

Jennifer Burton  
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### **The Forgotten Tragedy**

On July 24th 1915, disaster fell upon Chicago. In the Chicago River 2,500 people boarded a ship that was to take them to their company picnic. Right before the boat departed, it somehow tipped completely over. Over 800 people died. Twenty-two entire families were wiped out. Children immediately became orphans. Wives and husbands were left widowed. It took weeks to pull out all the dead bodies. The victims were laid out in rows to be identified. This tragedy, rated the number one in Chicago's history, was called The Eastland Disaster. Though this tragedy sounds devastating enough to reach people all over the country, few knew about it. For a reason not defined, the Eastland Disaster was hidden from the public. It barely reached the population of Chicago. So why is it so concealed? What happened that made the incident unknown to the public? What are the roles that society played?

I explored these questions in my sociology class. I interviewed twenty random people about their knowledge on the Eastland Disaster. Half of the people were over the age of sixty; half of the people were younger than fifty-nine. I asked them their ideas on why society is slowly letting this major event in history disappear. I discovered that only eight of the twenty people knew about the disaster. Two of the eight had family members or close friends that were directly related to the tragic incident. The answers as to why this event never received high publicity were pretty repetitive. Many believed the cause was lack of communication or the other events during that time were more important to people. I believe differently.

I have looked at this event from all angles of the three major perspectives in sociology. As a functionalist, I asked major questions as to the causation of the incident, the function the

incident had, and why it is even being addressed today. There are a few twists as to why the Eastland ship tipped. The embarrassing idea is that too many people went to one side of the ship to wave goodbye to the others still on land. The ship couldn't hold the weight and that made it unbalanced. The scientific approach is that the ship was top heavy because of the extra lifeboats on board. The ship was constructed for speed and the narrowness and shallow draft caused it to be unstable. Consequently, when the ship became rocky, the unbalanced weight at the top made the Eastland capsize. The scandalized version is that the small tugboat that was used to guide the Eastland away from the dock somehow tipped it over. Regardless of the reason the tragedy started, it ended in devastation. As a functionalist, this event, although devastating, must not have left our economy unstable. True, some families became unstable, but not the entire city of Chicago, or the electric company that sponsored the picnic. Because the men of the city were always looking for jobs during this time, the electric company was able to hire the manpower needed to keep it going. It made more families stable because their income increased. Therefore, this tragic incident can be seen as contributing to the stability of society. Many didn't want to discuss how Eastland contributed to their employment because they wanted to think they could have gotten their jobs because of who they were, not because the last man died. Another idea is that during this time, the main event was WWI. The war had more of a hold on the economy and it affected a wider population. Because of this, Eastland wasn't the topic read on the headlines. It wasn't as important to society.

Why did discussion of this tragedy begin? Because the number of deaths and the location of the disaster were so important, it made it the worst event in Chicago's history. As students, we are taught about the Chicago Fire and the Titanic. The capsizing of Eastland was

more gruesome than the fire and the number of passenger fatalities was greater than Titanic's. A survivor passed away nine years ago. The granddaughter's felt a need to keep history alive and knew that it was dying out as generations passed. They organized the Eastland Historical Society to make sure the event would never be forgotten. Today, the organization is growing and as people are rediscovering some to the history of Chicago they are shocked that this tragedy has not received the recognition it deserves. Now people are trying to make it public. This is why the Eastland Disaster has become a widespread topic.

Sociologists, who view the world with a conflict perspective, want to know which people gained from this tragedy and which ones lost. They ask who has been exploited and who has retained power and even why some benefit over others. During the event of the Eastland Disaster the only people who gained were those who took over the jobs of the deceased. The number of people that lost from this event, were too great to count. The immediate families and extended families, the close friends and acquaintances, the neighbors and coworkers, were all losers for the months and even years that followed. Therefore, it is possible that this tragedy was kept quiet because it was hard to talk about. When it was mentioned, it made people sad and angry. It brought back painful memories for everyone and many stopped discussing it. People were traumatized and stability of sanity declined. The widowed men and women, the parents of dead children, even the orphans, had mental breakdowns and people during that time believed that if wasn't mentioned it would help everyone heal faster. This reasoning may help others understand why the tragedy had been hidden from society.

There were shared emotions after this tragedy, which allowed people to communicate without using words. Using an interactionist perspective, I believed that shared signs and

gestures kept the incident from spreading to other areas farther than the Chicago land. It has been reported that after the tragedy struck mourners put black bows on the front doors of those that died. People knew whom the victims were without having to ask one another. The Eastland was becoming less talked about. If people were not talking, how could it spread? The counter point of that would be if people traveling through the neighborhood saw the bows, they would inquire about them and then the news would spread. I cannot answer why this didn't happen.

I truly believe that the reason Eastland Disaster is so vaguely known is a combination of all the above ideas and the obvious ones. The only people that died were from Chicago. This means that the news would only deeply affect those in the area. Secondly, with the WWI in the progress, all classes of people were affected. The newspapers wanted business and the only people to afford papers were upper class. The people on the ship were blue collar and didn't fit with the upper class. The newspapers only had the disaster on the front page for a day. Because the war was making the headlines, and it was so serious, the disaster was put on a back burner. Many of the upper class had other worries, so the Eastland was forgotten. Also, the fact that this tragedy carried serious pain meant that talking about it hurt. Then, if the people, who were out of work, found a job at the electric company, they didn't want to reiterate that they only got the job because of a death. Some people who were descendants of the victims thoroughly knew about the disaster and assumed others knew about it too, so there was no need to talk about it. Let's not forget the fact that the entire disaster was ludicrous. I mean, the ship never left the dock. People drowned in a river, very close to shore. People were embarrassed to talk about such things. Some people didn't believe the story when they heard it because it was so silly. I do not think that this happening was social amnesia. I feel

that once someone knows about the Eastland Disaster, they won't forget it. This means society can't forget it. I think what happened here is a matter of people assuming that others already know about it with a combination involving the pain of talking about it. It is not social amnesia; there isn't a name for what has happened. I think the only reason why society doesn't know about it is because of the chain of events. That's all there is to it.