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The Eastland Disaster

What is going on in society that a historical event where over 800 perished is not remembered? Have we become that apathetic, that oblivious to the goings-on that take place right outside our doorstep? The Eastland Disaster of 1915 is a prime example of society's ability to forget important events in our country. I interviewed 20 people and of those 20 only six knew of the Eastland Disaster. Two of the ten individuals I spoke to under the age of 60 had heard about this tragedy, most of these interviewees were over the age of 25. A 31-year-old woman said she did a report about the disaster when she was in college. She took a course that focused on Chicago's history and found out about the hundreds of people who died on the Chicago River. She concludes that people were too busy thinking about the war and did not want to hear any more bad news, "war has always been an extremely tragic event in the eyes of Americans. We would rather give press to the men fighting to protect our country and the risks we face rather than focus on the unnecessary death of people who could have survived if more responsibility was taken." Many took the stance that the war coverage drowned out the reality of the Eastland Disaster. But it is fact that many Chicago newspapers ran the story front page, so why don't people know?

Four of the ten elderly people I interviewed had heard of the disaster. My Grandparents once met a woman in the seventies whose childhood friend died on that ship. My grandfather believes that the early 1900's was a very conservative time. People did not speak of things the way they do today. Secrecy and inverted feelings were a sign of strength; you were respected for your silence. My grandmother however thinks that the lack of media

in that time is why many did not hear about the disaster and therefore we do not remember it now because it is almost as if it never happened. Others felt this way as well. Many younger people believed that lack of media is to blame. In 1915 newspapers were the main source of news and they were not nationally read papers.

I am not satisfied with the answers I found. I realize that the event took place a long time ago but we remember the Chicago Fire, the sinking of the Titanic, and other tragic events that happened long before the Eastland disaster. I believe that the event was too embarrassing, that no one wanted to be a part of deaths that occurred in stupidity. Those 800+ people should have walked off that boat when the crew recognized the problem. The captain of the ship should have canceled the excursion for he knew something was not right with his ship. Did the survivors and those affected by what happened choose to forget? The lack of knowledge on this subject suggests that information was not passed through generations because few wanted to remember what occurred on the river that day.

In regards to this situation we look to the three major theoretical perspectives in sociology: Conflict, Functionalist and Interactionalist. A functionalist might ask why do some know of this event while others are clueless. The Eastland Disaster promoted no positive side of society, in reality it was a negative event that society has chosen to forget. A fact that proves the Functionalist point that if it benefits society it will be passed on from generation to generation. Nothing beneficial came from this tragedy and so it was forgotten.

Conflict theorists might wonder who would gain and lose in knowing about this event. Obviously Western Electric looked bad after this tragedy; they were the ones who planned the event, who rented the faulty ship. Wide coverage of this issue might hurt the company, which, in a Conflict perspective, is regarded higher than its workers. The individuals who

died were average workers who no one cares about, who are easily replaceable. Conflict theorists believe in inequality, and those who died did not have a chance of being recognized for they were of unimportant status in the eyes of big business. And then there are the questions an Interactionist would ask: how do people define situations? How do we learn this information about our history? Are we taking things for granted? Families have the responsibility of teaching their children, if they choose not to share information than it will not live through generations. An Interactionist would believe that the event was not learned through the family or through social interactions and therefore was not remembered.

I believe that the Functionalist perspective best suits this event. The Eastland disaster did not benefit society so it was easier to forget. People did not want to remember such a tragedy and so they forgot and moved on. Knowledge was not passed because it served no purpose. We remember the Chicago Fire because it helped revitalize Chicago. New buildings were built and overall Chicago became a stronger city through its renewal. The 800 people who died on the Eastland changed history in no way. People forgot what happened because they chose to, not because they suffered from some sort of amnesia.

The fact exists that hundreds died on a ship in the Chicago River in 1915, no one can deny that. Individuals, families chose to keep the news to themselves, chose to move on and focus their attention elsewhere. We don't like to look bad and the crew of the Eastland and Western Electric, the company that planned the event looked incredibly bad after the boat capsized, killing so many people. Whole families died for a reason that could have been remedied. The death of so many changed nothing in history except put the Eastland out of commission for a while. Why remember such a horrible event when it brought about no change to benefit society? Social amnesia is not the answer to why no one remembers. We

are a selfish society and commit to memory the things that make us stronger as a whole.

Intentionally the Eastland Disaster was forgotten.