

 This project advanced through the school and regional rounds of competition to the Illinois State History Fair.

Editor's note:

The three short stories below are personal accounts from people who were aboard the *Eastland* when it rolled over in the Chicago River. The student who entered this project in the history fair dressed in wardrobe of the era (early 1900s), and then recited the stories in the first person as if each story was being recounted.

## "Never Again"

Why do people go on boats anyway? They just bring trouble and I am saying that from experience. But before I go on, let me introduce myself. My name is Augusta Houillion. I was born here in the great United States in 1901 but my parents, they came from France. I was one of the passengers on the Eastland on that terrible trip it once had. Oh dear me I am skipping my whole story. Let me go back for you. I was working for Western Electric Company at the time. They hired much younger people than they do now, I was only 14 then. Everyone was so very excited to go on this company picnic that was held every year in Michigan. However some of us weren't exactly thrilled about taking a four-hour boat ride to get there. But let me share a secret with you. Deep inside, I was very excited to go, boat or no boat. It was the one time a year that us employees got to have a good time.

It was an overcast Saturday if I remember correctly. The light drizzle felt so cooling because I did have on this heavy dress in the middle of summer. You know, one day women will have it easier when it comes to dressing. Anyway, back to my story. The boat was very crowded; everywhere I turned I saw more and more faces. Soon I was just a speck amongst the thousands and thousands of people surrounding me. From the background the steam tug rumbled as we prepared for our journey. This was just too exciting for me so I went to the lower decks to find one of my friends who also worked at Western. I figured that we could go on deck together and wave to all the people that were still on shore. My heart was beating so rapidly. This was so much fun, like nothing I've ever done before. I spotted my friend in a little room. But something wasn't right. I felt unbalanced as if the ship was tilting. "Impossible" I thought, "this is a strong ship and it's probably just my sea legs giving out." Except it continued to get worse and soon the boat was gradually turning on its side. My feet began to slip and I fell to the ground. Glass was shattering all around me. Shouts and screaming were heard from the passengers as a perfect ninety-degree angle was established. Something fell on top of me, it must have been a locker or a closet but it shielded me from all of the flying debris and formed a sort of airpocket as the boat was sitting in the water. I looked around and shouted my friend's name but to no avail.

I never saw her again as she perished in the Chicago River. Then, I had no choice but to concentrate on my own survival. But how could anyone find me here? The sounds around me were quiet which only meant that I was the only one to survive so I listened to the distant shouts of those outside and just hoped and prayed that I would get out. How could a 14-year-old die so soon before life has even started for her? I was so scared. I thought of my family and imagined how my mother's face would have looked if she were told that her daughter was dead. I knew then I couldn't die-if just for my mother's sake. Well my prayers were answered and I was eventually found and taken to the hospital with the other survivors and the dead. I stayed there very briefly for I had to report to work on Monday or I would have lost my job! Imagine that. Luckily I had no injuries that required hospital care for we had to pay it ourselves and that was very expensive.

This experience changed my life in many ways, and proved how strong I really am inside. But never again will I set foot on another sea bearing object for as long as I live.

## "My First Swim With Uncle Sam"

Do you want to hear a story? Well I'll tell you what, since I'm here right now I will tell you not one but two stories about the worst tragedy I can remember. If you thought the Titanic was a catastrophe, than listen to my experiences aboard another dreadful ship, the Eastland. But first I must tell you a little bit about myself and my husband, Herman. My name is Elsie. Both me and Herman were aboard the ship except we didn't meet until several years after the event.

I was born September 13, 1898 in Denham, Indiana on a beautiful farm. Oh, how I missed all of my animals when my family moved to Chicago but I learned to deal with it. Well I worked for Western Electric and was invited to board the Eastland for a company picnic. I accepted.

My husband was born August 8, 1883 in Chicago. From an early age he made a living as a child laborer in a glass-cutting factory. Believe it or not, the tiny glass fragments damaged his lungs ever since then and he has developed coarse breathing. But aside from that he did have one very distinctive feature- his height. As he stood towering over everyone and everything at 6'3", he got many special assignments such as getting things in high places and being Uncle Sam in a parade that was to take place in Michigan City, the site where the Eastland was to be headed. Being a Western Electric employee, he was ready and willing to take on this new and exciting task. And so he also accepted the invitation....

