

The Call to Remember

Newsletter - Vol. VI, No. 6

EASTLAND DISASTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Nov/Dec 2004

IN MEMORIAM

Aida Woods, also known as Jean Watson, age 92, passed away on Friday, Jan. 28, 2005. Jean was aboard the *Eastland* when it capsized; and upon being rescued, dried off and took an Elevated train home without shoes on her feet.



(Jean Watson appeared via videotape at the 85th anniversary commemoration on July 22, 2000.)

While we never had the opportunity to meet Jean personally, we did develop a friendly relationship with her over the phone. She was also kind enough to grant us permission to videotape an interview with her from her home in Las Cruces, N.M. In July 2000, a portion of the videotaped interview with Jean was played during the EDHS commemoration of the 85th anniversary of the *Eastland* Disaster. Through this videotape replay, Jean was one of four survivors who were our very special guests of honor.

Our fondest memory of Jean is a phone conversation in which she explained why she changed her name from Aida

(pronounced Aid-ah) Woods to Jean Watson: When she was young and growing up, the kids in her neighborhood constantly called her "Aida Potata" (Aid-ah potay-tah), a nickname for which she did not care.

With Jean's passing, we are now aware of but one survivor of the *Eastland* Disaster who is still living.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

We've completed another year of delivering top-notch programs and services! The marquee accomplishment for 2004 was the release to major bookstores throughout the country of Jay Bonansinga's new book, **The Sinking of the *Eastland*: America's Forgotten Tragedy.**

The significance of the release of Jay's book is that it now gives, for the first time ever, *nationwide* exposure to the *Eastland* Disaster and EDHS. From Seattle to Texas to New Hampshire to North Carolina, we've had people contact us upon buying the book at Barnes and Noble, Borders, etc.! Read the wonderful feedback we have received from some of those who have read Jay's book!

FEEDBACK ON JAY'S BOOK

Your staff was so very right that I wouldn't be disappointed with the book and I am extremely thankful to have it among my finest book possessions. "M. J., Gobles, MI

"Thank you...for referring the Eastland Book. It was very good. I now wish I had asked my Mother more questions." J. S., Wheeling

"I sat down and couldn't put it down until I finished it." J. P., Bolingbrook, IL

"Jay's book gives one the feeling of actually being at the Eastland on that fateful day. This is the part of the picture that myself and my family have been missing for all these years." A. J., Cedar Lake, IN

"I just finished the book...by Jay Bonansinga. I never really understood the horrible things that happened. By Jay writing it in the first person, I was in that water, I felt the filth of the river. It held my attention completely." L. T.

"I have just finished reading Jay Bonansinga's book on the Eastland disaster. Read it in a day; couldn't put it down." S. S., Chicago

"...This book is the good read that we have all been waiting for, and it is also a very filmic version. Hollywood should take notice of this young historian." J.H., Chicago

JAY'S BOOK IN LARGE PRINT

Thorndike Press, the world's leading publisher of Large Print books, has acquired the permission and rights to publish **The Sinking of the *Eastland*: America's Forgotten Tragedy** in large print. The large print edition will be released in March.

Thorndike Press offers thousands of Large Print titles. Stay tuned to this newsletter for information on how to order a large print edition.

EASTLAND CORNER

"Let's take the second boat - it's safer," Charles Vileta, a 23 year-old assembler at Western Electric Company told his three buddies. Instead they boarded the first boat, the *Eastland*.

Charles strolled to watch latecomers from a porthole on dock side. In his pocket he carried the book, "Law of Biogenesis," by J. Howard Moore. It discussed, ironically, the study of the development of human beings.



(Charles A. Vileta pictured above.)

"Suddenly the boat tipped," said Charles. *"I grabbed the porthole with both hands and held tight. Men and women were screaming. Water poured in the doors and whirlpoiled my buddies down to the floor."*

"For thirty minutes we waited there with water up to our shoulders," he said. *"I shouted something to a group of women huddled over in the corner."*

Then some men broke through the side of the ship, threw down a rope and we climbed out. My buddies drowned."

