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The Eastland Disaster

The Eastland Disaster of 1915 was a traumatic event that leaves us with questions that may never be answered. Western Electric was hosting a picnic for their company and the boat sank before it ever left the dock. Eight hundred people from the Chicago area died that day and many people to this day do not even know that this event took place. The question that needs to be answered is “Why don't people know what the Eastland disaster is?” I interviewed twenty people from the Chicago area ten of which were older than the age of sixty. The question asked was “Have you heard of the Eastland Disaster?” The results conjured even more questions. A surprising sixteen out of twenty people, ten of which over the age of sixty, did know about the disaster. The responses in my data seemed to overlap and repeat.

One response that I received many times was that the public doesn't know about it because they were never told much about it. It wasn't ever publicized enough for people to be completely informed. They would ask “How is the public suppose to know much about it when they were never told about it.” This raises another question. Why wasn't the Eastland Disaster publicized? There are many probable answers. The Titanic happened years before and this disaster will be known forever. Many people died in the Titanic and another boat sinking after it was embarrassing. Also, passengers on the Titanic were all upper class and the Eastland Disaster was mainly lower class immigrants. In society then and still now, the wealthy receive more recognition than the middle or lower classes.

Another response that I heard was that it was so tragic that people in the Chicago area do not like to talk about it. It was a very local event that it hurts people to discuss it. This response was mainly from the age group of sixty and over. It was more personal to them because they either knew someone on the boat or it happened during their lifetime. The younger age group that did know about the disaster did not recognize it by its formal name the "Eastland Disaster." I had to explain exactly what happened and then they remembered. I think that this is one of the reasons that it isn't widely known. The name "The Eastland Disaster" is not embedding in society's minds' as a historical happening. The lack of publicity could be the reason for this.

The last response that I heard, and one that I heard quite often, is that it happened so long ago that people today don't know about it. This response shows that our society doesn't think of the "Eastland Disaster" as a significant historical tragedy as we do the Titanic or the Chicago Fire. This was proof that there may be a case of social amnesia in our society concerning the "Eastland Disaster."

All of these responses are a start to understanding the case of social amnesia that may be occurring in our society. All of these answers put together create a strong explanation of why people do not know about the "Eastland Disaster", but there is no way to decide which ones are really true. Looking at this disaster from all of the theoretical perspectives is important to more clearly understand.

The Conflict theorist would think that the "Eastland Disaster" is basically unknown because of the social standing of the passengers. The passengers on the Eastland Disaster were working class people that were immigrants in Chicago. They did not receive the publicity because of their social standing. This event shows the social inequality that was

occurring at the time in the city of Chicago. It is a conflict between the lower and upper class. The Titanic received unforgettable publicity because of the wealthy passengers on the boat. This historical event showed the inequality of the different classes in the early nineteenth hundreds.

The Functionalist would say that the “Eastland Disaster” happened to prove a point in society. After a tragic event such as the “Titanic” occurred, society is expected to fix the problems that caused the event to prevent another one from happening. The “Eastland Disaster” was proof that this did not occur. This showed society that we cannot fix everything. Also a functionalist would say that this occurred to show the inequality of classes. The working class people did not receive the attention that the wealthy did. This event happened and helped to show where the society stood in their ideas at the time.

The Interactionist would say that the “Eastland Disaster” isn't known about because the people wanted to cover it up and not be reminded of it. It was so tragic that it was painful to hear or speak of it so the only answer would be to forget about it. Looking at the “Eastland Disaster” helps to more fully understand reasoning why it is not remembered but does not give a concrete answer. It is just different ways of analyzing the situation to come up with good answers.

All of these responses and possible answers have all equal validity, but some are more reasonable than others. I believe that the reason no one knows about the Eastland disaster is that the Titanic occurred years before it and it took the attention and caused the embarrassment of it. The Titanic was filled with wealthy important people and the Eastland was not. Also, they did not publicize it a lot because the people were all ready worn out of hearing about the Titanic. Another boat disaster would be too much and very overwhelming.

There is a lack of good information out about the “Eastland Disaster” which makes it hard to learn about it if you were interested. Movies and books were written about the Titanic and it is hard to find information about the “Eastland Disaster” on the Internet. The Titanic happened so close to the time of the Eastland that it was too draining to society to go through the same feelings again.

I do not believe that any of these responses contribute to the answer that we went through social amnesia. I think that there are reasons that explain why we do not know about the “Eastland Disaster”. I think that social amnesia may exist but this is not an example of it. The timing of the "Eastland Disaster" was just so that our society could not handle to publicize it therefore making it a non-memorable event. It could also be compared to the news. When somebody famous dies, the whole nation is informed of it and at the same time people are dying everyday and it makes the local newspapers. The Titanic is comparable to the famous people in our nation. The Titanic and the Eastland Disaster are both equal in the level of tragedy just as a famous person's life is equally important as anyone else's life.

The “Eastland Disaster” will remain a questionable subject until more in depth research is done. The small survey taken is a good start to answering these questions, but we may never know why no one knows about the “Eastland Disaster”. Hearing personal stories made the “Eastland Disaster” more real to me. It is a questionable subject that still needs to be explored. I do not feel that a case of social amnesia is occurring concerning the “Eastland Disaster”, but I do feel that there are valid reasons that can explain why no one knows about it. The “Eastland Disaster” is a tragedy lost in time and one day we will know why it is not remembered.