

Canal's Inaugural Bash in 1869 A World Occasion # 473

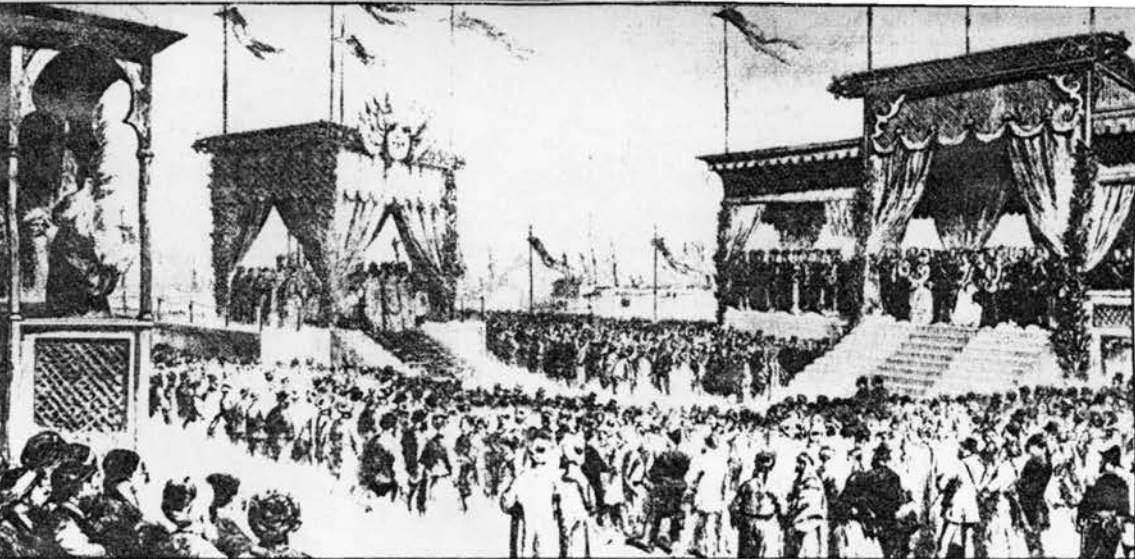
CAIRO - With little fanfare or festivity Egypt this month noted the tenth anniversary of the 1975 re-opening of the Suez Canal. The occasion could not have been more different than the original bash that surrounded the festivities of the 1869 opening of the canal or even the celebration staged by President Anwar Sadat 10 years ago.

Ismail Pasha, the then Ottoman viceroy of Egypt, sailed to Egypt to invite kings and dignitaries to a lavish ceremony marking the opening of the waterway in 1869. Monarchs, several hundred members of the royal families of Europe, and 100 of Europe's most famous artists and scientists came for the celebratory visit paid for by Ismail Pasha out of government coffers.

An opera house was built in Cairo especially for the occasion, for which the Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi wrote his famous *Aida*. A new road from the city to the Giza pyramids was constructed, and the pasha's favourite member of European royalty, Empress Eugenie of France, rode with him on this macadam road in a horse-driven carriage. Ismail hosted a banquet for 6,000, which was prepared by 1,500 foreign cooks who were brought to Egypt for the occasion.

But the massive cost of Ismail Pasha's extravaganza contributed to the financial problems which later plagued the canal and finally precipitated the sale of shares that eventually resulted in Egypt losing control of it entirely.

The 1869 opening was only the beginning of a long series of dramas surrounding the Suez Canal. In 1882 the canal was seized by Britain. Years later it was nationalized by President Gamal Abdul Nasser. Two wars with Israel were fought



Pomp and ceremony: The religious ceremony at Port Said in 1869 marking the opening of the Suez Canal.

