

The Eastland Disaster: Why Has Society Forgotten

In my attempt to answer this on going question of why society has forgotten the Eastland Disaster I surveyed 10 older adults, age 60 and above and 10 younger adults, age 59 and below. My results are as follows. I found that a higher number of the younger adults seemed to remember the disaster than the older adults. Despite my results the overall study demonstrated that the older adults were the higher majority of those that seemed to remember the Eastland Disaster. The answers I received from the younger adults stated that a possible reason for the disaster being forgotten was the lack of teaching and passing down of stories to younger generations about the event. They felt that there was a huge generation gap that affected the longevity of the memory. The younger adults also felt that technology such as television affected the memory of the Eastland Disaster. In society past and present there has been less and less interest in newspapers and historical events and more interest in what the new gadget for a more advanced life is. My responses from the older adults reflected the same views with the addition of there were bigger events going on at the time such as WWI and that maybe it was not something that people wanted to be known or remembered. The above-mentioned responses reflected the majority of answers given in the survey.

I feel that the stated responses do not tell the whole story of the apparent social amnesia of the Eastland Disaster. There were other factors such as the publicity the event received and that some felt the disaster did not occur on a big enough scale to be remembered by more people. In further attempt to answer the question of why no one knows about the Eastland Disaster we will look at it through three different perspectives, conflict, functionalist

and interactionist. Through the conflict perspective the focus of the Eastland Disaster can be placed on the status of those who died. Had they been upper class and not the immigrant working class the memory might still be embedded in the minds of more people. Possible questions to be asked from this point of view include was the safety of the ship overlooked because of the social standing of the passengers. Another question to be asked is how might the suppression of the memory benefit those who were and were not involved. An answer to this question is that for those who were involved suppressing the memory is a way to forget the pain and trauma of losing loved ones. For those not involved, suppressing the knowledge may be a way to forget the inadequacy of the fumbled attempts to save more people. Another question of the conflict perspective is how much would Western Electric stand to lose if there was continued publicity and discussion of the disaster.

Through the functionalists perspective the reason why we don't know about the Eastland Disaster may be because it served no purpose for such a sad tragedy to be remembered and passed on to younger generations. A possible question to be asked is what purpose a tragedy such as this would serve to be remembered. The memory of the event would only weaken and disrupt the job market provided by Western Electric for fear of safety. Also for future generations the disaster would be of little significance since nothing good came out of the tragedy. It had no benefits for anyone.

From the interactionist perspective why we don't know about the Eastland Disaster may have been in part a way to suppress the inadequate rescue efforts and behavior of those who did not pay attention to the possible problems that the ship was having before hand. The lack of communication between the individuals who knew there were possible hazards on the ship was not properly addressed. The concern might instead have been placed on the possible

monetary gain of those involved in such an event. Perhaps it was an attempt by the upper class to lessen the effect of their mistake on what occurred by giving little attention to the disaster on a public scale. A few articles given to the public and then the responsibility of their actions would be forgotten. Another view of interactions might be that the loss of entire families and the orphaning of children might have led to the disaster being forgotten. The immense trauma of losing both parents might have caused younger children to repress the memories while the memories of the event are vividly remembered in the minds young adults. According to Arthur G. Neal in his book *National Trauma and Collective Memory*, "the members of a generation are influenced disproportionately by what was happening historically during their formative years"...they would seem to be primarily the years of late adolescence and early adulthood... Because "the large number of decisions in early adulthood place individuals in a position of hyper-receptivity to events that are occurring in their community." Questions from the interactionist perspective include how does the emphasis put on the significance of the Eastland Disaster influence our willingness to share the experience with others. Another question is what would be the correct response to a disaster such as the Eastland. The answer to this question would lie in how traumatic the event was for those involved and those on the sidelines.

In my review of each perspective I found that the interactionist perspective seemed to have the better response on why we don't know-about the Eastland Disaster. It suggested the personal response to the event whether repression or remembrance and what factor may have influenced it, which in this case was age. It also shed light on what might have contributed to the selective responses of the survey that was taken. The answer to whether or not these perspectives shed any new light to the question why is no. Looking at it from these three

perspectives can only help to form a hypothesis. I feel the real reason can validly be determined by taking into account the responses of every individual that has heard about or experienced the Eastland Disaster. Though this view may seem far-fetched I think that a survey or other form of getting information from selected individuals will not accurately represent the population of those who know or don't know. There are many influences that could vary the results. Such influences could include the individuals who knew about it moving away and leaving the people who didn't know behind. To survey those left behind would not reflect an accurate number.

I think that there is such a thing as social amnesia. My reason for thinking this is it has been developed as a response by an individual or group of people to a traumatic event. By simply putting an event in the past and keeping it there the emotions caused by the event can be curbed for the time being. If no one brings the subject back up the memory can be forever forgotten with the passing of all the individuals who took part or were witness to the event. This is evident in the case of the Eastland Disaster. There is less than a handful of survivors left and very few people in subsequent generations have bothered to ask older family members, The reason I feel they haven't asked is because so many of those who know have died without ever sharing the memory with others. It is up to the people who do know by firsthand or passed on knowledge to educate people on the subject so that an event that affected so many lives is not completely forgotten. As in the overshadowing of the fire in Wisconsin with the Chicago Fire I feel the same result was true of the Eastland Disaster and WWI. The effects of WWI caused far greater catastrophes on fellow men than the damages of the Eastland Disaster did. This may have caused a more emotional response and thus put more emphasis in the sub-conscious mind than the Eastland Disaster.

In conclusion I feel that the answer to why so many people have forgotten about the Eastland disaster can be mainly attributed to the deaths of so many of the people who did know of the event. The lack of communication by this older generation with those of younger generation has left the memory of the event on the shoulders of the handful that survive today. These few along with the descendants of those who have passed away are now responsible for keeping the memory alive. To do this there needs to be more teaching on the subject of the Eastland Disaster.