Only the River Remains: History and Memory of the Eastland Disaster in the Great Lakes Region, 1915 – 2015

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On July 24, 1915, the passenger boat Eastland capsized while docked in the Chicago River, killing 844 of its 2,500 passengers. The Eastland Disaster remains the greatest loss-of-life tragedy on the Great Lakes. Using museum exhibits, government documents, trial transcripts, period newspapers, oral interviews, images, ephemera, and popular culture materials, this study examines the century after the disaster in terms of the place the Eastland has held in regional and national public memory. For much of that period, the public memory of the tragedy had been lost, but private memories survived through storytelling within the families of survivors, rescuers, and victims. During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the third and fourth generations of Eastland descendants began sharing these family histories with the world, thereby beginning to re-inscribe the tragedy in public memory, at least in the Chicago and Great Lakes region.

My research assesses how people create personal memories and meanings from historic events and how these personal memories influence public memory. This study uses memory studies scholarship—and especially the concepts of “iconic events,” “postmemory,” and “prosthetic memory”—to explore how Eastland descendants’ inherited family memories (postmemories) survived and came to affect others who had
no prior connection or knowledge of the disaster, creating prosthetic memories in those individuals. Those prosthetic memories were then used to construct historical narratives through museum collections, written histories, teen fiction, and a musical that in turn expanded the broader public’s remembrance of the Eastland Disaster. Despite that expansion of public memory, the Eastland still has not met the criteria for becoming an iconic event in the broader American culture. This dissertation also explores two secondary themes: relating the Eastland to better remembered incidents like the 1871 Chicago Fire and the 1912 sinking of the Titanic; and considering how the immigrant and working class status of the victims may have affected the tragedy’s place in public memory.
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My years as the Frederick S. Upton Fellow and later, Curator at the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center in St. Joseph, Michigan were very special to me. There, I developed my skills as a public historian and grew as a museum professional. A number of the museum’s images and sources are used in this dissertation and I consider myself lucky to have had access to such a rich archive at my disposal.
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Finally, this dissertation is also dedicated to the thousands of souls touched by the *Eastland* Disaster, including the 844 lives lost on July 24, 1915.

Caitlyn Perry Dial
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GLOSSARY

‘Tween Deck – The ‘Tween Deck is the deck between the main and hurricane decks.

Aft – In or near the rear part or stern of a boat.

Ballast – The ballast on the Eastland was a system of tanks on the bottom of the vessel used to raise and lower the boat in the water to make it easier to enter and leave shallow harbors.

Bow – The front end of the boat.

Cranky – Liable to lean over or capsize: said of a ship when she is built too deep or narrow, or has not sufficient ballast to carry full sail.

Deck – A deck is a horizontal platform in a vessel, which corresponds to floors in a house.

Hull – The body or frame of a boat, apart from the masts, sails, and rigging.

Hurricane Deck – The hurricane deck is the top-most deck on the Eastland.

List – The careening or inclination of a boat to one side.

Metacentric Height – the height of the metacentre of a floating body above its centre of gravity.

Port – The left hand side of the boat.

Put About – To cause to turn around so as to be facing or travelling in another direction.

Starboard – The right hand side of a boat.

Stern – The rear end of a boat.

Trim - The condition of being properly balanced.

Twin Screw Boat - having two screw propellers on separate shafts, which turn in opposite directions so as to counteract the tendency to lateral vibration

INTRODUCTION

On July 24, 1915, the passenger steamer *Eastland* capsized while docked on the Chicago River, killing 844 people. The Eastland needs its recognition as a significant event in Great Lakes History, and not solely because its death toll is higher than other Great Lakes shipwrecks.

There are historic societies and museum exhibits dedicated to explaining the history of the event, but the tragedy lacks the kind of recognition attached to other traumatic events, like the Chicago Fire of 1871. This dissertation addresses the problem of how in the century after the *Eastland* capsized in the Chicago River, the incident came to be forgotten and then reestablished in public memory. It argues that personal, private memories of individuals have the ability to influence public memory of historic events.

Throughout the period under study, memories of the *Eastland* were carried on through oral traditions among the families of victims and survivors. One purpose of my research is to examine how people create personal meanings from historic events and how these memories influence public memory. Familial storytelling has power to sway public memory, and the study of history and memory provides a gateway to this understanding. By comprehending how and why people remember certain events and commemorate them, we deepen our understanding of the past. How do memories shape an historic event? Is memory restoration possible long after an event occurred?

I chose to study the *Eastland* Disaster through the lens of memory studies because of postcards I discovered in the archives of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center in St. Joseph, Michigan. The horrific scenes in the postcards resonated in me,
making me curious as to why postcards were made to commemorate the event. I considered myself a Great Lakes historian, but I had no knowledge of this disaster. What was this disaster? Why was this museum collecting these horrifying postcards?

The lens of memory allowed me to reflect on how traumatic events like the Eastland become forgotten. The public often remembers events with such high death tolls with a “lest we forget” mentality – one which proclaims that an event will never be forgotten. For example, the sinking of the ship Titanic and the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 both captured the attention of the world as significant traumatic events, and managed to maintain their significant places within public memory. The Eastland initially garnered such outcries, but soon faded from public memory.

Newspapers around the world reported on the Eastland Disaster, but as World War I escalated, headlines of the Eastland Disaster soon left the front pages. Once the public stopped talking about it, memory of the event faded and only those directly related to it commemorated the disaster.

Memory of the Eastland Disaster survived the twentieth century because of the personal, family storytelling of Eastland survivors. These individuals shared their stories with younger generations, imprinting their experiences on them in such a fashion that made the stories their own. This phenomenon, known as postmemory, drove individuals like Dave Nelson and Ted and Barb Wachholz to form historic societies and share their and others’ Eastland stories with the world.¹

According to historian Raphael Samuel, "Memory is historically conditioned – that so far from being handed down in the timeless form of ‘tradition’ it is progressively altered from generation to generation." Family members and descendants of victims and survivors formed historic societies, like the Arlington Heights, Illinois-based Eastland Disaster Historical Society and the Eastland Fellowship Authority at the Wheaton Center for History in Wheaton, Illinois, and worked to incorporate their personal, private memories into an official, public history of the wreck. Their family histories and connections to these events passed through the generations. Since the 1990s, these groups have pushed to make the Eastland Disaster better known in public memory. My study follows their efforts, explores why they felt the need to commemorate the event, and assesses whether they are or are not accomplishing their goals.

The field of history and memory in Great Lakes history is virtually non-existent, and the field of memory studies can aid in understanding how the public creates meaning from the region. This dissertation uses a number of terms that will need a clear definition. In particular, "public memory" is used to describe the collective remembrance of an event by a group of people outside of private spaces. As stated earlier, during the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, public memory of the Eastland Disaster had fundamentally been lost, meaning that the public’s awareness of the event was minimal.

I use “narrative” to refer to a selective version of events that creates a meaning that serves the purpose of the group or individual using the narrative. The Eastland

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Disaster, throughout the twentieth century, suffered from a lack of significant public narrative of the event, but memory survived through the private storytelling of families of victims, survivors, and rescuers. In this project, “official narrative” is used to describe an official version of events that emerged from newspapers and litigations immediately after the Eastland Disaster. This is because “official” narrative emerged from sources that have authority and have a higher level of trust in the eyes of the public. This contrasts with other “private” narratives that emerged from the Eastland Disaster that did not have the same level of public authority – working class immigrant families, ethnic minorities, and communists – or, private people who some might view as having a biased narrative based from personal or group interests.

Memory studies suggests that official public memory exists when leaders of a community share an interest in social unity by promoting interpretations of the past and present that create a sense of sacredness. In contrast, personal memories consist of specialized interests that are grounded in parts of the whole. This concept is based on John Bodnar’s official and vernacular memory terminology. For the purpose of this project, I will use “public memory” and “private memories” to distinguish the two types of memory.4 Private memories inform and shape public memory through the actions of historical societies and their efforts to memorialize disasters like the Eastland. Because of the lack of public memory of the Eastland, the groups responsible for sharing the personal stories and memories of the disaster are driving the public narrative.5

When I discuss the “history” of the Eastland Disaster, I am referring to the

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5 Bodnar, 13.
recorded story of the tragedy, as written by historians and supported by scholarly research in primary source evidence. By its nature, history strives not to be emotional, but naturally it incorporates narratives to tell the story. Through the study of history and memory of the *Eastland* Disaster, we can better understand the event and the meaning it holds for the people connected to it – both directly and indirectly.

This dissertation also explores immigrant experiences in the Midwest and Great Lakes region. While there has been considerable work on the Midwest, many historians tend to favor studies of the East and West coasts. And, immigrant studies often are separated from memory studies. Industry, immigration, economy, morality, and family are the heart of both the Midwest’s and the nation’s stories. The *Eastland* Disaster is just one moment in the early twentieth century, but the people connected to it—working class immigrants seeking a leisurely day off on Lake Michigan’s shore—exemplify much of the region’s and the nation’s experience of that era. As historian Fredrick Wetzig states, “History reveals that the region’s [Chicago’s] economy, its racial and ethnic tensions, its political traditions, and its religious vitality made this region both distinct and typically American.”

During the turn of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Chicago was home to many of the nation’s immigrants. The *Eastland*’s story is very much a part of the working class immigrant’s story, and their experiences and memories of the *Eastland* help illuminate this neglected aspect of the American story.

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Historiography

Any discussion of Great Lakes shipwreck history requires a thorough background in the many popular and professional works available. The notable authors of this genre have published several books, most of which are in many lakeside gift shops throughout the Great Lakes region. In most books about Great Lakes shipwrecks, Eastland receives brief recognition as the worst Great Lakes loss of life disaster. However, there are few books dedicated solely to the topic of the ill-fated passenger vessel. Two of these works are an Arcadia Publishing Images of America book written by Ted Wachholz, published in 2004, and the narrative nonfiction, Sinking of the Eastland: America’s Forgotten Tragedy (2005), written by Jay Bonansinga.

Transportation and economic historian George Hilton is well known for his works on Great Lakes maritime history. Specifically, his technical analysis of the Eastland Disaster in Eastland: Legacy of the Titanic (1995) puts the shipwreck in historic context and claims that the pressures of passenger shipping regulations imposed by the Federal government after the Titanic disaster in 1912 were responsible for the 844 lives lost in July 1915. His work was the only that analyzed the technical reasons for the Eastland’s demise until Michael McCarthy’s work in 2014.

Michael McCarthy’s book, Ashes Under Water: The SS Eastland and the Shipwreck that Shook America (2014) is the most recent work to address the disaster. Thorough in its investigation of the litigation that followed the wreck, McCarthy’s work blames Eastland’s owners for the disaster because of their neglect to make the necessary repairs at the beginning of the 1915 season. He contradicts Hilton’s theory.
that it was the added weight on the uppermost decks that capsized the boat; instead focusing on the boat’s faulty ballast as the cause of the wreck. My work does not attempt to reconcile these two theories, but instead presents them both as factors in the boat’s demise.

With the exception of a few works like George Hilton and Michael McCarthy, academic historians have yet to explore the *Eastland* Disaster within Great Lakes maritime history. Perhaps shipwreck history is a field for the enthusiast, but one of the goals of this project is to alter that notion. At this time, there are no published academic studies of any Great Lakes shipwreck in relationship with memory. This study seeks to be a pioneer in this field while also expanding the ever-growing literature of history and memory.

Historian Mark L. Thompson states, “A shipwreck is not an isolated, exclusive event that occurs to one unlucky ship and its equally hapless crew.” Thompson contends shipwrecks are the result of a series of evolved behaviors that have been repeated within the shipping industry over a long period. As a result, the wreck of the *Eastland* is not a special event, but it is the product of industrial behavior. By moving past a “shrine complex,” an anthropological term describing the fascination of lay people with shipwrecks and their folklore, historians and the public can gain new insights into ships and the Great Lakes. This study goes beyond the disaster and studies the human interaction of memory-making and forgetting that takes place after an event. It

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9 Thompson, *Steamboats & Sailors*, 151.

then discovers how these private memories survive and later influence public memory.

In addition, this project will aid the field of public history by presenting an understanding of how public narratives of historic events are created from private, personal memories. As a public historian, I experience first-hand how the public interacts with history and how they interpret historic events. My study, although regional in scope, will aid other historians in their own understanding of how history and memory intertwine in the public realm.

Methodology

In order to determine how the Eastland Disaster is viewed in public memory in the Great Lakes region, this project follows the boat’s history in local newspapers from her early career as a passenger steamer through to present day. In addition, my study also uses traditional primary resources such as letters, court records, transcripts, ship plans, and personal narratives.

This project uses oral histories as a major guide in gauging the importance of the Eastland in public memory. Memories expressed in oral histories inform public memory. Oral history interviews of Eastland Disaster descendants and artists help understand how these memories have informed the memorialization of the Eastland Disaster.

A project of this dimension has required the use of many non-traditional, interdisciplinary sources. The fourth chapter of this dissertation studies how the twenty-

first century public’s awareness of the disaster has been affected by the 2012 Chicago performance of *Eastland: A New Musical*, a theatrical production based on Jay Bonansinga’s 2004 novel *The Sinking of the Eastland*. In addition, this study employs the use of postcards, photographs, and folk songs to demonstrate the impact of the *Eastland* on public memory in the Great Lakes region.

The use of memory studies is what guides this project. By understanding how people create personal memories and meanings from historic events, historians can better understand how these personal memories influence public memory. This study uses the concepts of “iconic events,” “postmemory,” and “prosthetic memory” to achieve this understanding.

The *Eastland* Disaster’s status as the Great Lakes’ greatest loss-of-life tragedy should signal what Patricia Leavy termed as an “iconic event.” As an iconic event, the *Eastland* Disaster would sear itself into permanent public memory based on three criteria: its use in popular culture, political discourse, and initial interpretive practices.¹² This dissertation explores the ways in which *Eastland* meets Leavy’s criteria, but falls short.

Memory of the *Eastland* Disaster survived the twentieth century because of the private, personal memory sharing of survivors, rescuers, and families of victims. Theorist Marianne Hirsch describes this process of memory transfer as “postmemory.” Through this process, descendants of the *Eastland* Disaster inherited traumatic memory as an inevitable consequence of the deep bond of family.¹³


The postmemories of the third and fourth generations of *Eastland* Disaster survivors, victims, and rescuers have the power to influence the perceptions of others who are not directly connected to an event. Through the process Alison Landsberg has termed “prosthetic memory,” audiences with no prior experience of an event are capable of acquiring new memories through public cultural displays, like a movie or museum exhibit, because of the emotional connection formed from that experience.\(^\text{14}\) In this study, descendants of the *Eastland* Disaster were the first individuals to share their family stories—their postmemories—outside of the family unit. Their museum collections, exhibits, books, and other cultural displays profoundly affected others who had no prior connection to the disaster, creating prosthetic memory. For the purpose of this dissertation, I study three artists and their prosthetic memory of the tragedy. These artists went on to write historical narratives, teen fiction, and a musical that would have an even greater impact on the public’s remembrance of the *Eastland* Disaster.\(^\text{15}\)

**Organization**

This dissertation contains four chapters that explore the history and memory of the *Eastland* Disaster over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Beginning with the boat’s inception and ending at the centennial commemoration of the

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disaster, the *Eastland’s* course of memory is an important story to tell. In Chapter One, the story of the boat is told from its first days as a passenger vessel in South Haven. From its start, *Eastland* established a reputation for being an unstable vessel. After changing ownership several times, she finally came to St. Joseph in 1914 to serve the Chicago to St. Joseph passenger line. This chapter discovers the working-class history of the disaster and the earliest moments of public memory-making.

