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The Forgotten Horror

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The question is: why does society not remember about the Eastland Disaster? It is very astonishing to know how such an important part of Chicago's history has been left out. This issue develops into an infinity number of questions about what could have been wrong, or better yet, what is still wrong in society today. Many of the questions dig deep into the possible fallacies of our society and search for possible approaches to improve it (in a collective way primarily). We live in a society that prides itself as being the most improved technological society of our days where virtually everything is at the grasps of our hands. In this sense mostly all sorts of information surround us constantly in our everyday lives and we are still largely a target to ignorance.

The day I heard about the Eastland Disaster I was a little stunned. At first, I felt almost like a stranger to the class because I did not know what the Eastland Disaster was, but I was sure the meaning of those words stood for something important. Then, when I realized that this was not just my personal problem of ignorance but that almost everyone had had similar experiences many questions began to pop up in my head. Why don't we know about it?

Consequently, we began an attempt to discover why such an important event that had affected the history of Chicago, and mainly the lives of hundreds of persons, was not widely

known. Therefore, after having carried out an informal survey among people of different ages (one for the elderly and another for the younger people) I came to see different responses and patterns being supported, I approached to survey people with one main question: Have you heard about the East land disaster? The results were stunning, coinciding with my predictions. Out of twenty people surveyed, only seven people said they knew about it. Now, going a little deeper, I found that only two persons, out of the ten non-elderly, and five out of the ten elderly knew about it. When I asked the people who had said they knew about it, I was somehow surprised to their responses. The one that surprised me the most was when one man (of the non-elderly) told me he learned about it in during a "ghost tour" in Chicago, where he had visited the plaque on the river. Another non-elderly and an elderly person said they had also heard about it in a tour to the Chicago. In the rest of the older people, one said that his mom had told him when he was little; another that he saw the plaque by coincidence in the river, another that his friend told him, and another that he saw it in the Titanic Exhibit.

Then I advanced to the next question, and perhaps the most important: Why don't people know about it? However, as I expected it, there were a variety of responses. Among the most controversial responses given by these people were that there is something within the government that impedes knowledge from being spread (like a conspiracy), and that the officials tried to hide the information in order to prevent bad reputation to the city. Other responses included that there is something wrong in the education system, that people do not want to recall such traumatizing situations, that people are constantly moving to different places and do not have time to explore events, or that people simply take things for granted. Of course, the most common response was that there is definitely a lack of knowledge about this issue. I noticed that one response that was very common in both age groups is that there is

that people take things for granted today; they do not pay attention to their surroundings. Also one response, which was given by some other students, called my attention because one person responded that perhaps this event never actually happened.

Obviously there were many differences in the responses according to the people being surveyed. Perhaps, if we take this question into deeper phase, by using the three major theoretical perspectives of sociology (Conflict, Functionalist, and Interactionist), we might be able to find other possible solutions to the problem.

If we begin to focus on the Conflict perspective, we will have to take drastic change from our views of society. Although we supposedly live in a society of equality, this is not necessarily true. During the 1910's there was a clear distinction of classes, mainly the middle class and the working class. The fact that the passengers of the Eastland were connected (directly and indirectly) to the Western Electric Company subjected them to the hardships of the poor working class. The majority of the workers were immigrants and that just made them an easy target for injustice. After the disaster occurred and those days of horror had passed the government, occupied by a higher class, did not do anything to commemorate this dark event of its history. All the people in command (government officials) did not want this event to be included in history for some reason(s). They did not see it as an important thing to be remembered because the people who had been affected did not count to them. The feelings and opinions of the working-class people had no important place in taking their decisions. Because this disaster did not affect those who had something "important" to say, those who possessed true freedom of will and power, it was not worth considering the event as special to remember. In this way, the working class was unable to defend their history, and even less in

such circumstances of despair. Thus, the working class was left entirely to the mercy of the decisions taken by a more powerful social class.

In taking this issue from the standpoint of the Functionalist Perspective, we would have to consider the role of this event within society as a whole. Because this perspective sees society as Darwin did with his theory of evolution. Just as this theory helps explain how certain living creatures cease to exist, it also explains why this event appeared to have died in our history. The main point to make here is that the commemoration of the Eastland Disaster was believed to be useless for the welfare of the public. Why would anyone want to remember something that will serve no real purpose, something that will not benefit anyone in the future? Taking it a little deeper, we see that this event eventually was condemned to become "extinct" from history because society (collectively) was not being benefited by it and decided to throw it away. Why should society worry keep something that might eventually perturb its existence? *This* becomes just like Dr. Fournier said it: "if something is meant to survive it will, if not it won't."

Now, by taking this issue from the Interactionist Perspective, we will begin to focus more closely in a more individualistic approach for possible explanations. The different responses people gave in the surveys will serve as the point of analyzing the issue. This perspective tries to explain the event 'by going directly to the core of the subject, that is the individual's behavior. First, it is useful to notice that the lack of knowledge resulted from not spreading this information to other generations. And the next question now becomes: Why didn't people pass their knowledge to others? The fact that this perspective concentrates on the study of human interactions, we can begin the argument that individual's behavior could be transformed according to whatever changes occur in their surroundings. Therefore, we would

be very certain that the Eastland Disaster did have a certain effect on people's lives. Although this sounds more like a psychological explanation, it is easy to see that the people were affected in many ways, but perhaps, mostly emotionally. The conclusion to be made here is that this event affected people internally, and that it brought certain changes in their behavior (mainly their ability to pass on and spread information).

Without much doubt, the investigation for the possible causes about the "extinction" of the Eastland Disaster is a process so complicated and exhausting as that about the causes of the disaster. This seems to be an endless channel of examination. Still, there remains to see other possible successful methods to be implemented with the only purpose of expanding the present results.

In my opinion, there is not just one possible answer to why people do not know about the Eastland Disaster. People in those days did not have the same sets of behaviors and standards as we do now. People did not have the same type of freedom as we have today in things so simple as to give an opinion. This is more real if we analyze that the working class was composed mainly of immigrants who would worry mostly about surviving in a different country. This people did not participate as actively as we do today, and that definitely affect them. There are a number of reasons that could help give a more clear idea of why these people did not contribute to preserve this knowledge. First, although it sounds dramatic, I agree with the theory that there was some kind of involvement from the government and the upper class. The Fact that this was an unusual type of disaster (because hundreds had drowned in a river) originated a feeling of embarrassment and guilt to the city and to the work institution (bureaucrats). This type of insecurity of the city and the company prompted them to had methods to prevent the spread of knowledge. Thus, the best way to prevent this was to

"force" people forget about the disaster by controlling their behaviors with the cultivation of fear or something similar. Second, people's own reactions to the disaster could have disabled them from making proper decisions. People might have been affected psychologically so strongly that in some type of subconscious way decided not to think ever again about it. They were deeply traumatized. And lastly, I would say that if people were not affected psychologically so strong, their ways of living, of working in order to survive, made them indifferent to the outcome of the disaster. Other factors that should be included here are the limited sources of circulation of information (media), and other events that possibly foreshadowed its importance, such as the World War I and the Titanic (as discussed by other classmates).

In the conclusion of this "research" I would certainly say that it is virtually impossible to find the right causes for the burying of the Eastland Disaster in history. And also, I believe there was definitely some type of social sickness or "Social Amnesia" operating during that period of time. Society became ill and lost its "memory" when it was shocked by the Eastland Disaster but after several decades, it gradually recovered its health and memory. Hence, although society became sick it was able to recover itself and we should now look into the future to a possible type antidote to prevent it from happening again.