

# The Call to Remember

Newsletter - Vol. V, No. 5

EASTLAND DISASTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Sep/Oct 2003

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

At the end of this month we will celebrate our fifth year of operations. We are grateful to all who have supported us: We depend largely on public support to help us provide award-winning services. If you have benefitted from our services or if you simply want to ensure that others can, please think of us this giving season.

May your holidays be filled with joy.



## BOOK UPDATE

As announced earlier this year in our Mar/Apr newsletter, author Jay Bonasinga has reached an agreement with Kensington Publishing Corp. to publish a book about the *Eastland* Disaster. Since this announcement, Jay has been working steadily on the book.

- Prior to his August 15 deadline, Jay submitted several dozen photographs and images to the publisher. These photos and images were those suggested by Jay to be included in the book.

- Prior to his October 15 deadline, Jay submitted the first draft of his book to the publisher.

Jay recently received feedback from the publisher regarding his first draft of the *Eastland* Disaster book. Jay said, "they loved it and they are planning to use the book as one of their lead titles for 2004."



## PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS

Justice Public Library, 7641 Oak Grove Avenue, Thursday, January 15, at 7:00 p.m. Call 708-496-1790 for more information. Also, the First Congregational Church of Berwyn, 6500 W. 34<sup>th</sup> Street, Sunday, January 18, 12:00 noon. Please join us and bring your family and friends!

## CAPTAIN PEDERSEN

Under the command of Captain Harry Pedersen, the *Eastland* rolled over while still partially moored to its wharf along the Chicago River, claiming the lives of nearly 850 people.

The newspapers made Captain Pedersen the central figure of the tragedy, the courts tried to make him the scapegoat, and to many of the people in Chicago and around the world he was a villain.

Captain Harry Pedersen was born March 19, 1860 in Norway. He emigrated to the United States in 1885, acquired his pilot's license in 1896, and obtained his Ship Master's license several years later. He was hired by the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company to command the *Eastland*, which would be the first (and last) excursion steamship that he commanded. After the disaster, Captain Pedersen withdrew to his farm near Millburg, Michigan.

During the Spring and Fall of 2003 we traveled to Millburg, Michigan (90 miles east of Chicago in southwest Michigan) to the cemetery where Captain Harry Pedersen and his wife, Anna, are buried.



The small community of Millburg consists of a single intersection with a gas mart and a tavern/store on two of the corners, a few residential neighborhoods, and several surrounding farms.

Those of us who made the trips to Millburg stood in the simple, unpretentious cemetery overlooking

the modest graves of Captain Pedersen and his wife and pondered several different thoughts.



What was his life like after the tragedy? Did it and the tremendous loss of life haunt him? If so, for how long? Months? Years? His entire life? How did the small community of Millburg look upon him? Was he ostracized? Were Millburg's citizens sympathetic? Was he isolated by the community or did he isolate himself from the public?



Standing over the simple grave of Captain Pedersen makes one think that "Harry" quite likely was an ordinary man who lived an ordinary life, except for that one day when an error in personal judgment drastically changed not only his life but the lives of tens of thousands of others - forever. He died at age 79 of nephritis in Cook County Hospital, Chicago, on July 25, 1939, one day after the 24th anniversary of the tragedy. Could it be that his illness was aggravated by the grief and stress that he might have experienced at least annually on July 24th of each year after the tragedy?

## EASTLAND CORNER

Each issue of our newsletter contains a column called the *Eastland* Corner. This column features the story (and accompanying photo, when available) of someone who was involved in the *Eastland* Disaster - a survivor, victim, hero, member of the crew, or perhaps someone who assisted with the rescue, recovery, and relief efforts.

Last month, one of our subscribers (who also is a member) asked, "Where do you get the information that you publish in the *Eastland* Corner?" Our answer more often than not is that a descendant or relative provides us with the personal account and photo.