Chapter Two explores how the press and other media covered a major iconic event like the *Eastland* Disaster immediately after the catastrophe. This chapter discusses the limits of American public memory and explains how the *Eastland* Disaster, which had nearly all characteristics to be an iconic event, failed to establish permanence in public memory. This is due to the working-class background of *Eastland* victims and the competition for headline space with the Great War.16

Memory of the *Eastland* survived in the twentieth century largely because of the personal memories of survivors, victims, and rescuers who shared their stories within their family units. In Chapter Three, I explore how the descendants of *Eastland* survivors formed postmemory of the event from the emotional storytelling of their ancestors. Specifically, this chapter discovers the postmemories of Dave Nelson and Ted and Barb Wachholz, and what inspired them to share their family histories of the *Eastland* Disaster.

In Chapter Four, I build on the idea of postmemory of the *Eastland* Disaster and how family storytelling is now directing the way the history of the disaster is shared

beyond the direct lineage of the tragedy through prosthetic memory. These prosthetic memories were then used to construct historical narratives, teen fiction, and a Chicago musical that each sought to expand the public’s awareness of the *Eastland* Disaster.

Finally, this dissertation ends with my analysis of the centennial commemoration ceremonies that took place over the July 24, 2015, weekend in Chicago, Illinois.
CHAPTER ONE

The Queen of the Lakes

This chapter discusses the history of the Great Lakes passenger boat, *Eastland*. Before the disaster, the boat endured a troubling reputation of being an unstable vessel. The *Eastland*'s history as a cranky vessel played an important role in the initial reporting after the tragedy, and the boat’s origin story is a significant part of the history and memory of the *Eastland* Disaster. This chapter presents the history of the disaster as written from public records without attempting to find cause or explanation of why the boat turned over. The story of the disaster, as supported by primary sources, is important because it provides the basis for the history of the event and for the commemoration process that took place throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. This chapter argues that initial public memory of the *Eastland* Disaster began as soon as the boat capsized with the rescue and relief efforts and victims’ funerals. Although well documented in mass media, public memory of the *Eastland* Disaster faded once litigation ended in the 1930s. This chapter also explores a secondary theme that played a role in shaping the Disaster’s place in memory: the people of the *Eastland* Disaster were of little importance in terms of fame, status, or wealth. The victims, survivors, and rescuers of the tragedy were largely of working-class origins, many of them non-English speaking first generation Americans.
The S.S. Eastland

*Eastland* was built in 1903 for the Michigan Steamship Company as a vessel to transport passengers and package freight between Chicago and South Haven, Michigan. In the early 20th century, boats made daily trips seasonally between Chicago and west Michigan ports. The basic service for this trip left Chicago mid-morning during the week and on Sundays. At the destination, passengers had several hours to enjoy the attractions, or could stay at one of the many resorts. While at dock in one of the several Lake Michigan ports, dockhands loaded the boat with fruit from local farmers for sale in Chicago’s markets. In the evening, the boat returned to Chicago with both passengers and package freight as cargo.

Dissatisfied with rates from competing shipping companies like the Dunkley-Williams Steamship Company, Captain John C. Pereau and local fruit shippers organized the Michigan Steamship Company intending to enter the South Haven-Chicago market. The new company proposed building a new 300-foot vessel that would be able to make the round trip from Chicago to South Haven twice per day. The twin-screw ship, or dual-propeller boat, was proposed to have space for 2,000 passengers with room for 500 overnight guests.¹

In late 1902, the Michigan Steamship Company ordered plans from the Jenks Ship Building Company of Port Huron, Michigan, for the company’s newest vessel. Competing for the right to name the new boat “City of South Haven” with the Dunkley-Williams Steamship Company, time was of the essence. The first boat to launch on the South Haven-Chicago line would have the right of using South Haven in its name. When

construction for the new boats began, Jenks Company boatyard fire slowed production, guaranteeing Dunkley Williams would win the race for the prized name.²

At their January meeting, the Michigan Steamship Company announced plans to hold a name contest with a prize of ten dollars and a season pass on the steamer. The company received 565 contest entries and chose South Haven resident Mrs. David Reid’s submission “Eastland” on April 25, 1903.³ She chose the name because the boat was made for “the land East of Chicago.”⁴

*Eastland* was launched in the Black River at Port Huron on May 6, 1903. The launch was a major occasion for the Jenks Shipbuilding Company and the community of Port Huron. *Eastland* was the first passenger steamer built in the town since the ferry *Omar D. Conger* in 1882. To celebrate, crowds gathered at the shipyard and children were given a partial day off from school to see the boat’s christening by Captain Pereue’s wife, Frances.⁵

Before she made her maiden voyage, Jenk’s outfitted *Eastland* with boiler tanks and a special water ballast system. Jenk’s designed the system specifically with the South Haven in mind. *Eastland* needed to be able to make it over the shallow sandbar just outside the mouth of the Black River. Described as “ash” beneath the water, the

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³ “Want a Name for the New Boat,” *South Haven Daily Tribune*, January 21, 1903 and “Mrs. Reid Names Boat,” *South Haven Daily Tribune*, April 25, 1903.


⁵ “Eastland Ready to Deliver,” *South Haven Daily Tribune*, July 13, 1903.
sandbar stood as a major hurdle to the boats coming and going out of the small Lake Michigan port.⁶

On July 16, 1903, the boat set out from Port Huron with 250 passengers en route for South Haven. *Eastland* made stops at Mackinac Island and Manistee before finally reaching her destination on July 18. Several hundred people inspected her interior. The boat’s crew originally planned to only stay at South Haven for an hour before leaving for her first trip to Chicago, but she was delayed by the loading of additional coal. While leaving, one of her lines caught in one of the propellers, disabling the propulsion system and requiring the boat to be towed back into the harbor.⁷ This would be the first error of many for the doomed boat.

Her owners deemed *Eastland*’s first season on Lake Michigan a moderate success. However, the boat could not meet the speed requirements set out in her initial building contract. From her first South Haven-Chicago voyage the crew knew her “built for speed” design was not what they expected. The Michigan Steamship Company altered her schedule to mirror the rival *City of South Haven*’s passenger timetable. On this schedule, *Eastland* left Chicago at 9:30 a.m. for a four hour cruise to South Haven. In the evening, the boat made a return trip to Chicago at 5:00 p.m. On Fridays and Saturdays, the boat made overnight crossings from Chicago to South Haven.⁸

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Eastland’s owners and builders believed she was a sturdy vessel, but during her first season she began to develop a troubling reputation relating to her stability. Eastland frequently hit the sandy bottom in the shallow mouth of the Black River at South Haven. Although her ballast system was designed to adjust the boat’s draft for this very reason, Eastland had to replace twenty-two propeller blades in the first four weeks of service. On July 19, 1903, just a day after going into service for the Michigan Steamship Company, personnel at the Life Saving Service Station in South Haven recorded that Eastland, while underway just outside of the South Haven port, leaned enough to bring water into her low gangways and open ports. The boat’s listing was severe enough for personnel to notify the captain, but the boat righted herself before any major incident occurred.

At the end of the 1903 season Eastland had a small accident in the Chicago River that forced the boat’s owners to dismiss the captain. While turning around in the river, the boat struck the tug George W. Gardner. The tug rolled over and was swamped. The accident convinced the boat’s owners that Captain Pereue was too inexperienced to operate a twin-screw boat. They replaced him with Frank A. Dority, first mate of the Goodrich Line’s twin-screw ferry Iowa.

In September 1903, Eastland traveled back to Port Huron for repairs. Since the boat never met the speed promised by the Jenks Ship Building Company, she returned

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9 McCarthy, 8.

10 Hilton, 37.
to the port to reduce her draft and increase her speed.\textsuperscript{11} After winter repairs in 1903-1904, *Eastland* returned to South Haven looking forward to another successful summer season. However, the adjustments made to her engines and ballast led to more rumors that the boat was unsteady.

\textsuperscript{11} Reducing the *Eastland*’s draft helped the boat avoid hitting the bottom of the Black River and the sand bar located just outside of the mouth South Haven’s harbor. See Hilton, 39.
Figure 1 - These drawings of Eastland are based from George Hilton's own estimate and the author and artist's inference from historical photographs of the boat. Drawings by Christopher Valvano, Ph.D.
Figure 2 - Interior plan of *Eastland*. Drawing by Christopher Valvano, Ph.D.
Eastland’s reputation for instability was not helped during the summer of 1904. On a very hot July 17, Eastland loaded approximately 2,370 passengers in South Haven, well under her licensed capacity of 3,300. The passengers were a group of postal workers returning to Chicago after a holiday weekend in the vacation town. Suffering from the stifling heat on the main deck, many of the passengers moved to the hurricane deck (top deck) to take advantage of the cooler lake breeze. As Eastland left the South Haven harbor, her No. 1 and 2 ballast tanks were full of water to ensure the vessel would make it over the shallow sandbar approximately 1.5 miles away from the pier. Filling the front tanks was necessary in order to raise the stern and protect the propellers from the lake bottom. This maneuver was called “jumping the bar.” Once the vessel cleared the sandbar, the boat began to list to port twelve to fifteen degrees. Concerned with the sudden instability, engineer William Eeles ordered tanks No. 1 and 2 empty and tank No. 4 on the starboard side to fill. After five minutes the boat’s list began to correct itself, but it soon began to lean even more to starboard. At this time, Captain Dority, concerned with the vessel not coming to trim, ordered the 1,200 passengers on the hurricane to go below to the main deck. At this point, the boat was reportedly at a twenty to twenty-five degree list when water began to flood the main deck through the aft starboard gangways. After a half hour of uncertainty, the boat finally righted herself and the captain ordered the engines “ahead strong,” the equivalent of full speed ahead.

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12 Hilton, 46.

13 Hilton, 46-47.
This episode is significant because it demonstrates the boat’s poor stability. The July 17th event happened in full view of the South Haven shore, which led many future passengers to prefer the *City of South Haven* as their vessel for Chicago transportation. One witness to the South Haven incident, in a letter to Secretary of Commerce William Redfield after the 1915 disaster, stated: “People, both on the boat and on the piers, screamed, and some women fainted. When this event occurred, my wife and I were standing on the pier. The effect of this action on the part of the *Eastland* was never entirely overcome, so long as I resided there.”¹⁴ As a result of the event, Captain Dority lowered the number of passengers allowed on the hurricane deck to 500. The next season, no passengers were allowed on the top most deck.¹⁵

The 1904 season ended without any other incidents. The twice daily scraping on the sandbar in South Haven and general wear and tear caused the owners to winter *Eastland* in Chicago over 1904-1905 for repairs to her damaged hull. The Michigan Steamship Company also made interior changes, including the removal of forty-nine aft cabins and an additional staircase and lunch counter. The repairs for the coming season cost the firm an estimated $50,000.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Hilton, 49.

On Lake Erie

*Eastland*’s reputation could not recover from the incident in 1904 and ticket sales slumped. The Michigan Steamship Company was unable to recover the costs owed for her winter repairs. They sold *Eastland* to Robert R. Blacker, a shareholder of the Michigan Steamship Company, for $100,000 in December 1905. Blacker reorganized the Michigan Steamship Company into the Indiana-based Michigan Transportation Company.  

For the 1906 season, the Michigan Transportation Company and Dunkley-Williams consolidated their services into the Chicago-South Haven Line. *Eastland* made her twice-daily runs without a major episode until late summer. On August 5, 1906, *Eastland* put about (turned around) in the Chicago River just west of the Clark Street Bridge. A large number of passengers concentrated on the starboard side and as the boat passed over the streetcar tunnel below La Salle Street, she listed “an unspecified amount” causing an official complaint to be filed by the Chicago harbormaster.  

The official complaint led to a precautionary decrease in the number of passengers certified for the boat from 3,000 to 2,400.  

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17 The Michigan Steamship Company was losing money at a very fast pace and owed more money than it could make. Blacker was the President of the company when he purchased the *Eastland*. Hilton, 51-52.  


19 Since the boat was launched in 1903 to the 1906 listing incident in Chicago, the licensed capacity of the *Eastland* changed five times for various reasons. *Licensed Passenger Capacity of the Eastland, with Reasons for Changes*. Hilton, 50.
In 1907, citing a decline in passengers, *Eastland*’s owners sold the boat to the Lake Shore Navigation Company for $150,000. The group of Cleveland investors desired the boat to run a rigorous route that soon proved to be impossible. The Lake Shore Navigation Company wanted the *Eastland* to depart Cleveland at 8:00 AM, unload passengers at the Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky and then continue on to Toledo. In the evening the boat would return to Cedar Point by 6:00 PM and arrive in Cleveland by 9:30 PM. Several late arrivals in Cleveland convinced the owners to revert *Eastland* to a simple Cleveland-Cedar Point route, along with a few moonlight cruises.\(^{20}\)

In 1909 the boat changed ownership again. Cleveland City Clerk Peter Witt assumed ownership of the newly organized Eastland Navigation Company with a $130,000 loan from the Depositors Savings & Trust Company and $140,000 in capital. The Eastland Navigation Company continued to make day trips between Cleveland and Cedar Point. *Eastland*’s remaining thirty-seven cabins were removed to lighten the boat.\(^{21}\)

*Eastland*’s reputation as an unsteady boat followed her to Ohio, but surprisingly did not alarm her new owners. During her stay in Cleveland, she had few incidents. On June 8, 1907, the rudder chains of the boat broke while backing away from the Cedar Point pier. *Eastland* ran aground in Sandusky Bay in September 1909 and July 1912.