Water-soaked, but safe, Charles said that when he got outside he went to get the *"first drink of whiskey in my life."* He then rode an Elevated train home.

The four young bachelors who had met at work were below deck.

(NOTE: If you have a personal connection to the *Eastland* Disaster, please consider submitting your family's story and photos to us. To feature your family in the *Eastland* Corner, simply call us toll-free at 1-877-865-6295 or send an email to info@eastlanddisaster.org. A nominal honorarium is requested.)

90TH ANNIVERSARY
COMMEMORATION

Sunday, July 24, 2005 will mark the 90th anniversary of the *Eastland* Disaster. The EDHS commemoration of the 90th anniversary will be held the weekend of July 23-24.

- Arrangements for an afternoon river cruise and an evening dinner/program/cruise are tentatively being planned for Saturday, July 23.
- A brief, commemorative ceremony will be held on Sunday, July 24, in the early afternoon. River cruises may be offered during the day.

Mark your calendars today to plan to be in Chicago! More details will be released in the upcoming months.

BOOK SIGNINGS

Author Jay Bonansinga will be appearing Sunday, Feb. 27, 2:00 p.m. at the Chicago Historical Society. Please call us toll-free 1-877-865-6295 for information.

NEW TRUSTEES

To help continue the growth of the valued services that EDHS provides to the constituents we serve, we have been adding to our EDHS Board of Trustees. Two of our new Trustees are featured below.

George Drost is the founding partner in the law offices of Drost, Kivlahan & McMahon, Ltd. He is Adjunct Professor at John Marshall Law School (Chicago) where he also participates in the John Marshall Law School-Masaryk Univ. Exchange Program. George is Honorary Consul of the Czech Republic.



Carol Gilchrist owned and operated three nursery schools for 37 years in southwest Michigan. Her mother, Marie Hrabacka (nee Homola), was one of the last living survivors of the *Eastland* Disaster. Carol splits time living in Michigan and Florida.



UPCOMING PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Sun., Mar. 13, 2:00 p.m. at the Frankfort (Ill.) Public Library; Thu., Mar. 17, 7:00 p.m. at the Crystal Lake (Ill.) Public Library; Thu., Mar. 24, at 7:00 p.m. at the Winfield (Ill.) Public Library. Please call toll-free 1-877-865-6295 for more information.

REID MURDOCH CENTER DISPLAY

Another first! Later this summer we will be dedicating the first-ever **permanent** *Eastland* Disaster display that will include both text and images. This new 5-foot by 7-foot two-dimensional display will grace the lobby of the historic Reid Murdoch Center.



(The Reid Murdoch Center. The *Eastland* Disaster historical marker is in the foreground.)

The Reid Murdoch Center is a massive 400,000 square-foot structure fronting the Chicago River between LaSalle and Clark Streets. It was built in 1913 as a central food processing plant for Reid, Murdoch & Company, whose name remains part of the riverfront facade today. Designed by George C.

Nimmons of Chicago (a student of Daniel H. Burnham), the building was one of the first structures to be erected in full accordance with Burnham's vision that the Chicago River should serve the City much as the River Seine serves Paris or the River Thames serves London. It is on the National Register of Historic Places and is already a Chicago landmark for those reasons, as well as its architectural integrity.

Crowning the building was, and remains, its most distinguishing feature and frequent subject of riverfront photographers, a clock tower with four massive internally illuminated translucent glass faces. The tower, rather than being located over its then-on-Clark Street showroom entry or its LaSalle Street freight-loading areas, was directly in the middle of the structure on the riverfront facade.

Friedman Properties Ltd., the current owners of the Reid Murdoch Center, has worked with the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society since 1999 to approve, design, develop, and install a 5-foot by 7-foot, two-dimensional display describing the history of the *Eastland* Disaster. When the lobby was completed in 2003, a section of the lobby was reserved for the *Eastland* Disaster display.

