

Forgotten in History: The Eastland Disaster

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How could such a tragic event as the Eastland Disaster, a ship that capsized killing over 800 people in 1915 in Chicago, be forgotten less than a generation later? In order to better answer this question a survey was taken in Chicago. The survey asked random residents of the city if they knew of the disaster, why so if they did, as well as asked possible reasons for the event's relative obscurity. Out of the 20 people surveyed less than half knew of the event. From these results, it was found that many people only knew of the event from a recent news blurb or they had some sort of personal connection through the event. Overall however, the reason for so many people not knowing of the event remains unknown, however many interesting ideas have come about.

Two different groups of people were surveyed for this experiment. The first group was of younger adults whose ages ranged from 18 through age 55. Out of this group 4 people were aware of the incident, while 6 people did not. The second group of people surveyed were older adults, in which 5 people knew of the event, while 5 did not.

Throughout the younger adults surveyed, the four people who did know of the event only knew so because of recent news coverage, or because of personal connection. Two people responded that they were aware of the disaster because of an article on a recent television news broadcast. The broadcast was being aired to try and bring awareness to the disaster, and obviously it worked to a certain extent. The other two adults who were aware of the event responded so because they each had family members or friends of family who were involved in the disaster.

In the case of the older adults, half of the responder's had heard of the event. Two of the older adults also responded that they knew of the event due to news broadcasts in the

recent year or two. The other three people who responded stated that they had heard of the event through word of mouth, but did not know anyone in the incident.

An interesting find from asking people possible reasons for the event's unknown status was that no societal level reasons were found. According to the younger adults, many people did not know of the event because it was "too local", "it was a senseless disaster", and that "people just don't talk about it." The older adults also found that "there was no reason to talk about it", "It was overshadowed by the war", and "it was just a long time ago, and there are more important things to talk about now." All of these responses show that the reason for no one knowing about the event is due to society as a whole. All of these reasons help to create a reason for many people not talking about the event, as opposed to personal issues. No individual reasons, such as the event being too traumatic to talk about, were found.

According to most sociologists, the answer to why people do or do not know about the Eastland disaster can be answered according to three different sociological perspectives. According to the Conflict perspective, social behavior is best understood in terms of conflict or tension between competing groups. In the case of the E.D., it could be argued that no one really knows about the event because no one is gaining from its story being told. No one gains from exploitation in the event, and no one loses from the story being told. Because no one gains from its story being told, the story has ceased to be told.

The next perspective that also provides a reasonable answer as to why the Eastland Disaster has ceased to be discussed is the Functionalist perspective. The Functionalist perspective is a sociological approach that emphasizes the way that parts of a society are structured to maintain its stability. According to this perspective, if the aspect of society does not serve a purpose, it won't continue. In the case of the E.D., there is no real purpose for

people to discuss the event. There was no purpose for the ship to go down, as well as nothing can really be learned from the senseless event. Due to the fact that there is no reason to talk about the event, society as whole has started to forget about the event, as it is stopped being related from generation to generation.

The final perspective that can be applied to the Eastland is the Interactionalist Perspective. The Interactionalist Perspective generalizes about fundamental or everyday forms of social interaction, asking how and why people act the ways they do. The Eastland Disaster shows that people do not talk about the event in everyday life. People are not expected to talk about the event because it does not relate to everyday life. No one else talks about the event, so people just do not start talking about.

All of these arguments contribute to the argument that there is definitely a case of social amnesia present in our culture. People do not remember this event because they do not want to remember it. As the survey shows, there was no real reason for the ship to have gone over, killing so many. There was no iceberg like the Titanic, or cow like in the Chicago Fire. The Eastland was just a boat that went over in the river right after passengers finished boarding. The disaster was senseless, and was not interesting enough for widespread coverage or historical significance. Nothing was to be learned from the tragedy, nor was the event itself an interesting or fascinating event deemed worthy by society to discuss.

Overall, the reason for the unknown status of the Eastland in history can be attributed to the events senseless nature. As seen throughout the three perspectives, nothing was gained or learned from the tragic event, and therefore society decided to stop talking about the event. Most of the first-hand survivors are gone, and now the only way people seem to know of the event is through news articles. In our society today, a tragic event such as this in which no

lesson can be learned, that does not include fascinating stories and recounts, and one in which nothing can be gained, is definitely an event that will be forgotten today.