\(^{20}\) Hilton, 55

During a moonlight excursion on July 25, 1912, she struck a breakwater in Cleveland due to a navigation error.\textsuperscript{22}

Although no major incidents were officially reported, many passengers remained wary of the boat’s instability during the boarding process. Inspectors met these concerns by stating that the boat was perfectly sound because she was stable while at sea. Historian George Hilton states the \textit{Eastland}’s stability at sea and instability at the dock are indicative of the boat’s low metacentric height, or level of static stability.\textsuperscript{23} Meaning, the boat had a faulty design, which made her top heavy in the water. The rumors of the boat’s instability were enough to cause the Eastland Navigation Company to run a public relations campaign and issue a $5,000 reward to anyone who could disprove the boat’s seaworthiness.\textsuperscript{24}

During litigation after the 1915 \textit{Eastland} Disaster, the boat’s history as a cranky vessel became a very important piece of evidence for the prosecution. Robert O. Moyer, a passenger traveling with the Fraternal Order of Maccabees on July 1, 1912, testified that while leaving Cleveland the \textit{Eastland} listed to port approximately twenty-five degrees and then to starboard by thirty degrees before finally righting itself. The incident was never officially reported to the authorities, but it scared Moyer enough for him to not return to Cleveland on the boat. Instead, he returned on the interurban railway from Cedar Point. Fellow passenger, J. Grant Snyder, corroborated the account.\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] Hilton, 57.
\item[23] Hilton, 59.
\end{footnotes}
The stability of Eastland remained forever in question, but over the boat’s tenure on Lake Erie she transported over 400,000 people between Cleveland and Cedar Point. However, the Eastland Navigation Company accumulated losses of up to $200,000 by the end of the 1913 season. In early 1914, the Eastland Navigation Company sold Eastland for $150,000 to the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company to settle debts at the Depositors Savings & Trust Company.26

In St. Joseph

The Graham and Morton Transportation Company was the major passenger and package freight company at the port of St. Joseph, Michigan. Known for their boats City of Benton Harbor and Theodore Roosevelt, Graham and Morton maintained a busy dock in Benton Harbor because of the city’s direct connection to train lines and resorts like the House of David. Visitors who wanted to visit St. Joseph’s popular Silver Beach and hotels had to cross the St. Joseph River once they arrived in Benton Harbor. The growing popularity of St. Joseph as its own destination inspired Mrs. E.A. Graham to form a new transportation line that had direct service between Chicago and St. Joseph. Mrs. Graham, along with fruit farmers and investors William Hull and Water Steele, formed the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company in late 1912. After one season with the small propeller boat Eugene C. Hart, the owners of the company sought to purchase a larger vessel that could handle the large summer crowds. Eastland was suggested for purchase after Steele had traveled from Cleveland to Cedar Point on the boat in late summer 1913.

26 Hilton, 61 and 65.
During the Coroner’s Jury held immediately after the disaster, the owners of the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company claimed they were never aware of the boat’s past or of its unstable reputation. On June 5, 1914, Eastland arrived at the old Graham and Morton dock in St. Joseph and was greeted with great fanfare. The City of Benton Harbor blew her horn from the other side of the river and the calliope played “Somebody’s Coming to Our House,” “Home Sweet Home,” and “Auld Lang Syne.”

Eastland passed federal inspection in Benton Harbor and was certified by U.S. Steamboat Inspectors Robert Reid and Charles C. Eckliff for a capacity of 2,045 passengers for the 1914 season. There was no mention in the press of the boat’s prior history, nor were inspectors concerned about the boat’s stability. Reid reasoned that since Eastland carried 3,000 passengers in 1906 with no problems, the decreased capacity and increased deck space would be no problem. That season the boat carried eight lifeboats, thirty-one life rafts, and one workboat.

The St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company hired Harry Pederson to captain the boat. Born in Norway in 1860, Pederson owned a farm in Millburg, Michigan, just outside of Benton Harbor. He had never commanded a passenger boat, nor did he have knowledge of the boat’s machinery or water ballast. Nevertheless, the management of the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company hired Pedersen based on his reputation.

27 Hilton, 64.
29 Hilton, 66.
as a consultant for Graham and Morton and his long history as a captain of other twin-screw steamers.  

*Eastland* had a relatively uneventful 1914 season. The boat only carried her capacity once that summer for a chartered excursion for a Western Electric Company picnic to Michigan City. The arrangement was not unusual. The boat was expected to leave Chicago on the morning of July 24, 1914, discharge the picnickers in Michigan City, return to Chicago in time to depart for St. Joseph at 2:00 p.m., and finally depart St. Joseph in time to pick up passengers at Michigan City and return to Chicago by 6:00 p.m. However, In keeping with the character of the ship, *Eastland* was late at all stops on her itinerary. The boat’s owners and picnic planners decided the trip was a success despite the lateness of the boat’s arrival in Michigan City. For the next year’s arrangement, the boat’s owners decided *Eastland* needed more time to make its usual run to St. Joseph.  

In the winter of 1914-1915, St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company dry-docked *Eastland* for repairs and remodeling. The bar was extended into the dormitory space, a firemen’s bunkroom was added, and boiler tubes were replaced. On the ‘tween and main decks, sections of the wood deck was replaced with concrete, but the additional weight of the concrete was not a concern and was only noted by the inspector, Robert Reid, after the disaster. According to testimonies after the disaster, Captain Pedersen

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30 Captain Harry Pedersen’s testimony, *Criminal Transcript*, 934.

31 Hilton, 70-71.

32 Hilton, 71-72.
was aware that the concrete added more weight to the boat, but he did not believe it would have an impact on the boat’s stability.\footnote{Pedersen’s testimony, \textit{Criminal Testimony}, 892-894.}

New regulations also meant changes for \textit{Eastland} in the 1915 season. In 1914, regulations required 2.5 cubic feet of air per person on life rafts. In 1915 this requirement changed to 3.0 cubic feet of air and 4.0 square feet of space per person, causing a reduction in life raft capacity by one-fifth. The change reduced the \textit{Eastland}'s proposed capacity from 2,500 to 2,183 passengers and a crew of 70.\footnote{Hilton, 73.}

Company management hired a new Chief Engineer for the 1915 season. Joseph M. Erickson, a Norwegian by birth, had been a mariner since the age of fifteen. He became an engineer in 1909 and served on several railroad car ferries and freighters as engineer, second assistant engineer, and first assistant engineer by 1912. Erickson took the chief engineer license exam in the spring of 1913. He served as Chief Engineer on the water ballast-equipped freighters \textit{C.W. Watson} and \textit{Sultana}. During his time on the Great Lakes, he met Grand Haven resident and local inspector Robert Reid and his daughter, Florence. Reid certified Erickson’s position after his exams. Erickson and Reid’s daughter married in December 1914 and, in an effort to come home more often, he applied for the position on the \textit{Eastland}. After the disaster, Erickson and Reid could not avoid the accusations of nepotism, but they denied that his rise to Chief Engineer was a result of his father-in-law’s influence.\footnote{Robert Reid testimony, \textit{Investigation of Accident to the Steamer Eastland}, 99.}
Management of the *Eastland* hired Erickson in April, but began to question his competency early in the season when the boat could not make its schedule. On July 18, 1915, Hull asked Grant Donaldson, the boat’s former Chief Engineer, to return to the vessel. Donaldson declined, but offered to help Erickson learn the boat’s unique character. Hilton notes that in “this questioning of Erickson’s competence, his handling of the ballast tanks was not an issue.” Erickson’s handling of the boat’s ballast was considered standard operation.

In June and early July 1915, the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company’s management made moves to increase the boat’s capacity for the rest of the summer. The season was going poorly because of bad weather and the declining tonnage of Michigan fruit. The owners prepared for a busy Independence Day holiday and the coming Western Electric picnic excursion by making an effort to increase the boat’s capacity. Because of the LaFollette Seamen’s Act, the company knew they would have to increase life raft and boat capacity in order to increase the *Eastland*’s overall licensed capacity. The LaFollette Seamen’s Act of 1915 included safety provisions inspired by the *Titanic* disaster. Among the regulations were the banishment of imprisonment for desertion and regulations for the compensation of seamen.  

37 Captain Pedersen recommended to Hull that the company purchase more rafts and life jackets. On July 2, 1915, Pedersen phoned Reid to notify him that the changes had been made to accommodate an additional 776 people in rafts or boats and enough life jackets for 2,570 people. Reid inspected the boat over the July 4th weekend in Chicago and issued

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36 Hilton, 74.

an amended Certificate of Inspection allowing for 2,500 passengers and seventy crewmembers on the *Eastland* for the 1915 season. Neither Reid nor Pedersen noted the additional weight of the safety equipment except for the addition of rails on the *Eastland’s* hurricane deck to keep passengers out of the area.\(^{38}\) With the increased capacity, the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company was ready to handle the anticipated 7,000 Western Electric picnickers later that month.\(^{39}\)

**The Western Electric Company and the People of Hawthorne Works**

Western Electric Company was a leading manufacturer of electric goods during the early twentieth century. As the telephone grew in popularity, the demand for cable grew apace. Western Electric led the industry with high-quality goods for telegraph, telephone, and electrical appliances. Western Electric is responsible for bringing sound to the movies. The iconic Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) lion roared for the first time courtesy of Western Electric sound equipment.\(^{40}\) Located in the heart of Chicago, owners of Western Electric Company, Enos Barton and Harry Thayer, operated a large manufacturing facility on Clinton Street, but with business growing they looked outside the city limits to build a larger plant. Their new facility, named Hawthorne Works, was located in Cicero, Illinois, just west of downtown Chicago. Thayer and Barton chose the location purposefully to avoid the “volatility of downtown and the extreme elements of

\(^{38}\) Letter to C.C. Eckliff and Robert Reid from Harry Pedersen requesting an increase in the passenger capacity of the steamer *Eastland*, dated July 2, 1915 (Coast Guard National Archives, Washington, D.C.).


the labor movement."\textsuperscript{41} When the plant opened in 1905, the population of Cicero was predominantly of Czech and Polish descent “without a history of labor activism.”\textsuperscript{42} This opportunity appealed to the owners of Western Electric because of their desire to avoid work stoppages that were frequent in the city’s manufacturing plants.

At Hawthorne Works, Western Electric employees manufactured telephone apparatus, cable, and wire. Employees also installed, engineered, and inspected Western Electric’s various products.\textsuperscript{43} Western Electric’s founders believed in a strong and united workforce both inside and outside the factory, and by developing a corporate welfare state within Hawthorne Works, Western Electric was able to focus on fostering relationships with their employees.

Corporate paternalism developed during the early twentieth century in response to labor organization and to promote non-legislative workplace reforms.\textsuperscript{44} “Welfare work,” as corporations commonly called this system, was a form of labor control. The system created the expectation that employers also governed a worker’s off-time. By


\textsuperscript{42} Adams and Butler, 83.

\textsuperscript{43} Wachholz, 23.

offering outside activities like sports, school, clubs, and picnics, “welfare work sought to regulate and control workers use of personal time.”\textsuperscript{45}

Hawthorne Works’ city-like atmosphere contributed to a paternalistic atmosphere with its own gymnasium, classrooms, band shell, baseball fields, restaurant, and social clubs. Employees were encouraged to continue their education with classes held on campus. Competition in athletics was also encouraged to promote teamwork and fellowship among all employees. Several young women played on the company “Bloomer Girls” softball team.\textsuperscript{46} Western Electric created a community that was close-knit both inside and outside the factory.

The people of Hawthorne Works were close not only because of their work proximity, but also because of their ethnic backgrounds. In the early twentieth century, the Chicago region was comprised of mostly European immigrants of German, Polish, Swedish, Russian Jew, and Czech descent. These groups of immigrants lived in neighborhoods and established community groups that allowed them to hold on to their customs.\textsuperscript{47} In fact, these working-class neighborhoods were spatially integrated with several ethnic groups occupying the same city blocks, but their culture and customs


allowed them to remain socially segregated within their own ethnic groups. According to historian Dominic Pacyga, these groups’ ability to maintain their communities in a new land stems from their desire to maintain the traditions of their European peasant community.

Churches and fraternal organizations also allowed these groups of new Americans to maintain some of their traditions. As populations of Czechs, Polish, Germans, and Swedes grew, so did the demand for non-English speaking Catholic parishes. Before the 1890s, Roman Catholic churches in Chicago were dominated by Irish priests and bishops. By the end of the nineteenth century, German and Bohemian Catholics insisted on their own parishes with leaders with ethnically familiar last names as well as cemeteries that reflected the communities in which they lived. These ethnically-based parishes allowed communities to maintain cultural bonds while navigating American assimilation. Western Electric’s paternalism reinforced the communities established within these neighborhoods by sponsoring picnics, sports, and educational events that brought together entire communities.

Beginning in 1911, Western Electric sponsored an annual picnic for employees in the summer. The company chartered passenger steamships to transport employees to


Michigan City’s Washington Park for a day of fun. At the park, guests enjoyed the park’s many attractions including a roller coaster, merry-go-round, a baseball park, bathing beach, bowling alleys, and photo studio.51

The annual picnic was a carefully planned event from the beginning. Attendees numbered in the thousands. Western Electric chartered several passenger steamers to transport the employees to Michigan City. The Theodore Roosevelt, United States, Holland, Pere Marquette, and Eastland were all used over the years.

Once passengers arrived in Michigan City, they disembarked at Trail Creek, just to the west of the Franklin Street Bridge. This dock allowed the picnickers direct access to the park. There was a great incentive for being on the first boat to the picnic. Once the first boat arrived, the Western Electric Band led a grand procession of early arrivals into the park, opening festivities with music, and later a parade of company women.52

The picnic included more than a dozen foot races for all ages and sexes. One employee wrote, “Men will run, women will run, and perspiration will run.”53 Among the many athletic activities available, the biggest attraction was the women’s softball team called the Bloomer Girls. These young women played a form of baseball that used a softer ball and a stick for a bat. They did not wear gloves and the pitcher and infielders stood only a few yards away from the batter. Several young women tried out for the

51 Wachholz, 29.
52 Wachholz, 29-31.
53 As quoted in Wachholz, 34.
team hoping to gain the popularity that many of its players attracted at Hawthorne Works.\textsuperscript{54}

At the beach, picnickers competed in tug-of-war and greased pole events. All meant for fun, these events cultivated the family-like atmosphere that Western Electric wanted to build. Employees looked forward to the annual picnic every summer.\textsuperscript{55}

Attendance for the picnics grew each year. At the 1913 picnic, 3,500 tickets were sold only to immediate family of employees. To grow the event, the committees advertised that extended family could attend. One advertisement encouraged workers to “Bring along her mother and her sister and her sister’s youngsters. Make a family party of it. They will all enjoy it.”\textsuperscript{56}

In 1914, the planning committees expected their numbers to jump significantly from 3,500 to 6,000 attendees. To meet demand, the transportation committee ordered another boat to transport the swelling numbers. The boat they chartered was the \textit{Eastland}.\textsuperscript{57} That morning the \textit{Eastland} departed from the docks after the \textit{Theodore Roosevelt}. In Michigan City, she discharged her passengers and returned to Chicago to make her regular run of passengers to St. Joseph. However, the \textit{Eastland} was delayed in Michigan City, throwing her off her schedule and making her late for the rest of the

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\textsuperscript{54} Wachholz, 35. \\
\textsuperscript{55} Wachholz, 39. \\
\textsuperscript{56} Wachholz, 39. \\
\textsuperscript{57} Wachholz, 39. \\
\end{flushright}
day. To avoid this situation in 1915, the picnic planning committees required that the 
*Eastland* be the first boat to be loaded that year.\(^{58}\)

The 1915 picnic was expected to be the largest ever. Hawthorne Works employees were encouraged to buy their tickets early for $.75 each. Ticket sales reached 7,000 picnickers, the highest ever.\(^{59}\)

Figure 3 - The site of the disaster, located on the South side of the river between Clark and LaSalle Streets, is marked by a red circle. "The Rand McNally New Standard Map of Chicago, 1913," *University of Chicago Digital Preservation Collection*.