This display will become a permanent addition to the lobby, the first-ever permanent display devoted to the *Eastland* Disaster that includes both text and

images. The display will cost nearly \$4,000 to develop/ install.



(Shown above is the section of the Reid Murdoch Center lobby that has been earmarked for the 5-foot by 7-foot *Eastland* Disaster display.)

BOHEMIAN NATIONAL CEMETERY MONUMENT

Yet another first -- this time in the form of sculpture! A bronze and stone *Eastland* Disaster monument will be dedicated and will permanently reside at the Bohemian National Cemetery in Chicago. The monument is the result of a collaboration between three organizations -- EDHS, Bohemian National Cemetery, and Friends of Bohemian National Cemetery. The dedication date is yet to be established.

The Bohemian National Cemetery, founded in 1877, is the final resting place for over 100,000 people, many of whom are of Bohemian descent. Approximately 150 of the 844 victims of the *Eastland* Disaster are buried at Bohemian National in Chicago, making it the cemetery with the largest number of *Eastland* Disaster victims.

During its board meeting in August 1915 (the month following the *Eastland* Disaster), the Board of Directors of the Bohemian National Cemetery discussed the concept of erecting a monument in memory

to the many victims buried there. A month later, during the September 1915 board meeting, a motion was made and approved by the Board of Directors to erect a permanent monument. Just as with the history of the *Eastland* Disaster, the idea to erect a monument fell into obscurity and the monument was never erected.

In early 2004, EDHS met with the Bohemian National Cemetery Association and Friends of Bohemian National Cemetery. These three not-for-profit organizations discussed the importance of a monument to commemorate the victims of the *Eastland* Disaster. Just as in 1915, but 89 years later, the Board of Directors of the cemetery voted unanimously to erect a monument.

A beautiful piece of property within the cemetery grounds was earmarked for the monument. This, too, was voted upon and approved by the Board of Directors.



(The Bohemian National Cemetery Association designated this plot of land for the monument to the victims of the *Eastland* Disaster.)

Local sculptor Fran Volz was chosen by EDHS to create the monument. The monument will be slightly larger than lifesize and done in an attractive combination of bronze and stone. This monument will become a permanent addition to the cemetery, the first-ever permanent monument devoted to the *Eastland* Disaster. The monument will cost \$250,000 to design, develop, and install.



(Local sculptor Fran Volz discusses very early design concepts with EDHS Co-Founder Barbara Decker Wachholz.)

IMAGES OF AMERICA BOOK

More news! Ted Wachholz has reached an agreement with *Arcadia Publishing* to write a new photo-essay book on the *Eastland* Disaster. Arcadia Publishing is the leading publisher of local history in the United States, with a catalog of more than 2,500 titles in print. The book on the *Eastland* Disaster will be part of Arcadia's popular *Images of America* series.

In May 2002 we began discussions with Arcadia Publishing, exploring the possibility of publishing a book on the *Eastland* Disaster. After several months of exchanging information, Arcadia accepted our proposal and a contract was signed at the end of 2003.

The book, *The Eastland Disaster*, will be published under Arcadia's *Images of America* series. Since its inception in 1993, the *Images of America* series has preserved and shared the history of hundreds of individual communities throughout the country. Each title records a town's or city's unique story through more than two hundred historic images. Due to the popularity of this series, it has expanded over time to include worthy local and regional historical topics including the examination and celebration of transportation, industry, architecture, ethnic groups and more.

The Arcadia book, *The Eastland Disaster*, will be a photo-essay that will tell the story of Chicago's greatest tragedy through hundreds of pictures with captivating narrative. The book will make an excellent companion to George Hilton's, *Eastland: Legacy of the Titanic*, and Jay Bonansinga's, *The Sinking of the Eastland: America's Forgotten Tragedy*.

The Eastland Disaster will be released in mid-2005. Periodic announcements regarding this new book will be published in this newsletter. As with all merchandise sold by EDHS, annual dues-paying members of EDHS will receive at 25% discount off the purchase price.

