

"Remembering the Eastland Disaster"

by

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Millions of people walk by the historic Chicago River everyday as part of their daily routine. Imagine however, one day as you walk by peering over the railings of the Wacker Drive bridge to discover a massive ship overturned in the water with screaming helpless people trapped in the muggy waters praying for their own lives as well as their families. This same tragic scenario occurred in the Chicago River in 1915 in which more than 800 people died including children and whole families. This horrible tragedy is known as the Eastland Disaster occurred when the boat which was to take friends, families, and employees of Western Electric Company on a daylong picnic, tipped over and trapped hundreds on board. Unlike the Chicago fire or the Titanic for instance, the Eastland Disaster has faded from the memories of the masses into the cobwebs of history. Why do people not know or remember an event that took over 800 human lives in the center of downtown Chicago? This event poses a question into the nature of human's memory and their conscious or unconscious tendency to remember certain events in history but not others. In an attempt to explore this mystery, application of certain sociological tools and the further exploring of the notion of unconsciousness are necessary to dig into the question of why people don't know about the Eastland Disaster.

In the quest to supply answers to the burning question as to why people don't know about the tragedy of the Eastland, a sample of twenty people, 10 over sixty and 10 under 60, in the Chicago area were asked if they knew of the disaster and what possible explanations they could offer as to why people do not know of this tragic piece of Chicago history. In terms of the younger generation, in which five of the ten people surveyed knew of the disaster, the majority felt that there is a waning interest in local history. If these events are not brought to their attention in either the schools or through the media than they have no way of

knowing or no desire to spend time further investigating events that happened a hundred years ago. Others stated that there was no drama involved or pre-media which would place the Eastland in the national spotlight. Then there were others who simply had no idea why they didn't know of the disaster, which suggests evidence of their unconsciousness in terms of this disaster. Among the older generation which seven of the ten people surveyed had heard of the disaster, many emphasized the time lapse and the fact that there are few people around now who lived through this tragedy to pass the information on to the next generations. Others claimed that people don't know of the disaster because the passengers of the Eastland were part of the petty working class who were considered less significant compared to the fascinating wealthy, aboard the Titanic for instance. Additionally, many felt that people are simply too busy to pay attention to events in the past in general, especially local history.

While the responses from the general population give insight into this mysterious occurrence, they tend to be reflecting the outward symptoms of a wider undiagnosed disease, of social amnesia. In order to gain a more clear grasp of what appears as an endless web of possible explanations for the lack of knowledge of the disaster it is helpful to examine this issue from different perspectives in which sociologists have systematically organized into three different views: conflict, functional, and interactionist.

Conflict theorists would tend to focus on the underlying tension and power struggle within a society. It is these tensions which then tend to bring forth the inequality specifically of race and social status. By asking questions such as who gains and loses in relationships, who are the have and have nots in society, and why do some benefit more than others, conflict theorists attempt to unlock the innate inequality and power struggle in society. In answering the question as to why people don't know about the Eastland Disaster, under the conflict

perspective the issue regarding the social status of those on board the ship would be highlighted. Unlike the Titanic, which transported the highly decorated upper class citizens across an ocean of adventure, the Eastland, an average river boat contained ordinary working class people varying in minority ethnic origin who were recent immigrants to the U.S. The majority of people, or the "have's" in society, tend to discriminate against those who occupy lower social statuses and whether consciously or unconsciously they view their lives and even the significance of their death as inferior to their, causing them to block an incident like this in their memory.

In the Eastland Disaster the powerful groups in society at the time including the government bureaucracy, managers of industry, the upper bourgeoisie class and others could have desired for society to run smoothly which would allow them to maintain their privileged positions. Therefore they had an interest in minimizing and controlling social conflict and disorder. With the Eastland Disaster the City of Chicago could have possibly purposefully discouraged wide press coverage in fear of embarrassment to the city due to the nature of the accident and the "failed" rescue effort which still resulted in the loss of over eight hundred lives. Additionally this incident can be looked at as an embarrassment to Western Electric, which could lead to a loss in profits and prestige from the viewpoint of the controlling money hungry managers.

The interactionist perspective sheds light from a different angle of the issue as to why nobody knows about the Eastland Disaster. Interactionists focus on the face-to-face interactions among people on a more personal and micro level. They dig into the meanings that people attach to things and events and how these meanings influence their behavior and interactions among others. In context of the Eastland the major focal point of this perspective

would be on how this event effected the lives of the people who had social ties with those involved in the tragedy. During the time when the Eastland Disaster occurred in 1915 the social structure and relationships among people differed from today in the sense that there wasn't such a clear division between primary and secondary groups. Therefore in a tragedy of such great magnitude as the Eastland, very few could escape the unceasing wave of grief and mourning that engulfed the city. Perhaps this event was so traumatic that the city as a whole suffered from a type of societal shock and in an attempt to cope with this intense grief, they climbed deeper into their shells and returned to the routine of their everyday life.

The question still burns as to why this disaster did not get passed down like the Chicago Fire for instance or the Titanic to future generations or brought to the generations of today by media coverage or commendation efforts. One plausible explanation through the eyes of an interactionist is that the meaning of death in our society has changed over the years. With the advancement in medicine in the last fifty years people's life span has increased dramatically which pulls people farther and farther from a place where they would have to deal with their own mortality. People as a result don't want to hear about senseless tragedies that occurred almost a hundred years ago because it forces them have to deal with the possibility of their own death, not a wide practice, especially among the youth.

In addition to the conflict and interactionist perspective lies the functionalist perspective, the final sociological tool. Functionalists see society as a system of interrelated parts much like a biological organism. Every part of society exists to serve as a function for the greater survival and if it doesn't promote survival or stability of the system than it will naturally disintegrate. The main issue that a functionalist would explore in the Eastland Disaster is what purpose or function does this tragedy have on society today and is this

necessary to the survival of modern day society. On a scientific or technological level stands the sheer fact that this type of accident involving the tipping over of stationary ship is not a current problem in society nor has been for decades. The current generations may see this tragedy as no longer useful for the betterment of society, so it is forgotten along with the other historical facts perceived as useless.

While these three historical perspectives are useful tools in chipping away at concrete questions I believe there is a larger more widespread universal phenomenon taking root throughout the world that is effecting every aspect of our lives known as unconsciousness. In an age where technology and availability of information is rapidly increasing, people are becoming overwhelmed by constant stimulus. In an attempt to cope with this overloading of information people desensitize themselves and are sucked by a societal vacuum into an unreactive state called unconsciousness. Even basic human emotional tragedies presented in to news of plane crashes, shootings, and natural disasters can bounce off the unconscious shield worn by so many. If people aren't even affected by current national traumas it is highly unlikely that pieces of local historical tragedies like the Eastland Disaster, despite the number of human lives lost can penetrate the trained unconscious minds. However, if institutions like the media and Hollywood break the cycle and present information to the public in an entertaining or eye catching way with a strong enough stimulus to break through the shield than people will begin to respond and enter the event into their long term memory.

I think it is extremely interesting to watch and be apart of bringing out the Eastland Disaster from the historical dust pile into mainstream society. There are always the few who make up the minority of people who chose to live their lives consciously and provide balance to the dehumanizing world. Perhaps as a result of our efforts to commemorate the horrible

tragedy of the Eastland Disaster people will awaken and become more compassionate towards fellow human beings increasing the strength of the universal human bond.