

HERNANDO DE SOTO

BY WILBUR F. GORDY

After the discovery of the New World by Columbus, the Spaniards dreamed eagerly of its marvelous wealth. They were impatient to be off to the land where they believed fortunes awaited them. So zealous were they, in their mad search for gold and adventure that many were willing to leave home and friends for years.

The most brilliant of these explorers were Cortez, the conqueror of Mexico, and Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru. Both of these men had carried back to Spain many million dollars worth of gold and silver. With Pizarro was a young man named Hernando De Soto. His life was full of adventure and most importantly, discovered the Mississippi River. This alone has given him a prominent place in the history of our country.

He was born about 1500, of a poor but noble family. In his youth he excelled in athletic sports. He was unusually skilled in horsemanship and in fencing. He took a leading part in all the dangerous exploits in the New World. For he not only won fame, but went back to Spain after many years a rich man.

While Cortez and Pizarro had been conquering Mexico and Peru, other Spaniards had been seeking their fortune in Florida. These



men had brought back no gold and silver. De Soto wished to conquer and explore the country. His faith in the mines of the interior was great. He already had won great influence by his achievements. He secured the favor of the king. He was appointed governor of the island of Cuba. He was appointed leader of an expedition to conquer and occupy Florida.

He was to take men enough with him to build forts and plant a colony. He was to hold the country for Spain.

De Soto had no difficulty in getting followers to join him on this trip. Young men from noble families flocked to him from all parts of Spain. He knew that dangers and hardships awaited them. He chose only the strongest men to go with him.

De Soto's men were richly dressed nobles. They were warriors in glittering armor. It was a huge party when they sailed out of port. Their banners were flying. Cannon were booming. Every young man felt proud to sail on so grand an expedition. After arriving in Cuba, De Soto spent some time there. Then leaving his wife to govern the island, he set out to explore Florida. His expedition was a large one. There were nine vessels, six hundred men, and about two hundred and twenty-five horses. In

May, 1539, the whole force landed at Tampa Bay, on the western coast of Florida.

De Soto and his men met with hunger, disease, death, and many other misfortunes. Still De Soto went on with his mad search for gold. He worked his way through the deep twisted forests. In the spring of 1541, about two years after landing at Tampa Bay, he reached the bank of the Mississippi river. It took months to make boats. Finally he crossed the mighty stream. From there he marched in a northerly and westerly direction. He went as far as the site of what is now Little Rock, the capital of Arkansas.

Next, he marched southeast to the Washita. He spent a winter so severe that many of the party, including Ortiz, died.

About the middle of April, 1542, tired, spent and sick at heart the Spaniards reached the mouth of the Red River. Even De Soto was discouraged and broken in spirit. He was taken ill with fever and soon died. At first his followers buried his body near the town where they were staying. Indians were curious about the ground under which he lay. So at night the Spaniards took up the body. They wrapped it in blankets made heavy with sand. Sadly they lowered De Soto into the waters of the mighty river that De Soto discovered. After many more hardships about half of those men who landed at Tampa Bay, traveled to a Spanish colony in Mexico. Thus ended the trip that set sail with such hope and wealth and renown.