**The Disaster**

According to Joseph Erickson’s logs, preparations for the excursion began in the early morning hours of July 24. After returning from a trip with the Masons, a fraternal organization, on the evening of July 23, *Eastland* docked in Chicago around midnight.

\(^{58}\) Wachholz, 42.

\(^{59}\) Wachholz, 43.
Captain Pederson ordered Joseph Erickson to “load her up” with coal in preparation for the long day ahead. Eastland was loaded with 104 tons of coal.

On the morning of July 24, 1915, Eastland’s crew prepared for a long day. Like the year before, Eastland would drop off the picnickers in Michigan City, return to Chicago, make its usual run to St. Joseph and return in the evening to pick up the picnickers. To prepare for the day, Eastland’s engineers pumped out all of the boat’s ballast and filled the coal storage. Chief Engineer Joseph Erickson planned to keep the boat balanced with plenty of coal and passengers.

The empty water ballast tank was standard procedure for Erickson. However, as passengers started to board the boat, Erickson knew something was wrong with the Eastland's stability:

As the passengers came on July 24 morning the ship started to list a little to starboard side, about 6:48 A.M. water was run in No. 2 port tank about 2 or 3 minutes then the valves was shut off, as the ship was about on even keel, at 6:53 A.M. the ship started to list a little to port, valve No. 3 starboard tank and the sea cock was opened for about 4 or 5 minutes, and she was on about even keel again. Erickson continued to open and shut valves on the Eastland's ballast tanks as the boat continued to list to the port and starboard sides. The boat’s listing led Erickson to believe that passengers were boarding at such a quick pace that they must have been rushing to one side. This was an issue experts and witnesses debated hotly in court,

60 Erickson letter, Investigation of Accident, 141.


62 Erickson letter, Investigation of Accident, 141.

63 Erickson letter, Investigation of Accident, 141.
although later analyses demonstrated the “rush to one side” myth is not possible. The following is a timeline of what transpired that morning.

*Eastland* was set to leave the Chicago River first, followed by the *Petoskey*, *Theodore Roosevelt*, and finally, *Racine*. At approximately 6:30 a.m., Robert H. McCreary, deputy collector of customs charged Luman A. Lobdell, Jr. and Curtis J. Oakley with counting the passengers loading on to the boat. Both men began loading passengers stationed at the rear gangway. At 6:41 a.m., the *Eastland* began listing to starboard. At this time, Chief Erickson admitted water to the No. 2 and 3 port ballast. The list was noticeable enough to stop loading passengers for fifteen to thirty seconds.

At 6:48 a.m., Captain Pedersen called for a tug to tow the *Eastland* from its dock to the lake. Dunham Towing & Wrecking Company dispatched the tug *Kenosha* to aid the steamer out of the Chicago River. At 7:05 a.m., Erickson started the engines at Pedersen’s command. Five minutes later, Harbormaster Adam F. Weckler arrived at the

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64 Both George Hilton and Michael McCarthy note about why this is not possible in their respective works. The consensus between both authors is that passengers boarded the boat on the starboard side and in order to say goodbye to friends on the dock the boat would have had to capsize in that direction. The boat capsized and came to rest on its port side, not the starboard.


66 Lobdell and Oakley counted adult and child passengers and considered children to be the same as adults when counting to capacity. According to regulations, “every person on board, other than the crew, whether adult or child in arms, shall be considered as a passenger in the count.” Testimony of Robert H. McCreary, *Investigation of Accident to Steamer “Eastland”*, Chicago, Illinois, July 24, 1915 to August 5, 1915, 6 and 16. Hilton, 94.

boat’s dockside and noted a seven-degree list to port. The boat’s leaning concerned the harbormaster, who ordered Captain Pedersen to get his boat under control before he left the dock. The boat continued to list to ten to fifteen degrees when Erickson ordered the boat’s crew to tell passengers on the forward main deck to move to the starboard side.

By 7:24 a.m., *Eastland* was leaning twenty to twenty-five degrees when Captain Pedersen rang the “Stand By” order to the engine room. At the same time, the stern line was cast off allowing the boat’s stern to begin to drift, a normal practice. The boat began to lean twenty-five to thirty degrees at approximately 7:27 a.m., and water from the Chicago River poured into the open gangways. A minute later, dishes and furniture fell from their shelves. The bar refrigerator slid from the bulkhead, crushing passengers as it hit.

At 7:30 a.m., the *Eastland* capsized and rested on her port side in the Chicago River. The screams and splashing of people hitting the water drew the attention of nearly every passerby near the dock.\(^{68}\)

According to his letter to the U.S. Steamboat Inspection Service Local Inspectors, Erickson stayed with the boat until several minutes after she capsized. He stated, “I remained in the engine room all the time, and till about a minute or two,\(^{68}\)

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\(^{68}\) Despite common myths regarding the cause of the *Eastland*’s accident, the boat capsized due to several factors relating to her ballast, weight, and passenger count. She did not capsize because passengers rushed to the port side of the boat to say goodbye to their friends. Although witnesses testified that there was no rush to one side by passengers, this myth of the cause of the capsizing would persist throughout the twentieth century. It was not until George Hilton published his book in 1995 that an official analysis of the disaster was stated for historic record.
perhaps longer after she rested on her port side, and done everything within my power at all times to hold the boat on even keel.”69

Immediately after the disaster, local officials turned to the boat operators to find an explanation for the accident. In an effort to protect the crew of the boat, Chicago Police placed Erickson, Pedersen and three other crewmembers under arrest. Erickson stated in his letter of his escape and arrest, “When I managed to reach the steering cable under the deck on the starboard side, and by standing on the air duct under deck starboard side reached through the port hole where the watchman Mr. Brooks pulled me through . . . . After changing some dry clothing about 8:40 A.M. . . . the Captain and both mates, and myself and the first assistant engineer were placed under arrest by the chief of police.”70

The events of July 24 marked an opportunity for many stories of heroism. Trapped inside the hull of the boat, many people were heard screaming and banging the bulkheads, begging for rescue. Eastland passenger and Titanic survivor, John V. Elbert, told his story of rescuing passengers after his escape:

I crawled back through the passageway leading back to the saloon without any trouble[…]they were hanging on to the molding, to chairs, and life preservers, and I guess there were several who were drowned in the cabin[…]we got to the forward saloon, where the men and women were hoisted out through the portholes by ropes. Then I went back and led the rest of them forward.71

69 Erickson letter, 143.

70 Erickson letter, 143.

Stories like Elbert’s were not uncommon. Professional and volunteer divers pulled dead bodies from the water for days after the wreck. One volunteer diver, Reggie Bowles, was only seventeen, but continued to search the water for anyone alive for over twelve hours. The professional divers and police nicknamed him “The Human Frog.”

**Funerals**

The close-knit Western Electric community experienced immense loss. Of the 844 people who perished on boat, seventy percent were under the age of twenty-five, including fifty-eight infants and young children. The average age of *Eastland* victims was twenty-three.

Hundreds of bodies were pulled from the wreck, each with a tragic story. The large number of victims required a morgue big enough to house them all. As rescuers pulled bodies from the boat, they were taken to the Second Regiment Armory and laid out in rows of eighty-five. One boy, labeled No. 396, was singled out as a symbol for the immense tragedy and loss of that day. For days after the tragedy, the young boy lay unidentified. Because the steamer had no passenger list, many bodies remained for days without identification. “Little Feller,” as the *Tribune* named the boy, was finally identified by extended relatives as Willie Novotny. He was seven years old. His funeral was the largest attended by Chicagoans in the wake of the disaster. Willie died with his sister and parents, one of several families who were eliminated entirely. His funeral was

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72 McCarthy, 124.

73 Wachholz, 111.

74 Hilton, 124.
held at the Bohemian School, and was attended by the Mayor of Chicago, hundreds of
school children, 200 boy scouts in uniform, and Chicago celebrities.

Julius F. Smietanku, an Internal Revenue collector, stoically announced at
Willie’s funeral, “Chicago wants not revenge but justice. This city will rise up in her might
and demand that this sacrifice of life be not in vain. The ‘Little Feller’ is dead, but out of
his death will be born a new sense of responsibility for public safety.” At the cemetery,
 fifteen thousand people filed past his coffin to pay respect to “Little Feller” and his
family.75 The tragedy of the Eastland called for a somber recognition of the lives lost,
especially children.

Catholic cemeteries around the city worried there was not enough room to bury
the dead. The Bohemian National Cemetery, one of the many cemeteries used to bury
the dead, devoted an entire section to the disaster, Section 16. Bishop Paul Rhode
delivered the sermon at St. Mary’s Polish Church for twenty-nine coffins, saying, “They
died like heroes, your boys and girls. . . . those young people were beautiful, but beauty
of the body is temporal while beauty of the soul is everlasting.”76 The number of funerals
exceeded the capacity for Chicago’s funeral homes. Recognizing the desperate need
for transport, Marshall Field & Company offered thirty-nine trucks as hearses.77

75 “Little Feller Gets Homage of All Chicagoans,” Chicago Tribune, August 1,
1915.

76 “Bells Toll All Day at Rites Over Boat Dead,” Chicago Tribune, July 25, 1915.

Victim and Survivor Assistance

The *Eastland* Disaster had a devastating impact on Chicago’s neighborhoods, especially those connected with the Western Electric Company and Hawthorne Works. Of the 844 dead, 465 people were employees of the factory. In his letter printed in August 1915, Western Electric President H.B. Thayer wrote, “Gloom hangs heavy over Hawthorne Works. Five hundred wage earners are gone. There are aged and feeble parents left, who have not only lost their children, but who have lost in them all that has kept them from destitution. There are helpless children who have lost their natural protectors.”

To the executives of Western Electric, the *Eastland* Disaster was not just a massive loss of employees, but also a devastating loss to the community. In response, the company set aside funds to assist families in monetary need, and provided the necessary aid to bury the dead. Thayer continued in his letter to employees, “In disaster there is always a lesson. For whom is this lesson? Working people are entitled to their pleasures and to the enjoyment of them in safety. The lesson is not for them . . . For some one there is a lesson. The lives of the innocent have been taken and they will have been taken in vain unless the lesson is heeded and hereafter there is safety where for our fellow-workers there was death.” Indeed, after the disaster many people looked for an explanation to the cause of the boat’s capsizing and a reason for the deaths of so many people.

In terms of assistance, Western Electric Company offered jobs and funds to whoever needed it after the disaster. The day after the disaster, executives voted to

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78 Western Electric News, August 1915, 2.
79 Western Electric News, August 1915, 2.
make one hundred thousand dollars available for relief. Of that money, fifty thousand was available in cash at Hawthorne Works ready for whoever needed immediate assistance. The *Eastland* Disaster put a severe test on the company’s new benefit and insurance plan, part of the corporate paternalism system meant to keep workers from unionizing. Established just two years prior, Western Electric set aside six month’s salary for death benefits for families of employees with more than five years of service. For families with ten years or more of service, Western Electric paid one year’s salary. With only 121 of the 465 Western Electric Company employees lost in the disaster qualifying for official death benefits, the company added an additional $100,000 to the aid fund to help those who did not meet the requirements of the death benefit. Local companies formed a citizen’s committee in response to the disaster and raised an additional $350,000 for the employee assistance fund.

In addition to monetary assistance, Western Electric also worked closely with rescuers to aid in the identification of victims and notification of victims’ families. The August Western Electric newsletter described the process of relief aid: “As soon as one of the dead had been identified as a Western Electric employee the information would be transmitted to the relief bureau, together with information as to the employee’s department and length of service. One of the relief workers would then be assigned to visit the victim’s home, in order to determine the circumstances of the family and

80 Western Electric News, August 1915, 3.


82 Adams and Butler, 91.

83 Adams and Butler, 92.
whether any relief was needed.\textsuperscript{84} During a second visit to the home, the investigator gave money to the family in the amount deemed necessary for proper assistance. Though Western Electric alleviated much of the initial financial burden of the tragedy, many families lost their primary wage earners and needed permanent assistance. Also, not all victims of the disaster were Western Electric employees and were not able to collect assistance from the company.

The six-week old Chicago office of the American Red Cross immediately established triage sites and offices to care for victims and survivors of the \textit{Eastland} Disaster. The organization occupied offices at Western Electric but also served families of victims and survivors that were not employees of the company. The Red Cross administered the rest of Western Electric's one hundred thousand dollars to whom they determined needed the most assistance.\textsuperscript{85} The permanent fund paid for its death and disability benefit plan. Administered by the Red Cross, dependents of Western Electric employees who had worked for the company for between five years and ten years received six months of wages. If an employee worked for the company for more than ten years, his or her dependents received a year's worth of wages to ease the hardship of their loss. According to the Red Cross final report, Western Electric paid approximately $78,000 in death and disability benefits.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{84} Western Electric News, August 1915, 3.

\textsuperscript{85} American Red Cross of Chicago and Northern Illinois, “About Us,” \textit{American Red Cross}, March 7, 2016, \url{http://www.redcross.org/ill/chicago/about}. Newsletter, 4.

\textsuperscript{86} American Red Cross, \textit{Eastland Disaster Relief: Final Report Eastland Disaster Relief Committee}, Chicago: American Red Cross, 1918, 29.
Within an hour of the disaster, the Red Cross worked to coordinate rescue and relief efforts. The grocery warehouse Reid, Murdock and Company, located directly across the river from the *Eastland*'s dock, acted as a command center for the day’s action. The Red Cross secured the building’s switchboard and used their own operators to relay necessary information to the police, city offices and government officials. The Reid, Murdock and Company building was also used as triage for treatable victims on the first floor with the large basement used as a morgue for the bodies pulled out of the river.\(^87\) According to the final report issued by the Red Cross regarding the relief efforts after the disaster, “General instructions to relief workers were to give liberal emergency assistance, principally in cash, and not to intrude at that time upon the families who were mourning and burying the dead.”\(^88\) The Red Cross helped hundreds of families coordinate and pay for the funerals of loved ones.

In the weeks after the disaster, the Red Cross coordinated social workers and relief volunteers to interview victims’ families for further assistance. In addition, social workers helped families find jobs and seek legal assistance in the litigation that happened in later years. In order to determine those who were in most need, the Red Cross organized the “Eastland Disaster Method of Equalizing Relief Grants.”\(^89\) This scale assured families of the same economic status would receive the same amount of

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\(^87\) This building is one of the few from the disaster that remains on the Chicago waterfront. A small exhibit in the building’s lobby illustrates the building’s role in the rescue and recovery efforts after the *Eastland Disaster*. American Red Cross, *Eastland Disaster Relief: Final Report Eastland Disaster Relief Committee*, Chicago: American Red Cross, 1918, 12.

