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Sociology 101-102

One summer day in July 1915 about eight hundred people drowned in the Chicago River. They were gathering by the Chicago River to board a vessel that would take them to their day's festivities. However before that vessel would even set sail it would roll on its side trapping people under water and drowning about eight hundred picnic goers. These were not just employees of the company; they were whole families, neighbors, dear friends, and family. Most of these people lived nearby one another. They got their family members jobs at the company. The city then went into a mass mourning. Eight hundred of its members had perished in the Chicago River when they were looking forward to a day of fun. This was indeed a tragedy the biggest tragedy Chicago had ever seen.

After having heard about the events that unfolded in July 1915 one may wonder why the biggest tragedy also seems to be the city's biggest secret. It seems that for some reason not many people today know much about this event. This is due to a number of reasons. First the media was not as advanced as today. News traveled via newspaper, radio, and word of mouth. This meant that news traveled slower than it does today. Secondly other events were going on in the world around this time. One of them being a world war. This event took precedence over the mass drowning. This event was also very traumatic for the city. Someone you know was bound to be affected by this event. Maybe people did not want to talk about it and were glad it was not making news everyday. The whole event seemed to get lost in the shuffle of events. Another factor in all this could be that most schools do not cover this event in their curriculum. Most young people have only recently found out about this

event through an exhibit at the museum. It was attached to the end of a very popular exhibit there Titanic. Yet another factor could be that many children do not have access to grandparents like they used to. Grandparents are usually a big source for stories, especially on how it used to be. No one factor is responsible for burying this tragic event in time. It was a combination of the factors that caused it to be forgotten but it would not be forever. A renewed interest in the Eastland disaster is being sparked that could ensure its place in history forever.

These were all acceptable reasons but one could still wonder how could an event of this magnitude stay hidden for so many years? Lets look to the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology. The first is conflict perspective. The conflict perspective believes that behavior is best understood in terms of conflict. This perspective would look at the events and say that perhaps the Eastland disaster was too painful for residence so they did not read articles nor want to read articles about the drowning, and preferred to read about the war so that they did not have to think about the many people now gone from their lives. The disaster brought up so much pain that people did not want to talk about it and that caused the event not to be transmitted to the following generation and it began to get lost. The functionalist perspective would look at the Eastland disaster differently. The functionalist would say that if this event does not contribute to society then it would not be passed on. Based on this perspective we would conclude that there was of lesson in this event and society did not benefit in any way from it. This could be because no one really even knows why the boat tipped over. No real blame was ever placed and people did not see anything good that could come out of it. No laws would be changed; the boat was declared seaworthy so no changes would be implemented with regards to its structure. Society could not find a single

benefit to the tragic event so it did not pass it on. The last perspective is the interactionist, which focuses more on the individual. This perspective looks to interpret the every day interaction of people, which they then use to interpret society as a whole. They would focus on what the families did after this happened. They would look at how the rest of the public responded. They might conclude that everyone unintentionally hid the event. The company probably did not want the event to be well publicized. It wanted to put it behind them so maybe after everything was said and done it did not push to bring it back up. This might have been silently ok with the people because they too wanted to forget about it. Unknowingly this type of attitude caused it to really be forgotten. These perspectives do help the current day Chicago citizen to understand what the city might have felt like after the Eastland disaster. I think they really help people today to understand the magnitude of this event. Is the fact that this mass drowning went unremembered for so long an indication that social amnesia exists? It could be. A whole generation forgot to tell the next that something terrible had happened. I think that in those times people did not want to talk about tragedy like they do today. Bad things were better forgotten, at least in those days. Today society is glued to their television at the very sight of tragedy. Not only will we be tuned into the last news and pictures of a plane crash but also will later tune into our cop show which show violence and tragedy everyday. Today society is very used to horrific acts and is readily available to view them. During the time of the Eastland society did not want to be reminded of tragedy that they faced. They buried it with their friends and family. They buried it to forget it and for a short time it worked.

The Eastland disaster is a very interesting story. It is hard to believe that something like that could happen in our Chicago. Even more amazing is how this could happen and not

be remembered for so long. Here in our very town a little more than 800 people died in our river. That almost seems unbelievable but it happened. It is sad to think that so many people were forgotten. So, if nothing else remember this story and pass it down to your children. Take a walk passed the bridge were it all happened and take notice of the plaque and remember that eight hundred people that died that day. That is the least that we can do to insure their place in our city's history.