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Intro to Sociology

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### The Eastland Disaster

On Saturday, July 24", 1915 the employees of the Western Electric Company along with their friends and families bearded the Eastland with no idea of what was to come. Of the thousands of people who had shown up for the company picnic, more than eight hundred of these people would be dead by eight o'clock that morning. There is no question that the Eastland Disaster was a tremendous tragedy. However, for some reason this tragedy is not very well remembered in our current society. This makes us start to question why. Why is the Eastland Disaster not well remembered today when other incidents such as the Chicago Fire and the Titanic are still fresh in our memories? Certainly the death of 844 people cannot go completely overlooked. Although the Eastland is not completely forgotten by everyone in our society, a large percentage of people who have not heard of the disaster are enough to start the process of examining and digging deeper into answering this question of why.

When conducting a survey concerning the knowledge, or lack of, concerning the Eastland Disaster, I found many different kinds of responses to this question of why. Many of the younger respondents blamed the forgetting of the Eastland Disaster on the Titanic. They believe that the Titanic overshadowed the Eastland because it was a larger, more glamorous ship, and also because more people died on the Titanic. Basically, the Eastland was just another "boat" disaster. Also, the younger generation believed that the disaster was somewhat of an embarrassment and that is why it is not remembered. There is a belief that if there was a

more thorough mechanical checking of the boat, or if the warning signs of a problem with the balancing of the boat had been taken more seriously, then innocent lives could have been saved.

The older respondents had differing opinions about the Eastland Disaster than the younger generation. The older generation also believes that the Eastland was overshadowed by other events. However, they not only believe that the Titanic overshadowed the Eastland, but they also say that World War I had a large part in it also. They also say that the disaster was simply too hard to talk about. Because many of the people who died were families and children, it was a very personal tragedy and even those who didn't lose loved ones in the disaster were able to feel the pain of those who did. Also, the event was a shocking disaster and many of the people who had connections to someone who was on the Eastland didn't know how to personally deal with such a misfortune. Because of this, many people who can remember the tragedy choose not to discuss it with others because it was too painful to talk about.

Although these reasons are some possible explanations for why the Eastland Disaster is not remembered, there are other possibilities also. Much of the reason why fewer people in the younger generations haven't heard of the Eastland is the lack of current records. Of the young people that I surveyed, most of them had heard about the Eastland outside of the school environment. There is a lack of historical records concerning the Eastland Disaster, and there is also a lack of education about it in schools, even in Chicago history courses. These two things make it very difficult for the younger generations to learn about the Eastland Disaster unless they have a relative or know someone who was involved in the terrible tragedy that took place 85 years ago.

The Eastland Disaster can be looked at through the three major sociological perspectives, one of which is the conflict perspective. This perspective is characterized by having tension and struggle between groups, and inequality between these groups. The conflict perspective would probably focus on the social class of those people who were onboard and who died on the Eastland. Someone looking at the Eastland from a conflict perspective would probably notice that those who died on the Eastland were mainly working-class immigrants while many of those onboard the Titanic, for example, were part of the elite upper class. They might see this example as a reason why the Eastland is not remembered and the Titanic is. The conflict perspective also emphasizes that people are shaped through power and authority. It is possible that at the time of the disaster it was encouraged not to report or show photos of what had happened. This may have been done out of respect for the families of the victims, or just because the disaster reflected badly upon the city of Chicago. No matter what these reasons were, it is possible that the disaster was not discussed much through the generations because the people still indirectly felt that authority telling them not to discuss the Eastland.

Another perspective that could be used to analyze the Eastland Disaster is the functionalist perspective. This perspective sees society as stable and well integrated. Someone looking at the Eastland Disaster from the functionalist perspective might question what kind of contribution this disaster made into society. How was society affected as a result of this tragedy occurring? For example the Chicago Fire resulted in the rebuilding of the city. The Titanic defied the idea that something can be invincible, and proved the need for lifeboats. If there was no such result from the Eastland Disaster, then a person looking at the incident from the functionalist perspective might cite this as the reason why society chooses

not to remember it. There were no positive results from the disaster, and it didn't contribute to the stability or survival of society.

The Eastland Disaster can also be viewed from the Interactionist perspective. This perspective says that society is active in influencing and affecting everyday social interaction. Social change is reflected in people's social positions and their communications with others. This outlook would question how people in the Chicago area talked about the Eastland Disaster, or if they talked about it at all. Interactionists would blame the lack of communication present about the Eastland. They would look deeper into the insufficient amount of discussion between people, and question as to why this is. Was the tragedy too traumatic to talk about with each other? Was there an element of embarrassment concerning the disaster, in that people didn't discuss the tragedy in order to keep a good name to their city or their company of employment? Also, Interactionists would want to investigate whom the tragedy could be discussed with. They might question as to whether it was only a locally talked about incident. It is possible that people spoke to each other about it, but did not share the information with anyone who wasn't present in Chicago at the time of the disaster.

Personally, I do believe that there is such a thing as social amnesia. It is important to note that the remembering of the Eastland incident is only recent. For decades the disaster was all but lost in the memories of those who experienced it first hand. It is these people, the people who were alive to read about the Eastland in the papers, and the people who lost friends and families in this disaster, these people who chose forget that the death of more than eight hundred people ever occurred. In my opinion, this is enough evidence to characterize the forgetting of the Eastland as a case of social amnesia. The Eastland is not integrated into our history education so that younger people can learn about what happened. Also, the

Disaster is not commemorated very well, and there is only a plaque present in order to pay homage to the death of those eight hundred people. The only form of information about the Eastland is from the older generation that can remember it. This entire generation of people collectively decided not to remember that a certain event ever took place, and in turn affected younger generations by not allowing them to ever hear of the Eastland Disaster.

There is no single answer as to why no one knows of the Eastland Disaster. I do believe, however, that any idea concerning this issue must somehow be related to the people who were in Chicago at the time of the disaster, because it is these people who chose to forget what happened. There was no major form of mass media at the time, and people outside of Chicago would not hear of the disaster first hand. So, why didn't they ever hear of the Eastland Disaster? I think that some of the more viable reasons are related to the emotional state of those people involved in and around the disaster. Some of it could have been because the incident was simply too close to home, and too traumatic to deal with, or there might have been a feeling of embarrassment related to the disaster. The Eastland Disaster was a very personal tragedy and I believe that people chose to forget this tragedy for very personal reasons.