In the case of last edition's *Eastland* Corner feature, the information and photo of Robert Hicks (a member of the *Eastlands* crew) were obtained from granddaughter Judy Botham, who resides in Australia! We are able to share this account and photo with you - all the way from Australia - thanks to the gracious efforts by Judy. (Last month's article is reprinted here.)

Robert Hicks was a deckhand on the *Eastland* and was on the bridge with Captain Pedersen and other members of the crew when the ship began to list. As the *Eastland* rolled over, Robert grabbed a chair and smashed out the wheelhouse windows and climbed out onto the side of the ship.

After the incident the ship owners knew that there would be extensive litigation and they did not want Robert around to testify. The owners gave Robert a sum of money and expressed their desire for him to leave the country as he was potentially a key witness. Robert went to New York and then to England and later on to Australia. He rarely spoke about the tragedy with his family.

Robert always believed that the accident was caused by the overloading of the *Eastland*.



## EDHS RECEIVES DONATION

Nearly two years ago, Mr. Robert Nickels attended the *Eastland* Disaster program we gave at the Park Ridge Public Library. (Ill.) Bob's personal connection to the *Eastland* Disaster is through his grandfather, Charles O. Reinhard (a member of the Chicago Fire Department who assisted in the rescue and recovery efforts). Bob recently donated a stamp to us, a stamp depicting the *Eastland* Disaster.

In the 1930s, the Jewel Tea Company issued a poster stamp booklet entitled "*The History of Chicagoland*." (See photo lower right.) The booklet reviewed the history of Chicago from 1673 through 1933 and had spaces for 100 poster stamps.

Each week poster stamps were issued with every purchase, while additional stamps were included in packages of coffee, tea, and cocoa. Stamp number 92 depicted the 1915 *Eastland* Disaster.



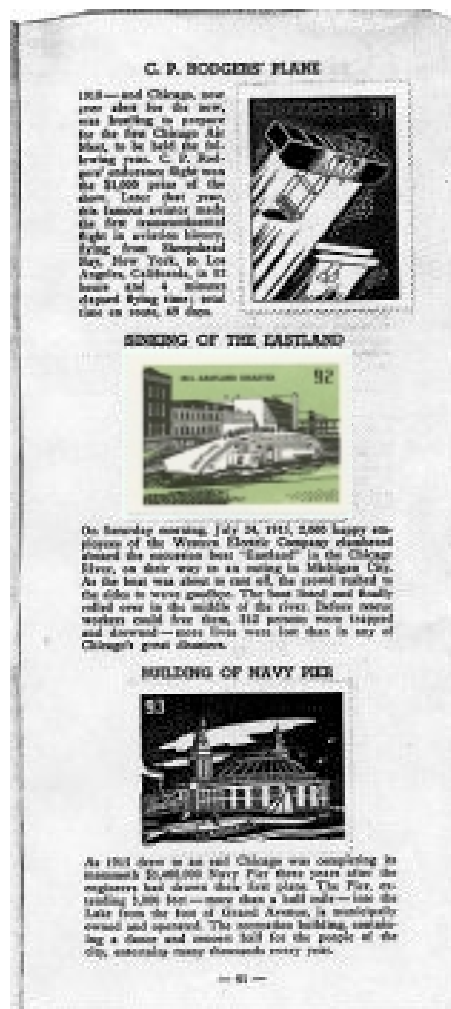
Donations of artifacts are very important to our efforts to record the history of the *Eastland* Disaster and to share it with the public for years to come. Artifacts help us in the area of research and in putting together timelines of when things happened and where things were during the aftermath of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

## HOLIDAY GIFT IDEAS



Looking for that last-minute, unique gift? We have several gift items that may end your search including an Emmy-award-winning documentary (on VHS video). Also available is a variety of books (author-signed and/or personalized *Eastland: Legacy of the Titanic*, books on the paranormal, and even a book that is perfect for youngsters including your nieces, nephews, and grandchildren). Gift memberships may also be given.

Need it in time for the holidays? No problem. Every order is processed and shipped the next day.



(Poster stamp booklet issued by the Jewel Tea Company in the 1930s.)