\(^88\) Red Cross Report, 15.

\(^89\) Red Cross Report, 20.
money. However, the scale also took into account the health and morals of dependent recipients. The Finance Committee in charge of administering funds determined that each family that had lost a member in the disaster would receive payment no matter their economic status. In this case, the smallest amount a family would receive was $150. In cases where only children survived, each child received $12 per month until the age of sixteen. In other cases where women were widowed with children, the woman received an amount based on the ages of her children plus $500 for herself on account of being widowed. A widower received the three quarters of the widow’s scale for children and only $200 for the loss of his wife. These relief efforts were the first of their kind, and were later used as the basis for distributing relief funds to families after the September 11th terror attacks.

Conclusion

The immediate response of the community after the disaster is an example of how the narrative of the tragedy began to form almost as soon as the first bodies were pulled from the water. The victims of the disaster were portrayed as heroes who died a senseless death. Outraged, the public declared that the victims of the Eastland would never be forgotten. As the twentieth century progressed, this promise was lost. However, the memory of lost loved ones survived privately in several family units, ultimately influencing the way the Eastland Disaster is remembered today.

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90 Red Cross Report, 21-23.
This chapter has provided an overview of the official history of the *Eastland* Disaster, based on analysis of available primary and secondary sources relating to the tragedy. Several conclusions can be drawn from it:

- The people on *Eastland* that day were not of any particular note. They were working class individuals and their families, bound for the one company picnic of the year. Many were women and children.
- *Eastland*'s crew had no malicious intent that caused the disaster, but the boat's owners may have neglected their responsibility of making necessary repairs at the beginning of the 1915 season.
- The boat’s cranky history suggests that an event like this was far from unexpected.

Historically, the *Eastland* would not claim a significant place in the American narrative. Though the death toll was massive and remains to present day the greatest loss of life in the Great Lakes, the people who died in the Chicago River that day were 844 faceless working-class men, women, and children, many of whom were immigrants or first generation Americans. Those who died in the water most likely spoke a foreign language, and within their communities the loss of each soul was felt tremendously. The close-knit communities of Polish, Swedish, German, and Czech mourned each loved one with their own mourning customs, and buried them in cemeteries that reflected those communities left behind. Their stories of tragedy and survival, from those that did manage to survive, would remain within their family units for generations.

The victims and survivors of the disaster were connected to or employed by the Western Electric corporate paternalism system, beneficiaries to a system set up to
oppress the workers’ ability to organize. This system also led to an early desire among corporate leaders and their representatives to frame the tragedy so as not to reflect badly on the company. By its actions, it seemed that Western Electric did everything in its power to provide for their workers’ families, but in reality they were dealing with a very bad public relations and factory morale problem.

While the immediate response to the tragedy suggested that it would remain fixed in public memory for a long time, steps necessary to make the Eastland Disaster an iconic event in American public memory were missed. The next chapter will discuss how the memory-making process of the disaster began, and how it faded from the forefront of public memory throughout the twentieth century.
CHAPTER TWO

Forgetting an Iconic Event

How does an event like the *Eastland* Disaster become a lasting public memory? Initial reports indicated the catastrophe claimed over 2,000 lives.¹ Newspapers and newsreels around the globe covered the event for weeks, but as the twentieth century progressed, *Eastland* faded from the forefront of national and Chicago public memory. Sociologist Patricia Leavy explains that an event becomes part of permanent public memory once it establishes itself as an iconic event. She defines an iconic event as “an event that undergoes intense initial interpretive practices but also becomes mythic within the culture through its appropriation into other political or social discourses and its eventual use within commercial culture.”² These criteria are essential for major events to survive the ever-changing landscape of public memory.

In her study, Leavy uses the wreck of the *Titanic* as one of several examples of an iconic event that has achieved mythic status. She states the sinking of the *Titanic* has “undergone hyper-representation, been appropriated into ongoing political agendas, transformed into commodities, and adopted into popular entertainment,” making it an iconic event in public memory.³ In addition, there are events in American history that fit

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¹ Several newspapers originally reported estimated numbers of the dead. The German-language newspaper, *Illinois Staats-Beitung*, initially reported 2,100 dead.


³ Leavy, 5.
many of the criteria for iconic status, but for their own reasons, miss the mark. By Leavy’s definition, the *Eastland* Disaster should have become an iconic event for the Chicago public, but as evidence suggests, it has become only a footnote in Chicago memory. The *Eastland* Disaster failed to become an iconic event in part because of the socioeconomic background of the victims, survivors, and rescuers. Without well-to-do names like Astor or Vanderbilt (as in the wreck of the *Titanic*), popular culture, political agendas, and initial interpretive practices could not take hold in public memory.

In addition, the disaster occurred at a critical point in national events. World War I dominated newspapers and newsreels around the world and, once the United States joined the war, the *Eastland* Disaster, aside from updates regarding civil litigations, faded from public memory. This chapter explores how the *Eastland* Disaster meets some of Leavy’s criteria but ultimately failed to achieve iconic status, relegating it to minor recognition throughout most of the twentieth century.

**Initial Interpretive Practices**

The media has a very important role in affecting how the public processes a major event. According to Leavy, newspapers were the first sources that shaped the meaning of an event for the general public during the early twentieth century. The *Eastland* Disaster generated a lot of press in a number of newspapers. From this initial reporting, a narrative emerged immediately that focused not on the St. Joseph/Chicago Steamship Company, but on the boat’s operators, especially Captain Harry Pederson and Chief Engineer Joseph Erikson.
Within minutes of the boat’s capsizing, newspaper reporters began reporting what they witnessed. That evening, Chicago’s newspapers flooded their readers with coverage. The front-page headline of the July 25, 1915, Final Edition of the *Chicago Tribune* read, “919 BODIES RECOVERED TOTAL EASTLAND VICTIMS MAY REACH 1,200.” Initial coverage of the disaster incorrectly reported thousands of casualties, but the sentiments of sadness and fear were well elaborated: “Last night, under the glare of a row of great flaming lights, they were still taking the bodies from the death ship.” In the same edition, a “Fund for Families of the Victims” was announced along with “Gov. Dunne Telegraphs Message of Sympathy.” In the next day’s edition, no other news stories claimed the front page.

Leavy discusses how the physical space an event occupies in newspapers is indicative of its possible iconic status. For the *Eastland* Disaster, every Chicago newspaper had the disaster as their top story for several days. In physical space, the disaster occupied headlines of newspapers for weeks. In the national press, on the first day of official reporting the disaster claimed top headlines, but shared space in several newspapers with news of the war in Europe. In the London *Times*, the disaster appeared as a brief article on page six below news of the release of German prisoners of war.

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5 “No warning; No escape” *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1915.
6 *Chicago Tribune*, July 26, 1915.
7 “1,000 Dead in River Disaster,” *The Times*, July 26, 1915.
Nationally, the *Eastland* Disaster captivated readers. The Associated Press coverage was picked up by several newspapers, including drawings of the event. Bob Satterfield, a political cartoonist, drew the following image:

![Cartoon drawing of the Eastland disaster](image)

Figure 4 - Political cartoonist, Bob Satterfield, witnessed the disaster on his way to work. He drew this cartoon depicting the rescue and recovery efforts of first responders. Bob Satterfield, *Tacoma Times*, July 27, 1915. *Library of Congress*

The image depicts *Eastland* lying on her side in the river with people standing on the hull of the boat. Rescuers are in the foreground throwing liferings into the water with others in rowboats pulling people out of the water. The image also shows tugboats forming a bridge to shore. The scene is panic inducing, as was likely Satterfield’s intention in sharing his experience.

Locally, the disaster consumed the attention of readers of all backgrounds. Local newspapers focused their coverage on their personal connections to the disaster because the passengers were primarily foreign-born, working class people. German and Czech-language newspapers reported news of the disaster in the first languages of
many of the *Eastland* victims. The coverage focused on reporting the number dead and their memorial services.

The *Eastland* Disaster greatly affected foreign-born neighborhoods like those in the Chicago suburb of Cicero, Illinois. German, Polish, and Czech language newspapers printed similar news as their English counterparts, but were better able to report to those struck personally by the event. In the following image, the German-language newspaper *Illinois Staats-Beitung* reported an early estimate of the number dead:
Figure 5 - This Illinois German-language newspaper, dated July 25, 1915, covered the disaster in great detail. It initially cited 2,100 dead in the capsizing. A large number of Eastland victims were of German descent or recent immigrants from the country. Photo courtesy of Jeff Nichols.

In this newspaper, the disaster shared front-page headlines with news of the Great War in Germany. The headline, “2100 finden Wellengrab” translates to “2100 went to their deaths in a watery grave.” The headline to the right of the photograph is news of the war
in Germany. The disaster greatly affected neighborhoods like Cicero, a largely working class immigrant suburb of Chicago, but news of the warfront remained an extremely important piece of news for the community. Within a short period of time, reportage of the war grew, while stories about *Eastland* diminished.

*Eastland* Disaster coverage reached across the globe. Even with the world gripped by information from Europe about World War I, places as far away as Australia reported the devastating news of the tragedy. Newspapers reported the same news featured in U.S. press. Coverage of the disaster first used incorrect numbers of dead and began speculation on the cause of the disaster, much like their American counterparts. International press also briefly covered the Coroner’s Jury, but by the time the Federal case began, very few international newspapers carried the story. In terms of occupied space on newspaper, the *Eastland* Disaster was front-page news, but never again took prominent space. Most articles about the rescue and recovery efforts and legal battles occupied small articles on inside pages of the newspaper. In the weeks after the disaster, *The New York Times* covered the boat’s investigations daily, but frequency of *Eastland* news dropped significantly after the second week. The July 25, 1915, edition is the only one to have the disaster featured as a headline. Studying the physical space of newspaper coverage is important because it gauges the interest of the public and the press.

8 Many thanks go to Chelsea Lyn Cupp for translating this newspaper headline for me.


Chicago Day Book

Chicago’s *Day Book*, a daily working class newspaper, focused on addressing news directly affecting the lives of Chicago’s working class. Newspaper mogul Edward Scripps began the newspaper in 1911 as an experiment in ad-free publishing. He believed that an ad-free newspaper would provide readers with news which was unrestricted by the commercial influence of large companies. Scripps moved to Chicago where he knew he would find a large working-class readership. Sold for a penny, the *Day Book* reached peak readership in October 1916 with over 22,000 readers. However, Scripp’s ad-free business plan did not turn a profit, and the newspaper folded in 1917.  

Two days after the disaster, the *Day Book* reported the event with a skewed narrative, blaming *Eastland*’s owners and Western Electric for the disaster. On the front page of the evening edition, the headlines pointed suspicion at Western Electric, stating that employees feared for their jobs if they did not buy tickets for the company picnic. The *Day Book*’s coverage of the disaster directly focused its news reporting to its working class audience. During the Coroner’s Jury, the *Day Book* reported that

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11 “About the Day Book” *Chronicling America*  

"Eastland's owners tried to make Captain Pedersen a scapegoat with their testimony."\(^\text{13}\)

![Capt. Harry Pedersen of Benton Harbor, Mich., who was in charge of the Eastland when she plunged her load of excursionists into the Chicago river. He has been arrested. Already certain men at whom the finger of guilt points are trying to throw the blame on him.](image)

Figure 6 - This clipping from the Day Book shows a photo of Captain Pedersen with a caption implying that the boat's owners used him as a scapegoat. Day Book, July 26, 1915, morning edition.

What emerged from Day Book coverage is a narrative not unlike what appeared in mainstream newspapers. Coverage of the Eastland Disaster in Chicago’s major newspapers focused on finding a cause for the wreck and placing blame for the tragedy. Day Book focused its coverage on the plight of Western Electric’s workers and the

\(^{13}\) Day Book, July 26, 1915, morning edition.
responsibility of the boat’s owners and Western Electric for the disaster. In her Masters Thesis, Stephanie Riley discusses the difference between what she termed “dominant” and “counter” narratives and their effect on the lasting memory of the Eastland Disaster. The Day Book, a counter narrative, was a primarily socialist work that hoped to grab the attention of the city’s working classes. She concludes the counter narrative of works like The Day Book did not help build the collective memory of the Eastland Disaster because it conflicted with the narrative created by mainstream newspapers – the dominant narrative. Coverage in Chicago’s mainstream newspapers established a dominant narrative largely based on the official investigations and litigation that followed the event.

Riley’s use of “dominant” and “counter” narrative is not unlike historian John Bodnar’s use of “official” and “vernacular” cultural expressions, and demonstrates the power mainstream newsmedia held over the public memory of a traumatic event like the Eastland Disaster. Bodnar states, “public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.” “Official” cultural expressions, like dominant narratives, according to Bodnar, directly originates from cultural leaders or authorities “at all levels of society.” This includes elected officials, judges, lawyers, and those interested in forming a cohesive narrative that benefits the status quo. “Vernacular” cultural expressions, like “counter” narratives, stem from members of the community whose interests in framing a narrative that “conveys what social reality feels like”


like rather than what it should be like.”¹⁶ Vernacular cultural expressions have little authority because they originate from a wide array of specialized interests. In this dissertation, the terms “official,” “dominant,” “counter,” and “vernacular” are used to describe the types of narrative that emerged from the Eastland Disaster and the state of public memory that came after.

The Day Book’s working-class, vernacular narrative did not have the same authority as other mainstream newspapers in the eyes of the public. For example, Chicago Tribune’s dominant narrative of the Eastland Disaster litigations carried more authority than the socialist Day Book, which many contemporary readers perceived as having a class-based agenda that rendered its interpretation biased and untrustworthy. By 1915, the Chicago Tribune had been in print since 1847 and had a wide readership across the city of Chicago and the lower Great Lakes region. The Day Book was new in town, not only as a print newspaper, but also as an established paper in Chicago. In addition, during World War I, socialism was highly suspect and published works like The Day Book were viewed with suspicion.¹⁷

Political and Social Discourses – Legal Battles

Beginning the afternoon of the disaster, the public demanded answers for how the catastrophe happened and who was responsible. The entire crew of the boat survived the capsizing, including Captain Pedersen, which led many to believe that the

¹⁶ Bodnar, 14.

