

The Call to Remember

Newsletter - Vol. V, No. 3

EASTLAND DISASTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

May/June 2003

FROM THE PRESIDENT

There's good news and not-so-good news. The not-so-good news is that this is already late August and we are just now getting the May/June newsletter distributed. The good news is that this is a sign that we have been incredibly busy working on *Eastland* Disaster activities.



What has been keeping us so busy? We developed our first corporate program (see related article in this newsletter), we hosted the historical marker rededication and 88th anniversary commemoration (see article in next month's newsletter), and we are steadily working with author Jay Bonansinga as he writes the next *Eastland* book (see article in the Mar/April newsletter).

All of this IN ADDITION to all of our other day-to-day work (answering inquiries, doing research, updating our web site, etc) has caused the delay in this issue.

BOOK-SIGNING OPPORTUNITY

George Hilton, author of the only book to date on the *Eastland* Disaster, has offered his support to our society through a very special opportunity. Mr. Hilton has graciously offered to sign (including personalized requests) the hardcover version of his book, *Eastland: Legacy of the Titanic*, with proceeds going to the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society.

If you have a family connection to the *Eastland* Disaster, a book signed by author George Hilton would make a great family keepsake. If you are a history buff or maritime enthusiast, this is a great opportunity to get the autograph of the author. With the holidays right around the corner, this would also make a fine gift for someone in your family. Watch for details to follow in a special announcement.

EASTLAND CORNER

Thomas Mathews was born July 19, 1856 in Oswego, New York. His father and brother were firemen in Oswego, and Thomas likely got his start there as well. He moved to Chicago around 1890 and joined the Chicago Fire Department, serving with them from 1891 until his retirement in 1925. Thomas' ceremonial retirement badge states that he was a stoker on the Chicago fireboat, the *Michael W. Conway*, Engine Company Number 58. Thomas died in Chicago on December 31, 1931.

At the time of the *Eastland* Disaster, Thomas was a stoker on the *Graeme Stewart*, part of Engine Company Number 37. The *Graeme Stewart* was dispatched to the scene of the tragedy, and as a result of his assistance with the rescue efforts, Thomas was awarded a commemorative star by Cook County Coroner Peter M. Hoffman.



PUBLIC PRESENTATION

We will present our award-winning program at the Forest Park (Ill.) Public Library, 7555 Jackson Boulevard, on Sunday, September 7 at 2:00 p.m.

Want to see us at your local library? Call your library's adult program director!

WALK ABOARD THE *EASTLAND*?

Ever wonder what it must have been like to board and take a cruise on an excursion steamer such as the *Eastland*? While the *Eastland* (subsequently renamed the *U.S.S. Wilmette*) was scrapped in 1947, a Great Lakes excursion steamer does exist today.



The *S.S. Keewatin* (above) was built in Scotland for the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Delivered to the Great Lakes in 1907, this lovely steamer was destined to make history. For over 50 years she served as the "railroad" connecting the Georgian Bay and upper Lake Superior railheads. She is one of the last of the Great Lakes Passenger Steamships still afloat.



Built around the same time as the *Eastland*, the *S.S. Keewatin* is a living maritime museum located just around the tip of Lake Michigan in Saugatuck-Douglas, Michigan. Although a bit larger than the *Eastland*, the *Keewatin* is, generally speaking, quite comparable and makes for an incredible tour.

Tours of the *Keewatin* are available Memorial Day through Labor Day. Phone 1-269-857-2464 for more information.

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EDHS RECEIVES DONATION

Lynn Steiner recently made a donation of four album pages containing sixteen photos. These photos were taken by *Chicago Evening Post* photographer, Jun Fujita.



Fujita, who was the *Post's* only photographer, heard the report about the *Eastland* rolling over, snatched up his equipment, and took off without hesitating. For hours his city editor, phoning his home in vain, didn't know where he was. Shooting right and left, Fujita climbed on the overturned vessel and was confronted by a fireman coming out of the hull with a dead child held tenderly in his arms and a look of sheer horror on his face. That picture was one of the sixteen included with the donation.



Donations of artifacts are very important to our efforts to record the history of the *Eastland* Disaster and to share it with the public for years to come. Artifacts help us in the area of research and in putting together timelines of when things happened and where things were during the aftermath of the tragedy. Artifacts

give us a way to let the public "see" and experience the *Eastland* Disaster, rather than being limited only to reading about it. Artifacts also help us to share information (such as personal quotes and photos) with the hundreds of families whose ancestors were involved, bringing their ancestors' involvement in the *Eastland* Disaster to life.

CORPORATE PROGRAM

In May 2002 we were contacted by the Education Committee of the World Presidents' Organization (WPO). We were asked to give a Friday evening program on the *Eastland* Disaster as the grand opening for a weekend of educational activities. The audience was to be 50-100 Chicago area CEOs and their spouses. Further, we were challenged to make the program fun. This was the first time that anyone had ever used fun in conjunction with the *Eastland* Disaster.

As our society has done in the past, we rose to the challenge and we did in fact deliver a fun evening for our guests. During a creative moment, we decided that in order to make our program fun we had to shift the emphasis from the tragedy to what July 24, 1915 was to be originally - a fun and festive picnic. Members of the WPO were invited to attend the Western Electric Hawthorne Works' fifth annual Employee Picnic.



Just as in 1915, our guests (members of WPO) took "streetcars" downtown arriving at the Chicago River wharf between Clark and LaSalle Streets.

This time, however, instead of boarding an excursion steamer alongside the south bank of the river, our guests arrived at the north bank at Bob Chinn's Crab House of Chicago. The gentlemen (wearing their skimmers) and the women (carrying their lace parasols) were greeted by over a dozen actors dressed in attire from the turn of the century. Guests and actors alike portrayed different people who were involved in some way in the *Eastland* Disaster and its aftermath: fire-men, priests, undertakers, survivors, victims, entire families in some cases.



After an hour of socializing, the WPO members walked through the gangway (double doors leading from the cocktail area into the dining room) and boarded the *Eastland* (entered the dining room). Once our guests had taken their seats, the *Eastland* tragedy was recreated through the use of multiple videos playing on two large screens. In between video segments, the actors came out one at a time to recount their personal experiences of July 24, 1915.



At the conclusion of the *Eastland* Disaster program, all thirteen actors gathered together and sang "The Boat That Never Left Town", a song written in 1915 about the *Eastland* tragedy.