

Rahelle Garcia
November 9, 2000
Sociology-Fournier
Eastland Disaster

The Eastland Disaster occurred in the early morning of July 24, 1915. Bound for Michigan City, Indiana, employees of Western Electric and their friends and family expected to spend a festive day full of events. There were four vessels chartered to take approximately 7,000 people across the Lake Michigan, one of them was named the Eastland. Due to many factors, some of which are still left uncertain, the Eastland toppled over. This paper will discuss factors that contributed to why people believe that the Eastland Disaster has not gained the fame it should considering the total number of fatalities that occurred that day.

With the survey conducted, we, as a class, were able to discuss responses received from the public as to why they were unaware of the Eastland Disaster. A popular response from those under the age of 50 was that they are simply too young to know of a disaster that occurred 85 years ago. This was especially heard amongst college age students. Unless people have taken history classes focused on Chicago's history, it is unlikely that they have heard about the Eastland. Many also believed that it was overshadowed by the war that was taking place simultaneously. The nation was too concerned with war that it did not give the same attention to local tragedies that we, in the present, do now. The media available in 1915 was also limited, unlike those that are openly available to us at any given time. For example, there were no televisions. The majority of the public today receives current events with the aid of the evening news or 24 hours news channels. Therefore, many people were limited to the newspapers. If the literacy rate was not exceptional at the time, then people often had to rely on others to read newspapers to them. Others simply believe that those who did survive

did not want to conjure up such a traumatic tragedy that they instead chose to try and forget the event. This could be true, especially amongst those who lost immediate family due to the occurrence. Another reason why the disaster may have been so well concealed could be blamed on the city of Chicago itself. Rescue efforts used to try and save those who were thrown off the ship were poor. The city could have done a better job and if they had, it could have resulted in more survivors.

There were a few specific patterns that I found within my data. After briefly informing those who were unaware of the disaster, many vaguely remember seeing the plaque dedicated to the catastrophe that was once placed on the Wacker Street Bridge. Of those who had heard of the disaster and were under the age of 60, they had only recently heard of the tragedy due to the Titanic exhibit at the Field Museum. Being able to display their artifacts alongside those of the Titanic made many more aware of Chicago's own personal Titanic incident. Of those over 60 who were informed of the disaster, they knew what the disaster referred to but they were unsure of the specific details. Many also believe that the tragedy should be common knowledge to Chicagoans and should be taught throughout schools in Illinois.

Conflict theorists understand social behavior due to tensions caused by events. Examples of questions they would ask include, but are not limited to:

1. Did anyone gain anything in concealing the existence of the Eastland Disaster?
2. Was there anything lost in not making the general public aware of such a tragedy?
3. Was anyone exploited by not making the public aware of the catastrophe?

Conflict theorists would focus on the inequalities between the employer and employee, the ship's crew and the passengers, etc. They may also focus on the power and control struggles

experienced when people were made aware that there was a possibility that the ship would tumble. Rather than concentrating on individuals, conflict theorists would investigate how the disaster affected society as a whole.

Functionalists also examine how events will affect the greater society rather than target a small group. Functionalists believe that all things that exist play a significant role in our society. Examples of questions they may ask include:

1. Was hiding the tragedy manifested or latent?
2. Was the reasoning rational?
3. Did hiding the tragedy promote some sort of stability?

Functionalist may focus on whether or not it was intended that the disaster be suppressed. They may also wonder whether or not hiding the event had a functional or dysfunctional impact on society.

Interactionists concentrate on smaller groups instead of the general society. They examine relationships people have amongst themselves. Interactionism is broken down into three sub-perspectives: symbolic, dramaturgical, and ethno methodology. Questions that interactions may ask include:

1. How did authorities expect people to react to the tragedy?
2. Were there any symbols that may have lead those on the ship to think that something was going to go wrong?
3. Didn't the actions of officials on the boat cause any passengers to think that something was going to happen that wasn't planned?

Interactionists will focus on individual situations. For example, an interactionist studying the Eastland Disaster may choose to focus on the trials and tribulations that Borghild Aanstad

experienced before and after the shipwreck. They may examine how her life changed and how she had to adjust her life accordingly.

I believe there is evidence to support the theory -of social amnesia. There have been many instances when people forget certain events that occurred only a few years ago. They only remember the event when someone else discusses it and their memory has been jogged beforehand. I believe that social amnesia can only be applied to events that are well known by the general public and have been discussed at some point in a person's education. Therefore, I would not consider the case of the Eastland Disaster to be one of social amnesia. It is only natural that those who did remember forgot due to the fact that they are aging. The majority of the public has no clue or was never informed of the disaster; therefore it would not be a justifiable case of social amnesia.

The Eastland Disaster is a tragedy that occurred on the Chicago River and took the lives of over 800 passengers. It is an event commonly remembered by the aging and those who are affected directly, such as those related to the victims. Only after 85 years has the general public become aware of Chicago's personal Titanic downfall.