

This Day in History... February 3, 1907

Birth of James A. Michener

James Albert Michener is believed to have been born on February 3, 1907, in New York City. He was a bestselling author of more than 40 books, selling an estimated 75 million copies worldwide.

Michener was abandoned by his parents and didn't know his exact birth date or place of birth, but it's generally considered to be February 3, 1907. At a young age, Mabel Michener of Doylestown, Pennsylvania took him in and raised him. Michener described his young life as poor but happy, stating "I grew up in a bundle of love." His happy home wasn't enough to keep the adventurous Michener from wandering though. Hitchhiking across the country, he had visited all but three states in the Union by the age of 20, yet still received straight A's in school.

After graduating from high school in 1925, Michener attended Swarthmore College, where he played basketball and majored in English and History. Michener graduated summa cum laude in 1929. He then traveled to Scotland and attended St. Andrews University for two years.

Michener was the 10th honoree in the Distinguished Americans Series.



Rodgers and Hammerstein adapted Michener's Tales of the South Pacific as the Broadway musical South Pacific, which was later adapted into films in 1958 and 2001.

When he returned to the United States, Michener taught English at the Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and the George School in Newtown, Pennsylvania. Michener then attended Colorado State Teachers College, earning a Master of Arts degree in education. He remained at the school as a teacher for several years and also taught at College High School. From 1939 to 1940, Michener was a guest lecturer at Harvard. After that, he served as the social studies education editor for Macmillan Publishers.

As a Quaker, Michener could have qualified as a conscientious objector and avoided military service during World War II. However, he chose to enlist in the Navy and served throughout the South Pacific. His commanders gave him several assignments because they believed his father was Admiral Marc Mitscher. Michener used his World War II experiences to write his first novel, *Tales of the South Pacific*. He mailed the story anonymously to Macmillan Publishers. The book was then published in 1947 and won a Pulitzer Prize. In 1949, Rodgers and Hammerstein adapted the story into the hit Broadway musical, *South Pacific*.

Michener traveled the Pacific many times, and moved to Hawaii in 1949. While there he took an active interest in civil affairs. He spent four years researching and three years writing his novel *Hawaii*, which became an immediate best seller. Michener visited several countries over the years, staying long enough to learn about the customs and people for his books. Michener's extensive and meticulous research resulted in lengthy novels, many of which were more than 1,000 pages. He claimed to spend 12 to 15 hours per day at his typewriter.



In the 1960s, Michener served as a member of the Electoral College in Pennsylvania. The experience inspired a book in which he suggested alternate systems.

Michener served as a roving editor for the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* from the late 1950s to 1970. He also worked on the television series *Adventures in Paradise*, which ran from 1959 to 1962. Michener's 1974 novel *Centennial* chronicled the lives of several generations of families in the Rocky Mountains. In 1978, it was made into a 12-part television miniseries.

Michener's experiences on NASA's advisory council solidified his interest in space and informed his novel Space, a fictionalized history of the US space program.

Michener was a noted philanthropist, donating more than \$100 million to educational, cultural, and writing institutions. Among these were Swarthmore College, the Iowa Writers Workshop, the James A. Michener Art Museum, and the University of Texas at Austin (Michener was this school's largest single donor). Michener also donated the earnings from his novel *Journey* to create the Journey Prize – an annual award for the best short story published in Canada.

Michener served on the US Postal Service Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee from 1979 to 1986. He also served on the Advisory Council to NASA, cultural ambassador to several countries, and on the International Broadcasting Board. During his life, Michener received several honorary degrees and literary awards as well as the Medal of Freedom.

Michener suffered from terminal kidney disease and died on October 16, 1997. He left most of his estate to Swarthmore College and the University of Northern Colorado. Several of his works were adapted for movies and television over the years, including *The Bridges at*

Toko-Ri, Sayonara, Hawaii, Caravans, Space, and Texas.

Mystic Stamp Company • Camden, NY 13316

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