

Gabriela Reyes
Eastland Disaster paper
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Dr. Fournier
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Eastland Disaster

I think that the answer to why no one knows about the Eastland Disaster is due to an accumulation of things; as opposed to one omni-causing reason. I think that communication was, if not one of the primary, than at least a very integral part of the initial amnesia toward the Eastland disaster. To begin with, the first completely electronic practical television was not established until 1929. Meaning that news would not be able to travel in the way it does now; unlike then, today about 98% of all homes in the US have at least one television set. The unique thing about television is that you do not have to try really hard to know what is going on. The flashing images do the work for you. For example there was no way someone in the US was not going to know that Princess Diane died in that car accident. It was on every channel. At this time radio was the fastest means of communication, even though not many could afford the luxury of a radio in their own home. Newspapers for the most part took the responsibility of spreading the news. Although some 75,911 people in Chicago were illiterate at the time.

Besides communication, other things contributed to forgetting the disaster; like, the company Western Electric for instance. Here is this big successful company that has the means to plan such an elaborate excursion for its employees. Out of nowhere the Eastland disaster comes about and kills over 800 people. That is a lot of people; even though families were included in that number, imagine the number of employers who lost their lives. Western Electric would have to eventually find replacements for these individuals. Such a disaster is not attractive for a person looking for a job. I am sure that Western Electric did everything it could, to forget the incident for the good of the company. I know that Western Electric

eventually changed its name, perhaps in a desperate attempt to become as alienated from the disaster as possible.

Another reason as to why the Eastland disaster might have been subject to social amnesia is the embarrassment of the whole thing. One might ask themselves why do people remember the Titanic and not the Eastland? The Titanic was cruising at 22 knots when the disaster occurred compared to the 0 knots of the Eastland. At top speed the Titanic hit an iceberg in the middle of the ocean, the nearest piece of dry land was 450 miles away (Newfoundland); and the Eastland just tip over while docked and only 20 feet to the wharf. In the end the Titanic rests at the bottom of the sea which in a way seems in a way romantic. While the Eastland was sold for scrap. All in all the story of the Titanic is more enchanting than that of the Eastland.

I do believe that for these reasons a group of people can choose to forget. Social amnesia is possible when a devastating disaster such as the Eastland that affected so many people. So many people at the same time all in the same place, it seems too overwhelming. It had to be intense even if you did not lose a relative at the time, with all the mourning that took place.

This whole disaster can be viewed in three very different ways. One can take the functionalist perspective and say that everyone dies at one time or another, what difference does it make if someone 800 people in the US die of a heat attack in a day than 800 people die in a boat on the same day. Death is not beautiful but it has to happen it is part of life, how it happens is irrelevant. Death makes way for the living, job opportunities await Western Electric. There is a reason that people do not remember the incident. It was not that everyone simply forgot. Yes, people forgot but why? Something happened on July 24, 1915,

something that affected and changed the lives of the people in Chicago at the time. Sometimes in when something is too traumatic your brain shuts it off so that you do not remember it. Perhaps some people had what is known as the decay of the trace theory. This is a theory of forgetting when something is too traumatic. There are retention problems in the brain so one has no access to the memory. Potential neural firing in the brain is blocked enabling one to remember. It is in a sense a defense mechanism, so that the painful memories go away. Also, people were not as opened to talk about feeling as people are inclined to now a days when people have marriage counselors. The idea of someone who does not even know you telling you what is wrong with your marriage might have sounded very strange in 1915.

The conflict perspective might argue that the accident could have been avoided. The ship was a wreck with a history of accidents that left it unsuitable for sea. The Eastland might have sounded like a good idea to Western Electric; perhaps it was cheaper than most steamboats considering its conditions. But the workers had to pay the price that Western Electric would not. People lost their lives because Western Electric did not get a more suitable means of transportation. Even when the ship reached it's maximum capacity Western Electric failed to take initiative. The crew for the most part survived, the people who ended up losing in this relationship between Western Electric workers and St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company, were the remaining members of the families that perished. There was hardly any compensation for the damaged caused by the irresponsibility of the steamship company. Why did people aboard the Titanic receive a handsome sum of compensation while the Eastland survivors were left stranded in their helplessness? Imagine an orphan whose family had not survived the incident, where was the child turn to?

An interactionist might focus on the crew, and question if the crew did everything in their power to prevent the accident. The captain cared more about the ship than the passengers aboard. The ship was a wreck to begin with, and eventually if not on July 24, 1915 then other someday; it was only a matter of time. The Eastland was destined to fail because of its tattered conditions. Hundreds of people drowned; didn't people know how to swim? Safety was just 20 feet away. And if they did not know how to swim why did they not? What in aspect of society, what norms were they following that enabled them not to learn how to swim? One woman I recently talked to said that her mother rushed to the site the next day to see what the commotion was all about. Bodies were still floating on the river. She said that although it was a nice sunny day it was chilly that day and people wore coats. (Given Chicago weather we know that it is very possible that we have a chilly day in the middle of our summer.) It became very hard to rescue people in their coats wet coats that added excess weight. For people who could not swim the extra weight only added to their struggles to keep them afloat.

I believe that the Eastland disaster was a disaster way after the accident had occurred. The silence maintained a collective pain, I am sure people just wanted to forget the whole thing, and get on with their lives at the time. I don't really think that the majority of the older people still alive today who knew about the Eastland really forgot. I think that people just do not talk about it. Except for historians and very curious people, no body really cares. It has nothing to do with our lives now. We have strict regulations on ships and if anything like that were to happen today people would be suing left and right. The boat would lose the passengers would win; imagine the scandal and the chaos if they did not. It is that simple today people are very egocentric it only matters if somehow something affects you.