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### The Eastland Disaster: An Unknown Tragedy

"Tragic and Unknown", these are two words that come to mind when I think of the Eastland Disaster. The Eastland Disaster took place in Chicago River along Wacker Drive. This catastrophic accident caused over eight hundred deaths in 1915. Many people mourned the deaths of their family and friends due to this horrifying calamity. Although this was truly a horrible disaster, many people do not know of this traumatic event in Chicago history. This causes many people to ask, "Why do people not know of the Eastland Disaster?" In this short essay, I will discuss a few theories that may explain why the Eastland Disaster remains to be an unknown tragedy.

In order to explain the theories, I conducted a small informal survey. I asked ten people under sixty and ten people over sixty if they have ever heard of the Eastland Disaster. Before even doing this survey, I thought that mostly the people over sixty would know about the Eastland Disaster. Since these people were older, I figured they would know about the Eastland. After I conducted this small survey, I was shocked at my results: more of the younger people I talked to knew about the Eastland Disaster. Four out of the ten non-elderly people knew about the Eastland Disaster, and 2 out of the ten elderly people knew about the Eastland Disaster.

The non-elderly people that I questioned were between the ages of eighteen to twenty-eight. Six out of the ten people I surveyed did not know anything about the Eastland Disaster. I asked those six people why they thought that nobody had heard of the Eastland. There were two popular responses to this question: people said they were not born when it happened and they did not know any Chicago history because they did not live in Chicago. The remaining four people who knew about the Eastland Disaster only knew about it because they had taken Chicago History classes. I questioned these people about the Chicago History classes they took. All four people admitted that the Chicago History classes they took mentioned the Eastland Disaster, but they did not discuss the event in full detail. The information in the history books only had a few lines of information about the Eastland Disaster. Since the Eastland Disaster only was mentioned for a few lines, these people did not know much about the disaster.

After questioning ten non-elderly people, I surveyed ten elderly people about the Eastland. Surprisingly, eight out of the ten people had never heard of the Eastland disaster. I asked them if they had any reasoning as to why they had never heard of this major part of Chicago history. There were two popular answers to this question: people either did not live in the Chicago until recently, or they did not know any Chicago history. The other two elderly people I surveyed did hear about the Eastland Disaster. The only reason these two people knew about the Eastland disaster was because they saw the Eastland Disaster exhibit at the museum. They admitted that they went to see the Titanic exhibit, and they stumbled into the Eastland exhibit. These two people also admitted that they would not have known about the Eastland disaster if they did not see the exhibit at the museum.

After conducting this short survey, I brainstormed many theories and ideas regarding Chicago's unknown tragedy. Before I discuss my ideas, I must analyze why the Eastland is unheard of using the three sociological approaches: Functionalist theory, Conflict theory and Interactionist theory. Functionalists emphasize the parts of society and how they are structured. Functionalists may believe that the Eastland Disaster had a function in society. They may argue that the disaster would not have occurred if it did not have any purpose. Since Functionalists emphasize structure and how the different parts of society work together, the Functionalists would focus on the purpose of the Eastland Disaster. They may dig deeper into the disaster and ask, "Why did the Eastland disaster occur?", "What lessons did people learn from the Eastland Disaster?", or "What were the sociological results of this disaster, and how did they affect society as a whole?" Functionalists may ask these questions before they even come up with any ideas and theories to why nobody knows about the Eastland Disaster. The Functionalist perspective may force people to really ponder the significance of the disaster. Functionalists may suggest that since the Eastland Disaster occurred in Chicago and mainly affected people who lived in Chicago, other people who did not live in Chicago would not know anything about the Eastland. For example, people who live in China are not likely to really care that eight hundred people died in Chicago. Since this tragedy did not function as anything else but a sad part of Chicago history, other societies would not regard this tragedy as something very important. Functionalists will first ponder the sociological importance of the Eastland Disaster in order to figure out why the Eastland Disaster is so unheard of.