¹⁷ This is because socialists opposed the Great War in Europe and aligned with the organized labor movement – a movement many industrialists wanted to stop entirely. Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States (New York: Young Press, 2003), 353.
boat was capsized intentionally or was the result of severe neglect on the part of the boat's owners and crew. This event was no Act of God. How does a boat, still tied to the dock, capsize with 2,500 on board? Did the boat's owners know of her “cranky” history? Did the captain try to stop rescuers from cutting into the hull of the boat? Who, if anyone, was ultimately responsible for the *Eastland*’s capsizing? These are all questions that emerged immediately after the disaster and persisted throughout the investigation. Beginning the day of the disaster and not ending until the late 1920s, courts debated these questions, leaving the public narrative of the *Eastland* Disaster without a definitive answer regarding the actual cause of the tragedy. Author Michael McCarthy believes that a cloud of misdirection allowed the boat’s owners to frame a narrative that allowed them to avoid full prosecution.\(^{18}\)

The outcomes of the legal proceedings are significant in establishing the public narrative of the *Eastland* Disaster because the perceived authority of the courts established an official narrative that placed blame on Chief Engineer Joseph Erikson and drew attention away from the boat’s owners. The Coroner’s Jury, Secretary Redfield’s hearing, the Federal criminal hearing, and further litigations, whether they came to an official judgement or not, all added to the official narrative of the disaster in the immediate period after the event. Like all narratives, this narrative is selective. But the official sanction provided by governmental and judicial decisions, coupled with mainstream newspapers’ daily reports of those bodies’ proceedings and decisions, gave authority to their versions of the emerging narrative of the disaster and implicitly weakened alternative accounts.

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Coroner's Jury

Beginning the afternoon of the disaster, the Cook County Coroner called to order a jury to begin the investigation of the cause of death of the hundreds of bodies pulled out of the Chicago River. The Coroner's Jury, as it was called, questioned witnesses for five days before reaching a decision on the cause of death of the Eastland Disaster victims. On the first day, the coroner called R.J. Moore, Daniel Gee, Walter Steele, Captain Harry Pedersen, Chief Joseph Erickson and others to testify. After their testimony, the Coroner handed over the witnesses to the state attorney for further investigation, and in the case of Erickson and Pedersen, prosecution. 19

The first witness, R.J. Moore, was a passenger on the Eastland the day of the disaster. Moore recounted his experiences on the main deck, commenting that passengers became worried when the “refrigerator was thrown over with all the bottles and made a terrific crash.” At this point, Moore testified that he moved to the starboard side of the boat because of the constant list (leaning) of the boat to the port side. When the boat finally came to rest on her side, Moore was in the staircase leading to the exit, “I hung down in there for thirty-five minutes before I was taken out. When I came out, I wandered away; my clothes were all torn and I was dazed.” 20

Moore was one of hundreds who survived the disaster with no physical injuries, but the crisis left horrifying memories. Incidentally, he gave one piece of information that was crucial to determining

19 Transcript of Testimony Before the Coroner's Jury, July 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 on the body of Kate Austin and all others lost by the overturning of the Excursion Steamer Eastland while tied to the dock at Clark and S. Water Streets in the City of Chicago, July 24, 1915 (Chicago: Clohesey & Co., 1915), 2. Hereafter “Coroner's Jury.”

20 Coroner's Jury, 3.
the cause of the boat’s capsizing. When asked if passengers had run from one side to another at the time of the disaster Moore replied, “No. They jumped from one seat to another. . . Very little opportunity for them to crowd over.”

After questioning witnesses from the Western Electric Company about the nature of the picnic and its festivities, the Coroner called Captain Harry Pedersen to testify. After the first questions establishing his background, Maclay Hoyne, the Illinois State Attorney, suggested Captain Pedersen not answer any more questions in fear that he might jeopardize the probable case against him in Federal court or incriminate himself. Pedersen insisted that he answer the Coroner’s questions by stating, “I am not going to say anything but the truth.”

The Coroner also warned Chief Erickson of the same consequences of his testimony without the assistance of his lawyer. Instead, the jurors accepted the statement Erickson made the night before in the office of the coroner as his official testimony to be considered by the jury.

In addition to determining the cause of the death of hundreds of victims, the Coroner’s Jury also made official recommendations to authorities regarding the responsibility of Captain Pedersen, Chief Erickson, and the boat’s owners, the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company. The Inquisition stated, “Nothing in the testimony offered before this jury indicated that the passengers were guilty of any unusual act that

21 Coroner’s Jury, 6

22 Coroner’s Jury, 94.

23 Coroner’s Jury, 96-97.
contributed to the disaster.”24 The jurors concluded the *Eastland* was “improperly constructed for the service employed and improperly loaded, operated and maintained.”25 This statement blamed Pedersen, Erickson, and the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company. The Coroner’s Jury officially recommended to the State’s Attorney that six people be charged with manslaughter: William H. Hull, Vice President and General Manager of the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company, owner of the *Eastland*; Captain Harry Pedersen; Chief Joseph Erickson; Walter K. Greenebaum, General Manager of the *Eastland*; Robert Reid, United States Local Steamboat Inspector; Charles Eckliff, United States Local Steamboat Inspector.26

**Secretary Redfield’s Hearing**

On July 29, 1915, United States Secretary of Commerce William C. Redfield called to order a hearing to investigate the cause of the *Eastland* Disaster. Redfield oversaw the hearing after assuring President Woodrow Wilson that he would personally look into the matter.27 The hearing lasted for eight days and called for the testimony of key participants of the disaster, including Erickson and Pedersen.28 The hearing was required to “investigate all acts of incompetency or misconduct committed by any

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24 *Coroner’s Jury*, 137.

25 *Coroner’s Jury*, 137.

26 *Coroner’s Jury*, 137.


28 *Redfield Hearing*, 1.
licensed officer while acting under the authority of his license.”

However, the hearing was limited to the conduct of the officers in charge and those responsible for the Eastland’s operation, including the boat’s owners.

Public opinion of Redfield’s hearing was not favorable. Redfield’s arrival in Chicago was greeted with criticism from Chicago officials and citizens because they viewed Redfield as an outsider, whose intentions for investigating the disaster were not honest. During the hearing, Redfield felt the need to address the situation by stating, “I am sorry I am hurt, and I am willing to admit it. I have been mistreated and prejudged by the Chicago press and by Chicago citizens . . . Men who are not familiar with the facts have condemned me and the inquiry I am making, almost before that inquiry had begun. I have been prejudged by men who are hostile to me.”

On the advice of his lawyer, Erickson testified in the form of a letter describing the events of the accident and the moments leading up to it. In his letter, Erickson briefly stated he had “done everything in [his] power at all times to hold the ship on even keel.” Erickson’s earlier interrogation by the police made it clear he had notified the boat’s owners of the needed repairs to Eastland’s ballast, but the boat’s owners decided to wait until the end of the summer to repair the boat. However, during Redfield’s investigation, focus of testimony turned toward blaming Erickson for failing to operate

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29 Redfield Hearing, 2.

30 Rockford Republican, July 30, 1915.

31 Redfield Hearing, 140.

32 Redfield Hearing, 143.

33 Interrogation of Joseph M. Erickson by Superintendent of Police. Hereafter Erickson’s interrogation, National Archives, Chicago.
the ballast system correctly instead of the owners’ decision to put off repairs. For some unknown reason, Erickson’s interview by the police was never entered as evidence in the Redfield hearing.\(^\text{34}\)

Redfield’s hearing ended abruptly without reaching a decision. The Federal Court of the Northern District of Illinois ordered Redfield to stop his investigation stating that no one subpoenaed for a Federal grand jury “could be examined in any other proceedings relating to the *Eastland* Disaster.”\(^\text{35}\) Before the hearing ended, Redfield formed recommendations for future legislation that would hopefully prevent accidents like the *Eastland* from happening again. On the last day of the investigation, in conference with the Executive Committee of the investigation, Redfield stated, “I have already written to the President that I think, I should recommend, from what had already appeared, that the Steamboat Inspection Service be given authority to survey vessels as to their stability and other necessary points before they go into service at all.” He also recommended that “an appeal be permitted by the law from the fixing of passenger allowances on vessels . . . the question can be raised before a higher authority than the local inspectors as to whether the allowing is sufficient or insufficient.”\(^\text{36}\) From these recommendations, it is clear Redfield believed *Eastland*’s capacity was raised too hastily two weeks prior to the accident and there was no oversight of the local inspectors. Though Redfield’s hearing was not received well by Chicago’s public, his investigation did attempt to find the errors leading to *Eastland*’s accident. But the

\(^\text{34}\) McCarthy, 158.

\(^\text{35}\) *Redfield Hearing*, 861.

\(^\text{36}\) *Redfield Hearing*, 843-844.
hearing was stopped before any formal recommendations to Congress could be made.  

_Federal Criminal Extradition Hearing_

On November 23, 1915, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis issued a bench warrant for the arrest of Arnold, Hull, Reid, Eckliff, Pedersen, and Erickson on the charges of conspiracy to operate an unsafe ship. Though charged in Illinois, nearly all of the defendants lived in Michigan. In order to proceed with a trial, an extradition hearing took place at the Federal Court in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The prosecution alleged that the officers and owners of the boat were incompetent and knew they sent out a boat that was unseaworthy. Knowing the hearing in Grand Rapids was not the real trial, the prosecution viewed the proceedings as a dress rehearsal for the upcoming Federal trial in Illinois.

In contrast, the defense believed they could stop the trial by treating the extradition hearing in Grand Rapids as the real deal. Steele employed some of the best lawyers in the Midwest, while the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company paid for a lawyer to represent Pedersen. Erickson was left without representation. Desperate, Erickson went to famous attorney Clarence Darrow’s office and asked him to take up his case. Sizing up the details, Darrow agreed. As the proceedings of the hearing

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37 Redfield Hearing, 861.


39 Hilton, 168.

40 McCarthy, 155.
progressed, it was clear that Darrow entered the courtroom with the intention to end the trial in Grand Rapids and never let it continue into the Illinois court.

Darrow argued the *Eastland* was a good boat and functioned exactly as she was constructed to do. He determined the boat rested on an underwater obstruction, which caused her to capsize.\(^\text{41}\) This avenue of Darrow’s defense caused concern for the City of Chicago because it made the city liable for the boat’s capsizing.\(^\text{42}\) To prove his argument, Darrow employed divers to retrieve pieces of pilings from the river bottom and had them included as evidence for Erickson’s defense. This addition was a problem because other boats with deeper drafts made no complaints about the alleged obstructions. Aside from this fact, Darrow’s argument did not alarm the judge. Attorneys for the other defendants argued passengers rushed to the side of the boat, causing it to capsize. However, testimony during the federal extradition hearing and Coroner’s Jury determined passengers concentrated mainly on the starboard side of the boat. Also, the vessel’s full capacity did not allow for passengers to “rush” to any side. In his study, Michael McCarthy notes that Eastland’s owners secretly introduced this theory in order to blame passengers for the capsizing. The “rush to one side” theory caught on and became a part of the *Eastland* mythology that persisted in Chicago and the Midwest throughout the twentieth century.\(^\text{43}\)

During his initial interrogation by the police, Erickson stated he had met with the boat’s owners to discuss needed repairs to the boat’s ballast system prior to the

\(^{41}\) McCarthy, 173.

\(^{42}\) Hilton, 169.

\(^{43}\) McCarthy, 163.
beginning of his tenure as Chief Engineer. McCarthy contends that *Eastland* capsized primarily due to the faulty ballast system on the boat, but this evidence could not be introduced during the hearing because it would lay blame on the boat’s owners. Darrow masterfully crafted his defense to draw fault away from both Erickson and the boat’s owners. This posed a significant problem because according to Erickson’s original police interview, the boat’s owners were aware of the severe mechanical problems of the boat, knew they needed to be repaired, and chose to put off repairs until the next winter.\(^{44}\)

After ten days of argument, Judge Clarence W. Sessions issued his decision that he could not determine a conspiracy to operate an unsafe vessel. He declared that the defendants were not eligible to be extradited to Illinois for further criminal prosecution.\(^{45}\) Sessions did not issue a decision on the actual cause of the disaster, leaving the case open for further prosecution in the Illinois courts.

The Grand Rapids court decision proved to be a huge win for Darrow and the defendants, but a stain on Darrow’s historical image. Darrow’s personal papers in Minnesota archives do not even mention this defense case, which is seen as a dark spot on his career.\(^{46}\) Prosecutors in Illinois never pursued a Federal criminal case against the boat’s owners, Pedersen, or Erickson because the extradition hearing failed to extradite the defendants and move the trial to Chicago. They were indicted for serious crimes of negligence, but the Grand Rapids court decision deterred further

\(^{44}\) McCarthy, 161.

\(^{45}\) Hilton, 179.

\(^{46}\) McCarthy, 240; Clarence Darrow Papers, University of Minnesota Law Library.
criminal action in the state courts. For Erickson, the action was a relief, but not for very long. Erickson joined the Army Transport Service as a chief engineer and served on the transports *Buford* and *Peerless* during World War I. In April 1919, he returned home to Grand Haven, Michigan, on medical leave for chest pains. Days later, he died and was buried next to his baby son.  

Although he was able to testify in his defense for the Federal criminal trial and Coroner’s Jury, he was unable to defend himself during the civil litigations in Illinois and Indiana. Furthermore, after the end of the Grand Rapids extradition hearing, Captain Pedersen returned to his farm in Millburg, Michigan, and never captained a boat again. He died on July 25, 1939, twenty-four years and a day after the *Eastland* Disaster.  

The outcome of the extradition hearing is important for the establishment of an official narrative because the blame of the *Eastland*’s capsizing was firmly placed away from the boat’s owners. Though Darrow was defending Joseph Erikson, his defense successfully steered the conversation away from the faulty ballast and design of the boat and gave credence to suspicions that the Disaster’s cause had something to do with the passengers rushing to one side – a myth that still permeates public memory.

*Further Litigation*

Several lawsuits appeared in Illinois and Indiana civil courts in the 1920s, which sought to obtain damages for the victims and surviving families of the disaster. With over 800 wrongful deaths, the collective estate of the dead sued the Indiana

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47 McCarthy, 242.

Transportation Company (for chartering the boat), the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company (for operating an unsafe vessel), Western Electric Company (for organizing the picnic), the Dunham Towing & Wrecking Company, the City of Chicago, the Chicago City Railways Company, the M.H. McGovern Company, and Great Lakes Dredge & Dock. These lawsuits did not last long in civil court, and were only able to gain minimal damages for the victims of the disaster.

Interestingly, the *Eastland* Disaster produced no major changes in admiralty law. As in the case of the *Titanic* shipwreck, the Federal government issued changes to the laws governing passenger boats in regard to the safety of passengers. The many faults in the construction of the *Eastland* and the misconduct of the boat’s owners for failing to repair the boat’s ballast system might lead to the belief that the government would respond with additional changes to boat regulations. However, after the many investigations, nothing changed. This is most likely the result of the official narrative that emerged from *Eastland’s* several investigations and litigations: Chief Engineer, Joseph Erickson and the passengers rushing to one side, not the boat’s owners, was responsible for the boat’s capsizing.

In summary, the extradition hearing in Grand Rapids was the only criminal action taken against the owners and operators of the *Eastland*. As a result of the hearing, and the legendary Darrow’s defense of Erikson, no one was held accountable for the deaths of 844 Western Electric picnickers. The official narrative that emerged from the litigations drew attention away from the boat’s owners’ responsibility for the disaster.

\[49\] Hilton, 185.

\[50\] Hilton, 204.
Furthermore, the owners of the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company started a rumor that the *Eastland*‘s passengers rushed to one side, causing the boat to capsize. This rumor survives today, now as a powerful myth for the cause of the disaster.\(^{51}\) It was the perceived authority of the newspapers and of the judges and government officials that allowed this narrative of the *Eastland* Disaster to take hold in public memory.