All women were required to wear long ankle-length white dresses for the picnic. Me being the fashionable woman I was, just had to wear the new high-laced boots I had bought myself. As I got to the boat, it was obviously very crowded but everyone was so neatly dressed I felt proud with my appearance. On occasion I did see someone that looked different, so to speak-one was Uncle Sam. "What a great costume" I thought to myself. Little did I know that eventually "Uncle Sam" would become my husband.

Piles and piles of people were in the boat and it was ready to go. I decided to stay on the upper deck to wave to everyone as we departed and to my surprise, Uncle Sam was on the upper deck right next to me. My heart skipped a beat.

But something had to be wrong, not with my heart but with my feet. I felt like I was rising and falling backwards. A glance around confirmed my guess. The boat was turning on its side, slowly but surely. As it gradually flipped over, I was thrown to the water. I tried to swim but there were so many people around me, it was so hard. Everyone were screaming at the boats that were already coming out to help us. Now this is very eerie but what I do remember is that I heard one of the rescuers yell "Grab Uncle Sam." It's a strange detail to remember amidst all that but it all came together many years later. Well as I was treading water, someone tried to grab my ankles and pull me under. Now I wasn't the best swimmer but who could swim at all with a long heavy dress and shoes on? I figured it was the end of me but I forgot about my hair. It was very long, waist length to be exact. A rescuer saw it floating and pulled me onto a boat by my hair. Yes it did hurt but the pain was a small price to pay for my life. As I looked back at the hundreds of people still in the water, I saw the man still holding my boots and thought of all that those shoes have been through. And to think those could have been the death of me if it wasn't for my "long vine of hair."

## "White Gown"

When I was a little girl, I always dreamed of having a large wedding with all of my family and friends there. I would have a gorgeous white gown and next to me would be the man I loved with all of my heart. Pardon me. I was just talking to myself. But if you'd be interested I will tell you what I was talking about.

My real name is Gabriella Schlentz but everyone calls me Ella. Both of my parents were immigrants to the US arriving as children from Luxembourg. My parents, me and my brother and sisters lived in Cicero which was composed of mostly immigrant families. Coincidentally, the biggest employer of the area was Western Electric at their Hawthorne plant. A majority of the neighborhood did work there and so we were all a very close knit community.

Well, me and my oldest brother Harry worked at Western Electric. I was an accountant at the plant. And you know what, I was engaged to a wonderful man, John. John was the best thing that ever happened to me. I loved him so much. Well I could go on all day about him so I will continue with my story.

The company picnic came up very quickly and John, Harry and I decided to go together. None of us could contain our excitement. It was going to be a great vacation even though it was only one day. And I would get to spend it with John. That was the part I looked forward to the most. I made plans with Harry that me and John would meet him on the dock. We got there first and waited for Harry. But after a good period of time, we decided to board and wait for him on the ship. It was not a surprise that Harry was late-after all his birthday was December 26th, one day late for Christmas. The joke was that he was always late for everything after that.

On the ship, I kept my eyes peeled for Harry. It really looked as if he was going to miss the boat. I couldn't help but smile at his tardiness. But this strange feeling came over me as I first began to tilt forward slightly, then more and more. This can't be happening, I thought, the ship can't be falling over. I tried to grab for John's hand right before I was thrown from the deck, but it was not there. John was nowhere to be seen. I didn't know how to swim so I tried to grab something that was floating in the water. As I looked up at the dock for a split second I saw Harry yelling and screaming my name. He was helping another woman up to shore but had his eyes fixed on me the whole time. Then I saw John, soaking wet, running to Harry. That was my last real recollection. One of the smoke stacks I think it was or maybe it was something else pinned me under water. I couldn't breathe, it was the worst way to die. But I did die in the waters of the Chicago River on that day.

Well, I never got to say "I do" to the man of my dreams as I now lie underground in a white dress of a different kind.