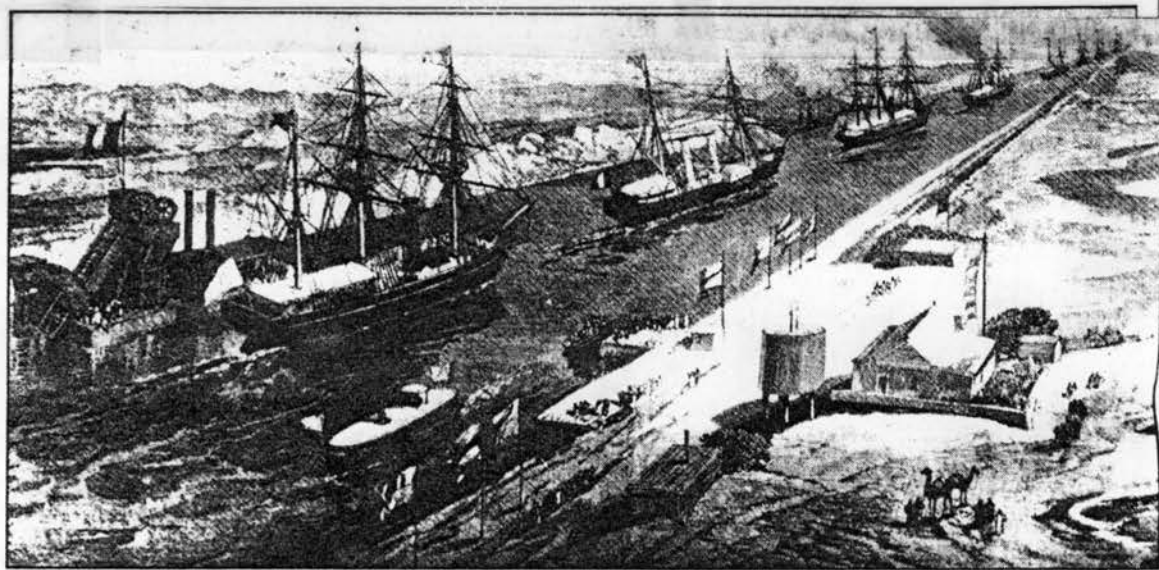
over the waterway, thousands of Egyptian and Israeli soldiers lost their lives in its defence.

The history of canals in Egypt goes back at least to the year 1975 B.C. when King Sestris III built a canal linking a branch of the Nile with the Bitter Lake near Ismailia. Celebrations for that canal instituted by priests of the ancient Pharaonic god Amon became a holy day and remained so for 700 years.

Almost 1,500 years later the Persian Darius wanted to extend the Sestris canal but work was stopped because engineers then believed that the Red Sea was higher than the Mediterranean. This was a common belief in ancient Egypt, which if true would obviously have led to the flooding of the country should a canal have been built.

The idea of building a canal between the two seas, although often touted, was not pursued again until Napoleon's occupation of Egypt at the end of the 18th century. At the French emperor's instruction the project was revived but later dropped because Napoleon's engineers, like their predecessors, were concerned about the consequences of joining the two seas.

But a persistent French engineer by the name of Ferdinand de Lesseps was convinced of the viability of the project and set out to convince the authorities. He was eventually successful because of a young



The first convoy of ships steams through the canal.

prince's fondness of macaroni.

The heir to the Egyptian throne at the time was Mohammed Said, son of the great Mohammed Ali Pasha. The young prince, a child of 13, was a lazy and fat boy, a fact which brought much unhappiness to his father. Mohammed Ali put his son on a strict diet and sent him to Alexandria for training and exercise on a naval vessel.

Going to and from the navy yard, young Prince Said passed the house of the erstwhile engineer, de Lesseps. De Lesseps, then the

French vice consul in Alexandria, took pity on the 'exiled' future king and would often bring the boy to his kitchen for meals of macaroni.

Years later, Said as king repaid his gastronomic benefactor with an exclusive concession for the digging of a canal to link the Red Sea with the Mediterranean.

On the day of the canal's opening, 19 November 1869, the ship *L'Aigle*, carrying European royalty, moved into the waterway followed by 68 ships from all over the world. French warships whistled

study, the authority has successfully allowed the transit of two supertankers. Canal authorities hope that large tankers will be able to transit more frequently, and thus help compensate the loss of income.

In January an Iraqi supertanker with total weight of 160,000 tons passed from north to south and paid \$500,000 in transit toll. Recently a Turkish supertanker with total weight of 423,000 tons - the biggest tanker ever to pass the waterway - crossed with no problems, encouraging requests from other supertankers to transit.

The Suez Canal chairman said that the canal's income has fallen this year by 5 percent to \$900 million compared with transit tolls of \$950 million last year.

and fired salvo after salvo of canon to celebrate the occasion.

When President Anwar Sadat officially re-opened the canal in 1975, he re-enacted the 1869 ceremonies with military parades and rode a destroyer down the canal.

President Hosni Mubarak on this 10th anniversary year took note of the past but the official emphasis was more on the projects to develop and expand the canal rather than fanfare.

- Ahmed Lutfy