The second sociological approach is Conflict Perspective. The Conflict perspective believes that society is in constant conflict. This means that social behavior can be described

in terms of conflict such as competing groups and social disputes. Therefore, the Conflict Perspective focuses on who suffers and gains in a social situation. Conflict theorists believe that society is maintained by this constant struggle between people in conflict. The conflict approach to the Eastland Disaster may focus on what other significant social events were occurring during the same time period as the Eastland Disaster. Conflict theorists may ponder questions like "Who were the victims of the Eastland Disaster?", "Where there any people who benefited from the Eastland Disaster?" or "What other social events may have took attention away from the Eastland Disaster?". Conflict theorists may argue that other events like the World War and the Titanic took much attention away from the Eastland. Since the World War and Titanic were international events, the media may have emphasized the World War and Titanic more than the Eastland Disaster. Also, since the World War and the Titanic were international events, more people may have paid more attention to these events over the Eastland Disaster. In order to explain why the Eastland is such an unheard of tragedy, Conflict theorists may argue that international events took attention away from the Eastland Disaster.

The third sociological approach is the Interactionist Perspective. The Interactionist Perspective is very different from Conflict and Functionalist perspectives. The Interactionist Perspective do not focus on society as a whole, rather they focus on small group and individual behavior to understand society as a whole. Interactionists focus heavily on gestures and symbols that are popular in society. When people share the similar gestures and symbols, they are able to communicate and socialize. Since Interactionists emphasize individuals and small groups, they may focus on the people directly affected by the disaster like families and friends of the victims. Interactionists might ask questions like "Who was

directly affected by the Eastland Disaster?", "How were they affected by the disaster?", or "What types of feelings did all these affected people have in common?". After pondering these questions, Interactionists may argue that since the Eastland disaster was so tragic for the families and friends of the Eastland victims, the disaster itself was forgotten. In order for mourning families and friends of the Eastland victims to move on with their lives, they pushed the Eastland Disaster aside and slowly tried to forget the disaster in order to lessen the pain of losing many loved ones. Interactionists focus on the individual people affected by the Eastland Disaster in order to explain why the Eastland Disaster is so unknown.

I have just proposed how Functionalists, Conflict theorists and Interactionists may approach the Eastland Disaster. Now I must analyze the issue of "social-amnesia". Personally, I do not think this is a suitable argument to explain the social unawareness of the Eastland Disaster. I do not believe that a large amount of people can forget about a social event. I do believe that many people, places and events in history are unheard of. I believe that many historical facts are unknown because many people did not experience these things directly. Since many people did not live through the Eastland Disaster, they may believe the Eastland Disaster was truly a tragic event, but not truly care for the memory of the event.

In analyzing these sociological situations, one must take into consideration the pace at which the world moves. The world is a thriving, abundant fast-paced society. In this society, many events occur everyday. These events can be tragic, pleasant or neutral. People in society hear about things, discuss the importance of the event and then move on with their lives. Although events may be hot and debatable one day, they may be forgotten, old news the next day. I believe that this notion must be realized in order to discuss the unknown Eastland Disaster.

I also believe that World War and the Titanic took a great amount of attention away from the Eastland Disaster. These two events were international issues that the media emphasized most of its energy on. Since the media focused so much of its attention of these the World War and the Titanic, the Eastland disaster was put on the backburner and must not have received much attention at all. Also, since these the war and the Titanic directly affected people all over the world, people must have focused mainly on these two issues before any other issue. People tend to know of things that affected the larger part of society rather than events that only affected small amounts of the population. For example, many Americans will associate O.J Simpson with the accusations that he murdered his wife, Nicole, but it is not likely that people in China will know of this incident. This exemplifies how people really only know about events that directly affect themselves.

I have discussed how Functionalists, Conflict Theorists and Interactionists may approach society's mysterious memory of the Eastland Disaster. I have also given my own theories and ideas discussing why many people do not know anything about the Eastland Disaster. Now I can conclude this essay with one last thought. Why are there so many events in history that remain unknown and forgotten? The Eastland Disaster is among many other social events that are forgotten and unheard of. Why does society forget its own history and emphasize the importance of the future? Should we not learn from our history in order to plan for the future? The mystery of the unknown Eastland Disaster as well as other unknown events may be solved if these questions are addressed.