**Use in Commercial Culture**

Commercial culture has a very important role in shaping the meaning of events and forming collective memory of tragedies like the *Eastland* Disaster. Newsreel, photographs, postcards, and folk songs all have the ability to selectively shape a narrative that affirms the official narrative or contribute to a new one entirely.\(^{52}\)

According to Leavy, commercializing an event like the *Eastland* Disaster is part of the process of bringing a tragedy to iconic status. The *Titanic* experienced almost immediate commercialization in the form of film. Only months after the sinking, studios released two silent films dramatizing the event.\(^{53}\) Moving picture companies also took advantage of the *Titanic* disaster by creating and doctoring film from other news events regarding the ship. Since the boat sank, likely taking much of the film of the maiden voyage with it, motion picture companies used clips from earlier newsreels about the

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\(^{51}\) The owners of the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company started a rumor that the Eastland’s passengers rushed to one side, causing the boat to capsize. McCarthy, 216.

\(^{52}\) Leavy, 149.

\(^{53}\) Leavy, 153.
ship’s construction. One scene titled, “Captain Smith on the bridge” is actually of the Titanic’s captain, but it was filmed while he was on a different vessel.54 The only post-sinking images included in the Titanic newsreels are of survivors arriving in New York City on the Carpathia or of the Halifax vessel sent out to recover bodies from the site of the wreck.

After the Eastland Disaster, media outlets, like the Chicago Tribune, stressed that any profits made from images taken of the event would be donated to victim and survivor aid funds. However, this did not stop all media owners from attempting to profit from the catastrophe.

Newsreel Footage

In 1915, newsreels were an important medium which presented a “here is what happened” brand of news that reached a very broad, diverse audience.55 Though it was always treated as filler for feature films, newsreels exposed large audiences to world news. Soon after the disaster, cameramen filmed footage of the rescue and recovery efforts. The Chicago Daily Tribune reported capturing 1,000 feet of film for distribution. However, the Eastland Disaster newsreel posed a problem for many cities across the United States. The images captured by cameramen were graphic in nature, and both state and local censorship boards banned the film to protect audiences from the horror of the carnage and out of respect for the dead.


Locally, authorities banned the film in Chicago theaters out of fear of commercializing the disaster. The *Tribune* wrote, “All over the country it is being exhibited. Such profits as may come to this newspaper are to be devoted to aid those who suffered.”  

Those who wished to see footage of the disaster had to venture outside of city limits, to suburbs like Hammond and Forest Park, to see the *Tribune*’s film.

St. Joseph, Michigan, the homeport of *Eastland* in 1915, banned all films of the *Eastland* Disaster out of respect, especially for the boat’s owners who lived in town. This did not stop neighboring Benton Harbor cinemas from advertising and screening the film. Benton Harbor theaters advertised in local newspapers a dual screening of *Eastland* pictures and Charlie Chaplin’s *The Tramp*.  

Attempting to stop Benton Harbor theaters from advertising in St. Joseph, local police stopped vehicles crossing the St. Joseph River from Benton Harbor that advertised the *Eastland* Disaster film.  

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56 “All Nation Sees Eastland Film: But Chicago is Still Barred by City; Decision is Due Today,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 29, 1915.


58 *Moving Picture World*, v. 25 issue 7-9, August 21, 1915, 1341.
Nationally, footage of the *Eastland* Disaster reached audiences as far away as the Pacific Northwest. In Oregon, the *Eastland* newsreel ran for two days without official approval from the state’s censor board. Though this was a serious breach in code, *The Moving Picture World* reported that no arrests were made in this incident.\(^{59}\) In Ohio, state and local censorship boards debated the merit of showing footage of the disaster. In *The Moving Picture World*, censors in Ohio felt that the “pages upon pages of

\(^{59}\) *Moving Picture World*, v. 25 issue 7-9, August 21, 1915.
newspaper matter run, accompanied by photographs showing every possible rescue” made the film redundant. Ultimately, the state censor board allowed theaters to show the film with some editing of the most gruesome scenes. In the Midwest, the cities of Youngstown, Cleveland, and Canton banned the film, but faced criticism for “censoring the censors.” A manager of Kritereon Film Company, a distributor of the film, “advised W. Urban, proprietor of the Orpheum Theater, Canton, to run the film with his operator locked in the booth.” Outside of the Midwest, in Buffalo, New York, officials believed that showing the film was a lesson in safety. In doing so, they also helped perpetuate the boat owners' explanation for the incident. The newsreel, the officials noted, was more "a factor for good than for evil in Buffalo because they have impressed thousands of people with the danger of sudden rushes from one side to another on shipboard.”

In the early twentieth century, film distributors had an agreement to circulate newsreels across the globe. International distribution is important because the clips were translated and edited to relate to the audiences viewing them. The Eastland Disaster largely affected German and Bohemian immigrants. Through international distribution of the Eastland newsreel, audiences all over Europe were able to connect visually to the tragedy and to the experiences of their loved ones.

International distribution of the Eastland films is also important because newsreels in the United States are a rare find in today’s archives. In January 2015, two American graduate students discovered rare Eastland disaster footage in British Pathé and EYE Film Institut Nederland digital archives. Although they were each researching...
unrelated projects, the students independently realized the importance of their respective discoveries and shared them with the Eastland Disaster Historical Society. Since 1915, the public has seen no other film footage of the rescue and recovery efforts. News of this discovery reached an international audience, and sparked local interest in the Eastland Disaster months before the 100th anniversary.62

The vast censorship of the Eastland newsreel had an impact on how the disaster was interpreted by the general public. Area censorship councils banned the film for several reasons, but mostly out of respect for the dead. Though newspapers printed photos of the disaster, newsreels had an even greater potential to reach a wider and more diverse audience. Preventing audiences from viewing the film impeded the creation of a lasting public memory of the event. By this account, attempts to successfully commercialize the Eastland Disaster in this manner failed.

Photographs

Lastly, initial news media coverage of the disaster could not have reached the recognition it did without the intense photographic coverage it received. Being a visual reminder of an event, a photograph has the potential of creating memory of an event without the viewer ever actually experiencing it. The photograph is a connection to a moment in the past and has the capability to aid the viewer’s own memory making.63

62 I am deeply thankful to Jeff Nichols and Alex Revzan for their discoveries. I am also thankful for their willingness to share other source material with me. Meredith Rodriguez, “First Known Film Clips Emerge of the 1915 Eastland Disaster,” Chicago Tribune, February 8, 2015.

Located in the center of the city, the *Eastland* Disaster was so well documented because of its proximity to the downtown offices of national newspapers and photographers. Alerted that something big was happening at the river, photographers and newspaper reporters rushed to the scene between Clark and LaSalle Streets. One of these photographers was Jun Fujita, a photojournalist for the *Chicago Daily News*. As a teenager, Fujita emigrated from Japan to Canada and later moved to Chicago to work as a photographer. For much of the early twentieth century, Fujita was there to photograph many of Chicago’s big events. He captured images of Chicago’s race riots in 1919, and was the only photographer to capture the horrific Valentine’s Day Massacre in 1929. During the Great Depression, the Federal government employed Fujita as an official photographer to document public works projects. The government commended his service to the United States with an act of Congress granting him citizenship, an act that would have been impossible by his own means in 1936. Fujita’s collection of photographs is now held at the Chicago Historical Museum.

On the day of the disaster, the newspaper dispatched Fujita to the scene just minutes after the boat capsized. He captured the horrifying event as it happened. In one of his most iconic images of the day, a fireman, clearly touched by the event, carries a dead child from the water.

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65 Jun Fujita Collection, Chicago History Museum.
Figure 8 - This photo inspired Fujita to write his essay about the Eastland Disaster and the injustice suffered for this little girl and fireman because of “carelessness.” Eastland Disaster Historical Society photo

Fujita’s photographs of the disaster stand today as some of the most haunting images that depict the recovery of bodies from the wreck. One image struck Fujita so personally, it inspired him to write about the disaster. In his essay he wrote:

> And there lies one little sheaf from this awful harvest, in the strong man's arms - A CHILD LIFE forever STILLED. These people were his own kind - workers like himself; men and the wives and children of men who earn their living by toil. Is there any wonder that horror looks from his eyes? God pity those who today are heartbroken. But of what avail is the pity of God against human carelessness?  

In this essay, Fujita is adopting the narrative many newspapers used at the time of the investigations and trials.

Postcards

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In the weeks that followed the disaster, newspapers and magazines advertised the sale of postcards and photo cards of the wreck. Usually manufactured by independent companies, these advertisements promoted “keepsakes” of the disaster for a price. The postcards are photographs of the disaster at the height of the rescue. Bodies, debris and rescuers are strewn about in the water. Several depict the whitewashed faces of the dead as they are pulled out of the boat. No doubt the manufacturers of these items preyed on the vulnerable memory of those affected and attracted by these disasters. The postcards of the *Eastland* Disaster exist today as a peculiar reminder that after the event the public felt compelled to own a keepsake of the event. Or, more personally, share the memory with someone who might not have been able to see, read or hear about event firsthand.

![The Great Eastland Disaster](image)

Figure 9 - One of several advertisements for Eastland Disaster postcards in Moving Picture World.

After the *Eastland* Disaster, entrepreneurs pounced on the opportunity to capitalize on the tragedy. Though some firms donated profits to disaster relief, advertisements for postcards like the one above (Figure 6) were not uncommon in Chicago’s local media. Postcards are the most common artifacts found in museum
collections. This suggests they were the most affordable and easiest keepsake to obtain after the disaster.67

67 Every museum I visited during my research had a collection of *Eastland* Disaster postcards. This includes the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center (St. Joseph, Michigan), Chicago History Museum, Wheaton Center for History (Wheaton, Illinois), Grand Rapids Public Museum, and Michigan Maritime Museum (South Haven, Michigan). Several collectors also approached me with their privately held postcards.
Figure 10 - This postcard is a popular image that circulated in newspapers after the disaster. Image courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.

Figure 11 - Close-up shots of body recovery commonly blocked out the faces of the dead. However, not all postcard manufacturers followed the practice. Image courtesy of the Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.
Popular Culture Consumerism

Folksongs in American culture primarily commemorate events in history and have a long tradition across cultures. As early as European contact, broadside songs chronicled the experiences of everyday life in North America. They were an important source of news and entertainment and often recounted tales of disasters, especially shipwrecks. In his analysis of American ballads, Maritime historian and folklorist J. Revell Carr identified six characteristics that all disaster folksongs have in common:

1. The song describes actual historical events.
2. The event features a significant loss of life.
3. Themes and motifs include unheeded warnings, human culpability, and divine retribution.
4. Stock formulae – most commonly the date of the tragedy – are used as both mnemonic devices and as keys signifying the performance frame.
5. Voyeuristic and sensationalistic details give the song a tabloid quality.
6. The song conveys empathy for the victims and the survivors. 68

Carr contends that disaster songs help “heal psychic wounds” that develop after a massive tragedy. Folksongs have the ability to create and transmit empathy, even for those that do not have first-hand experience of a disaster. This transmission of emotion through song also carries the ability to imprint memory of an event not experienced first-hand, and fosters the process whereby communities bond and begin to heal from tragedy.

After the Chicago Fire in 1871, songwriters issued ballads to tell the tragic story of the city’s major disaster that became well known throughout the Midwest. George Root, noted Chicago songwriter of the time, wrote several songs commemorating the Fire. One song, “Passing Through the Fire,” is performed at a quick pace that

resembles the fast pace of the rising flames of the great fire. The lyrics commemorate the terrible destruction of the city:

1. **Flames! flames! terrible flames!**
   How they rise, how they mount, how they fly.
   The heavens are spread with a fierce lurid glare,
   Red heat is filling the earth with air,
   While, mercy! mercy! We hear the despairing ones cry.

   **Chorus: (Moderato)**
   Passing thro' the fire! passing thro' the fire,
   And it is our Father's hand,
   Tho' we may not understand
   Why we're passing thro' the fire,
   passing thro' the fire!

2. **Flames! flames! terrible flames!**
   How they sweep, how they rush, how they roar.
   See the hideous tongues round the roof,
   tree and spire,
   As swells their wild carnival higher and higher,
   Till falling! crashing! Our glorious city's no more.

3. **Flames! flames! terrible flames!**
   What a fearful destruction they bring.
   What suff'ring and want in their train follow fast,
   As forth on the streets homeless thousands are cast,
   But courage! courage! From the mid'st of the furnace we sing.\(^69\)

In 1912, more than 100 songs about the sinking of the *Titanic* were published in the United States alone.\(^70\) The ballads published about the ship followed the formula explained by Carr, and serve as the best examples of disaster ballads of the early


twentieth century. One of the most popular songs about the Titanic, titled “The Great Titanic (When the Great Ship Went Down),” took many different forms depending on the geographic area in which it was performed and the audience. In the following adaptation, African American street performers sang “The Great Titanic” in Marion County, Alabama:

It was on one Monday morning just about one o’clock
When that great Titanic began to reel and rock;
People began to scream and cry,
Saying, “Lord, am I going to die?”

Chorus
It was sad when that great ship went down,
It was sad when that great ship went down,
Husbands and wives and little children lost their lives,
It was sad when that great ship went down.

When that ship left England it was making for the shore,
The rich had declared that they would not ride with the poor,
So they put the poor below,
They were the first to go.

While they were building they said what they would do,
We will build a ship that water can’t go through;
But God with power in hand
Showed the world that it could not stand.

Those people on that ship were a long ways from home,
With friends all around they didn’t know that the time had come;
Death came riding by,
Sixteen hundred had to die.

While Paul was sailing his men around,
God told him that not a man should drown;
If you trust me and obey,
I will save you all to-day.

You know it must have been awful with those people on the sea,
They say that they were singing, “Nearer My God to Thee.”
While some were homeward bound,
Sixteen hundred had to drown.\textsuperscript{71}

The song “The Great Titanic” changes in lyric and tune, but the chorus stays the same in almost all versions. The disaster ballad, with similar lyrics and a happier tune, has been transformed into a Girl Scout camp song.\textsuperscript{72}

In 1915, the publisher Frank K. Root & Company released sheet music memorializing the sadness and loss felt after the \textit{Eastland} disaster. The song, “The Boat That Never Left Town (Helpless There the Eastland Lay)” mourns the loss of innocent lives on what was supposed to be a carefree summer day.\textsuperscript{73} The lyrics to the song are:

\begin{quote}
\textit{It was the steamboat Eastland, ’Twas filled with happy ones, With fathers and with mothers, With daughters and with sons; And children playing gaily A happy trip await, When suddenly the boat turned o’er, Struck by the hand of fate.}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Chorus}
\textit{Helpless there the Eastland lay, The boat that ne’er left town, And hearts were left to mourn that day, And hearts were stricken down. But still, could tears bring back again, Those who were left to drown, Then all the world would pause and weep For the boat that never left town.}

\textit{The steamboat and the waters Were kissed by summer’s breath, And in the skies above them There were no signs of death. No signal gave its warning, No word foretold its doom, For suddenly the Eastland was Changed to a living tomb! (Chorus)}\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{72} “Girl Scout Titanic Song,” user Genevieve Ruhland https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rP1gD9xXkU (Accessed September 1, 2015).

