand would blow back and fill it up. Some did not want the canal dug. De Lesseps was French. They feared France would own the canal. De Lesseps had a friend. She was the Empress Eugenie of France, his cousin. She got money for him and helped him in many ways. Through all the problems she was a friend.

At last the canal was done. A great work of engineering was finished. The canal ran through the heart of the desert and joined the two seas. There is no great difference in the level of the two seas, so the canal had no locks. The water of one sea ran into the other. De Lesseps wanted to thank the woman who had helped him, so Eugenie was invited to open the canal on November 17, 1869. The empress was allowed to enter the canal first. She was on a French ship, L'Aigle. De Lesseps was with her. They stood on the ship's deck. Behind them came a long line of ships. They were to sail through the canal.

People stood on the banks. They cheered the two on deck. Whistles blew, guns thundered, but De Lesseps was tired. He had worked hard. The ship had not gone far when he went below deck, and it is said, he slept through half the trip.