

EASTLAND CAPSIZING: A disaster waiting to happen

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Outline

Not many at the time realized that when the Great Lakes excursion steamer Eastland turned on her side in the Chicago River, on July 24, 1915, that it was merely a disaster waiting for a time and place to happen.

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Not many at the time realized that when the Great Lakes excursion steamer Eastland turned on her side in the Chicago River, on July 24, 1915, that it was merely a disaster waiting for a time and place to happen. July 24, 1915, in Chicago, Illinois, began with a steady, light rain and a somber sky. This was the day most of the nine thousand employees of the Western Electric Company (a subsidiary of Bell Telephone) hoped would be warm and sunny, since it was the day of their annual picnic and excursion. For the occasion the company had chartered five steamers, the large Eastland and Theodore Roosevelt, and the smaller Petoskey, Racine, and Maywood. Families of the employees were invited on the excursion, which was to sail to a resort in Michigan City, Indiana, for a full day of fun and games topped off by a parade.¹ In all, 7,300 tickets were sold, and the excursionist began to arrive on the piers at 6:30 a.m.² The favorite was the Eastland, a tall, sleek three decker known for her speed, but also among sailors as the "temperamental ship of the Lakes."

The Eastland was launched at Port Huron, Lake Huron, in 1902, and made her debut the year after. She was 265 ft long, 38 ft wide, with a 23-ft draft. She had a total of four decks, the top, or hurricane deck, 69-ft above the waterline. The 1,961 ton ship was driven by two propellers powered by four boilers, which drove her at a speed of 22 knots, which was comparable even to the

Lusitania, sunk two months before. The Eastland held a crew of sixty-five.

But there were reasons for her reputation as a "temperamental ship," indeed. For one thing, a vessel as tall as the Eastland needed a 3.5 foot keel, where as the Eastland had none at all.⁴ As a result, she was top heavy, and when she went on her trial runs she almost turned over! After this, the steamboat inspection service at once ordered several modifications. The cabins on the hurricane deck were removed, and it was barred to passenger use. In addition, the Eastland's ten ballast tanks, five to either side, were to be kept filled at all times. (Nevertheless, the ship still lurched from the deck of one side to another on several voyages; besides, the officials failed to enforce strictly the rule about the ballast tanks and captains complained the valves were too small to take in water fast enough.⁵) Nothing was done to correct, this, however. The Eastland's notable lack of stability was complicated by an increase in April, 1915, of her legal passenger limit from 2,000 to 2,500 persons, excluding the crew. This was bad enough, but the limit was arrived at simply by measuring one square foot of deck area per passenger! All these facts and nuances were dismissed as hysterical in the midst of the festive preparations. (It is doubtful if any of the excursionists even gave the matter second thoughts that they failed to come aboard because of it.) When the Eastland returned from a moonlight excursion at 3:00 a.m. her captain, fifty-

seven year old Harry Pedersen, brought his ship alongside the docks on the north side of the filthy Chicago River (used as a sanitary canal) just west of the Clark Street Bridge. Ballast was then pumped out to bring the gangway to the level of the dock, and loading began. The majority of the excursionists chose the Eastland, even though there were four other largely empty steamers waiting. On the hurricane deck, between the two stacks, a steam calliope and musicians played "The Good Old Summer Time," alternating with "Bedelia."⁶ The Eastland was due to sail at 7:30 a.m., followed by the Roosevelt and Petoskey at half hour intervals, and Racine and Maywood at 10:00 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., respectively.⁷

By 6:53, enough people had found seats on the port side to cause the ship to list slightly in that direction. Down below, Chief Engineer Joseph Erickson, acting on his own, opened the valve to No. 2 ballast tank and the starboard seacock for five minutes to correct the tilt. All this time, people kept funneling onto the Eastland, crowding onto the decks and filling all the cabins. Soon it was difficult to move around. By 6:58, the port list had been corrected, but now the liner was listing to starboard, toward the dock. Seven minutes later the engines were started, taunting the hawsers. Meanwhile the attendant at the gangway finally realized that no more people could be squeezed on, even if pushed, and shouted, "No more aboard!" At 7:16 they tilted again to port and

No. 3 ballast tank was flooded to correct it. In two minutes the "cranky" ship lurched back to starboard, and an exasperated Capt. Pedersen ordered the engines to flood the port ballast tanks, "But do not overfill them," he cautioned. The tug at the Eastland's bow was already taking up the strain even though the ship was still tied to the dock, and the Eastland started to heel to port. Although few passengers realized that disaster was impending, the crew did, and cowardly clambered over the rails and began jumping from the already swinging steamer to the dock!⁹ The crowd was warned in another way, however, when an icebox on the deck broke loose, and plunged through the crowd and port rail into the river. But the Eastland was now righting herself, and a momentarily alarmed Capt. Pedersen relaxed. Then, at 7:23, the Eastland pitched sharply to port again, but when at an angle of forty-five degrees stopped, held by her stern mooring lines. Disaster was now seconds away! The calliope paused and the music stopped as the musicians, along with the now shouting passengers, lost their balance and slid toward the port rail.¹⁰ There was a blast on the whistle, followed by a shout from the captain, "Open the inside doors and let people off!" But it was too late! Water was rushing in open portholes and gangway doors as "passengers, benches, boxes of candy and popcorn, barrels of lemonade, and lifeboats,"¹¹ slide and crashed into the river amid a background of screaming. Then after pausing a few moments, the Eastland rolled on, and the weight broke the mooring lines, causing the ship to "drop on her

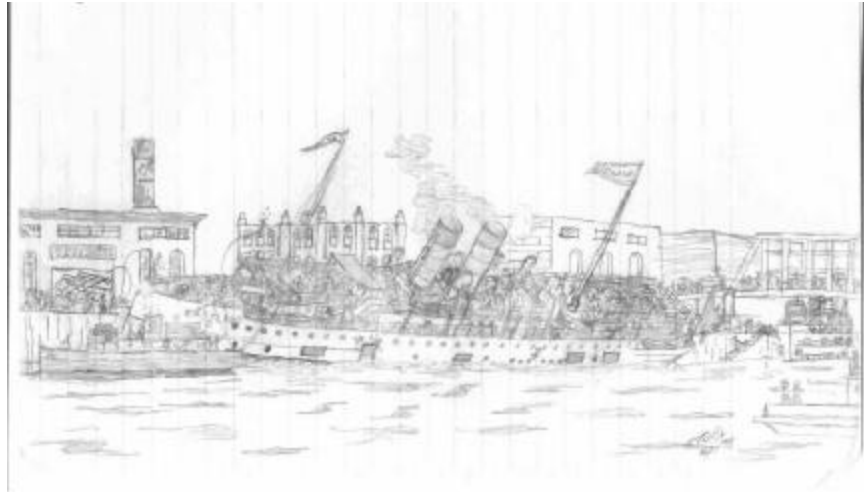
side like a stone."¹² Many died instantly, crushed in the wreckage. Some were trapped and suffocated. Others drowned, sucked down into the depths of the Chicago River. The time was 7:25, and so a mass of happy humanity was transformed in only a few seconds, into a struggling chaos of desperate bodies. Ironically, the Eastland's eight lifeboats and four life rafts were useless; only one boat drifted away with a boy inside, and almost none had a chance to don a lifejacket. Fire and tugboats rushed to the scene, and since the ship's starboard side was partly out of the water, many survivors stood or sat on the slippery bottom. On the Theodore Roosevelt, astern of the Eastland, passengers fainted while the crew threw life preservers and lowered lifeboats.

Immediately, rescuers heard tappings and began to torch holes in the side of the ship to rescue people trapped in the hull. Incredibly, Capt. Pedersen, who had walked off the only half-awash pilothouse, and his first mate tried to keep them from cutting the holes. An argument ensued, and Pedersen and his mate were arrested. Later, forty-one trapped survivors were rescued. (The final toll was 835 people, with 22 entire families wiped out.) None of the sixty-five crewmembers was killed, although the chief engineer risked his life to prevent a boiler explosion.¹³

Wholesale arrests were ordered and a court of inquiry convened. But because of the tortiselike inching of the judicial

system, the court convened in 1915 was still sitting twenty years later. Finally, in August 1935, the absolved all involved, said there had been no over crowding, that the Eastland was "seaworthy," and placed the blame on some unnamed, careless crew member who had neglected to fill the ballast properly. This ruling put an end to an army of claimants, and none of the bereaved, or those maimed by the disaster, received a penny of compensation. As for the Eastland herself, she was raised on August 16, 1915, and sold to the Navy for \$46,000. Radically cut down and altered, she became the training vessel U. S. S. Wilmette, which she served as for forty years. Finally, in 1946, the forty-four year old ship was decommissioned and sold to a scrapping company for \$2,500.¹⁴

The court ruling was absurd. The Eastland was obviously top-heavy, and had in fact, been condemned by several naval architects. The constant lurching of the steamer was well known, and a seaworthy vessel does not do that! Also, when people are packed so tight that they cannot move, it is certainly overcrowded! So, despite the court ruling, the Eastland was definitely unstable and overcrowded, and simply was a floating disaster waiting to happen. The only real mystery about the tragic capsizing in July, 1915, is not what could have caused it, but rather which fault caused it out of many mistakes.



Bibliography

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