\textsuperscript{73} “The Boat that Never Left Town” written by Albert Cook, music by Joseph Barnes. Published in 1915 by Frank K. Root & Co. (http://youtu.be/NImG8Nm7_EE, accessed March 11, 2013)

\textsuperscript{74} “The Boat that Never Left Town” written by Albert Cook, music by Joseph Barnes (Eastland Disaster Historical Society, Arlington Heights, Illinois).
There are no records to measure the popularity of the song at the time of its release. However, the quick release of the song after the disaster is an indicator that the public wanted to commemorate the event in a way that would honor the memory of the people who died that day.

Marita Sturken writes that Americans have a unique relationship with consumerism after tragedy. Though her work analyzes the post-9/11 period, her claim applies equally to the early twentieth century. Many Americans, then and now, seek out keepsakes that remind them of tragedy in order to feel an authentic connection with trauma. This connection through consumerism is how Americans have historically participated in public memory.\footnote{Marita Sturken, \textit{Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 9-12.} After the \textit{Titanic} shipwreck, publishers released special postcards that commemorated the tragedy. One postcard features the lyrics of “Nearer my God to Thee,” the song that several witnesses claim eight musicians played while the ship sank. According to the National Postal Museum, this postcard and photographs of the ship were very common souvenirs sent in the mail.\footnote{National Postal Museum, “Titanic Picture Postcards,” \url{http://postalmuseum.si.edu/collections/object-spotlight/titanic-picture-postcard.html} (Accessed October 30, 2015).}

The popularity of \textit{Eastland} photographs, postcards, newsreels, and folk songs, however, does not indicate its success as an iconic event with a lasting public memory. As Leavy states, consumerism alone is not the only way collective trauma becomes iconic. Mass consumerism must happen in conjunction with mass media and political and social discourse.
Forgetting the *Eastland*

The *Eastland* Disaster, although it remained a topic of interest for newspapers for several months after the event, began to lose its grasp on public memory soon after the disaster. Weeks later, Judge Landis ordered the vessel remains returned to the owners of the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company where they could proceed with an auction to liquidate their assets. Only two bidders on the “Queen of the Lakes” stepped forward to claim her. Captain Edward A. Evers of the Illinois Naval Reserve won out and purchased the damaged *Eastland* for $46,000.\(^77\) The St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company used the funds to pay creditors. No money was left to pay reparations to victims of the disaster.

The Illinois Naval Reserve converted *Eastland* into a training vessel and renamed her *U.S.S. Wilmette*. Naval architects redesigned the boat by removing the uppermost deck and making improvements to the water ballast system, which raised the metacentric height and made her more stable in the water. The Illinois Naval Reserve used *U.S.S. Wilmette* for training operations on Lake Michigan until she was decommissioned in 1946. The boat never saw combat, but did sink a German U-boat brought to the Great Lakes as an exhibition in June 1921.\(^78\) During her career as a naval vessel, the *Wilmette*’s history as the cranky *Eastland* never negatively affected

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\(^77\) Hilton, 164.

\(^78\) "German submarine sunk in Lake Michigan." *New York Times*, Jun 08, 1921.
her performance. In fact, the changes made to her stability improved her speed, fulfilling her original purpose as one of the fastest vessels on the Great Lakes.79

Eastland’s transformation into the USS Wilmette contributed to the loss of public memory by completely erasing her with the physical alterations and renaming of the vessel to the USS Wilmette. The vessel was no longer linked to its cranky history or its devastating connection to the worst loss-of-life disaster on the Great Lakes. By 1943, the Eastland’s reputation as an unsteady vessel had been completely forgotten when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt toured the upper Great Lakes on the USS Wilmette for ten days. Public accounts of the President’s visit mentioned the boat he traveled on, but did not share the boat’s checkered past.80

This is the challenge of the public memory of the Eastland Disaster in the mid-twentieth century. Without the boat marking the site and without a strong public narrative of the event – due in part to the working class background of Eastland’s victims, public memory of the tragedy faded over the twentieth century. The only public remembrances that came after the Eastland Disaster, but before any formal historical society formed, all came from individuals who had a direct connection as families of victims, survivors, or rescuers. Their private memories and narratives of the event took hold within their family units as they shared their stories with younger generations, and only intermittently came out of these units for public recognition.

In 1940, Salvatore Pisano organized a memorial mass to honor his late father Martin Pisano and other Eastland victims. Salvatore was three months old and in the

79 "Wilmette Reservists Win Races." New York Times, August 8, 1921.

arms of his mother on the dock when the boat turned over. The memorial card reads, “May the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.”81 Aside from this memorial mass, there appears to have been no other memorial services for Eastland Disaster victims until the late 1990s.

On the 40th anniversary of the catastrophe, Minneapolis newspapers The Minneapolis Star and St. Paul Pioneer Press published the account of John J. Petersen, who was twenty-four years old at the time of the disaster. He recalled that “all hell broke loose” when the boat turned over. After getting his wife and three year old son to safety, Petersen returned to the water to find his wife’s sister. While searching the panicked waters, he pulled three other women to safety, all friends attending the excursion together. Petersen never found his sister-in-law alive, but the women he saved felt forever indebted to him. They gave him a gold medallion with the inscription “Presented to John Petersen from grateful survivors of the Eastland disaster July 24, 1915.”82 At the 100th anniversary commemoration ceremony, Petersen’s grandson Scott Long shared the medallion with anyone who wished to see it.

As the twentieth century progressed, public recognition the Eastland Disaster waned. In 1963, the editorial column of the Chicago Tribune stated, “Anniversary – Chicago, July 19 – On July 24 it will be 49 years since the Eastland disaster. We lost many of our old friends on that day. We arrived at the dock just as the boat turned over.

81 Pisano memorial card, Eastland Disaster Historical Society.

We will never forget that awful day when 812 lives were lost. Mr. & Mrs. Frank Ehret."83

During the 1960s, it seems as though the Ehrets were the only ones to publicly acknowledge their memory of the Eastland. Yet, this indicates that private memory of the disaster persisted. Though it faded from public memory, survivors and their families carried the disaster with them.

On July 21, 1963, on the heels of Mr. & Mrs. Ehret’s editorial comment, Eastland garnered its first headline in many years. “Eastland Disaster File Found” marked the discovery of the Coroner’s Jury transcript in the subbasement vault of the County building. The transcript was purposefully found in an effort to preserve “an interesting bit of Chicago memorabilia.”84 The report contained the testimony of the County Coroner and other witnesses who recommended to the Grand Jury that several persons responsible for the disaster be charged with manslaughter.

Fourteen years later, the Chicago Tribune began to mark the anniversary regularly. In 1977, it noted the Eastland in a short article titled, “812 went down with ship that wasn’t even at sea.” The article recalled the memories of living witnesses. Frank Blaha, eighteen years old at the time of the wreck stated, “All that week it was just like tears falling from the sky. It was cloudy and dreary, and the shops were closed down and everyone was mourning. It was just a sight you couldn’t believe.”85 The Tribune’s article in 1977 generated many responses in the “Voice of the People” editorial column from people wishing to share their own memories of the disaster. T. Philip Scott wrote,

85 “812 went down with ship that wasn’t even at sea,” Chicago Tribune, July 21, 1977.
“It was a tragedy of tragedies.” As a young boy of eight years old, Scott grew up in the Western Electric plant’s neighborhood where many of his neighbors never returned.86

A year later, the Tribune published another memorial piece, “Survivor Remembers Eastland Disaster.” Josephine Crowley, eighteen at the time of the wreck, recalled dancing with her fiancé when the ship capsized. She stated, “They named it (her neighborhood) the City of the Dead.” She was from the Cicero neighborhood, where many Western Electric Company employees had lived. Interestingly, Crowley expressed her desire to forget the tragedy because the memories were so painful. Throughout her life she managed keep her traumatic memory at bay except for the Eastland’s anniversaries. On those days, she said, “I go to church and light a candle.”87

In 1979, the Tribune interviewed another survivor of the Eastland. Tom Chakinis, a Greek immigrant, survived the event and experienced long-term fear of the water after the episode. In his interview he was asked why he went back to work so quickly after the disaster, he stated, “The people who survived didn’t want to hear anything more about it. You tried to forget.”88 Perhaps, this need to forget the tragedy by the survivors helps explain the overall lack of memory for Chicagoans. Recent scholarship suggests Chakinis’ and Crowley’s comments about forgetting are not uncommon. A victim’s desire to forget tragedy is actually the first wave to remembering.89

Overall, news coverage of the *Eastland* Disaster waned as the twentieth century progressed. Leavy asserts initial and continuous news coverage is essential to establishing an event as an iconic memory. *Eastland* news coverage dominated American and international newspapers for several weeks, but after investigations ended and trials came to a close, the event slipped from the headlines. This is largely due to events of the First World War. In short, global traumatic events took precedence over public memory of the *Eastland* Disaster. This is demonstrated by how quickly news of the Great War superseded the *Eastland* Disaster in American and international newspapers. Even on the day of the disaster, news from the front lines in Germany shared the front page.\(^90\)

Between 1920 and 1970, public remembrance of the *Eastland* Disaster was practically non-existent because of the inability to establish the disaster as an iconic event. The disaster conforms to some elements of Leavy’s formula for what makes an iconic event, but the official narrative that emerged from the disaster prevented the tragedy from reaching iconic status. The narrative was purposefully manipulated by clever lawyers looking to redirect the conversation away from the boat’s owners. When the courts and other investigative bodies accepted those arguments, and their decisions were duly reported in the mainstream press, the narrative became official. The narrative that emerged from this process placed suspicion on the actions of the Chief Engineer Joseph Erickson and the movements of the passengers on board the boat. In addition, those who died were not the rich and famous like John Jacob Astor and

\(^{90}\) Front page of the *New Castle News* (Pennsylvania) shows “Lake Disaster Grows” as the main headline with “German Radicals Willing to Invite War With Uncle Sam” as a subheadline above the front page fold. *New Castle News*, July 25, 1915.
Benjamin Guggenheim, who died on the *Titanic*. Without passengers of note, public memory has a difficult time remembering the event. Historian Alfred Young asked in his work *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* that “how does an ordinary person win a place in history?” His answer, and for the purpose of this dissertation mine too, is that the ordinary person’s place in history as a lot to do with the power and political values of the person writing the narrative. Though Young’s work focuses primarily on the Revolutionary War period, his explanation of how history tends to ignore the experiences of the average person applies here.

Private memories survived within families as stories, but public memory faded because the official narrative of the disaster is impersonal and not focused on individuals. Victims, survivors, and rescuers do not have agency in the retelling of official events. After the *Eastland* trials and newspaper coverage, the official narrative of the disaster placed blame solely on Chief Joseph Erickson. In the next chapter, I will discuss how these private, personal memories of *Eastland* families survived through storytelling inside the family unit. Postmemory of the disaster, memory that is transferred from the original person who experienced the event, emerged with the third generation of *Eastland* survivors. This emergence of individual memory gained momentum in the late twentieth century and changed the official narrative of the *Eastland* Disaster.

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CHAPTER THREE

Postmemory: Personal Memories and the Next Generations of the *Eastland* Disaster

Between 1915 and about 1950, the public narrative that had taken shape around the *Eastland* Disaster was weak and focused on blaming Chief Joseph Erickson for the cause of the tragedy. Public memory of the disaster largely ignored the experience of the victims, survivors, and rescuers of the *Eastland* Disaster, but this period of silence does not mean the disaster was forgotten entirely. Within the confines of the family unit, families of victims, survivors, and rescuers shared their experiences and memories with younger generations. As years passed, the second and third generations of *Eastland* descendants came to realize that their relatives’ experiences deserved more recognition from the public and that the public narrative of the disaster needed to also include the stories of their families’ connections to the event. Through the process of storytelling, these descendants of *Eastland* survivors possessed memories of the tragedy without actually having experienced the trauma itself. In addition, *Eastland* Disaster descendants used their postmemory of the catastrophe to expand public awareness and reinvigorate public memory of the disaster.

Theorist Marianne Hirsch uses the term “postmemory” to describe the process where descendants of victims and survivors of trauma inherit memory through hearing about the traumatic event from direct witnesses. Hirsch defines postmemory “as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and
experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but at a generational remove.”

For Hirsch, postmemory is inevitable for the second generation because as first generation survivors recall their trauma, the second generation develops a stronger connection to their parents’ experiences. The transmission survives because of the deep personal connection descendants of victims and survivors feel with the history of the event. Though her analysis focuses directly on the second generation, postmemory and the transmission of traumatic memory in the third generation is also possible. As Hirsch states, “Postmemorial work strives to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression.” She continues: “Thus less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone.”

According to Hirsch, postmemory is formed when younger generations “remember” by means of the stories told to them by family members who actually experienced the events. The memories shared with younger generations “were

1 The best example of large-scale trauma and its effects on individual memory is the Holocaust. Since the 1980s, Holocaust studies have examined the transmission of memory across generations and whether traumatic experiences of the individual have the same profound effect on later generations. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 106.

transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”

For descendants of the Eastland disaster like the Wachholz family and David Nelson, their “memories” of the disaster are much more than old recollections by their grandparents, they are personal experiences.

The individuals connected to the Eastland Disaster, most of them from working class, immigrant backgrounds, are the reason private memory survived during the twentieth century. Working class, immigrant families only had the individuals within the family unit to share their personal histories, and as the twentieth century progressed, trends in society and in historical thinking allowed these memories to find new audiences outside of the private home.

This chapter analyzes how the grandchildren (third generation) of Eastland survivors and rescuers came to understand their postmemories of the disaster and their role in the greater narrative of the event. During the late twentieth century, these descendants changed the official narrative of the disaster—which had focused solely on the event itself and those responsible—and refocused it to include the private memories of their family members’ experiences. After nearly a century, the Eastland Disaster began to emerge from relative silence in public memory because of the actions and memories of the grandchildren, or third generation of Eastland survivors and rescuers. These groups put their memories into action. By collecting artifacts, starting museums, starting museums,

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4 In the 1960s and 1970s, historians began to look more into the history of the working class and how society began to recognize with greater authority “history from below.” Katrina Navickas, “What happened to class? New histories of labour and collective action in Britain,” Social History 36, No. 2 (2011): 192-204.
and creating historical societies, the grandchildren of the *Eastland* Disaster changed official narrative of the event by inscribing their personal memories in public discourse.

**Dave Nelson and Wheaton Center for History**

In 1987, Dave Nelson, the grandson of an *Eastland* rescuer, opened a museum based on artifacts he collected commemorating the wreck, on the grounds of his Wheaton, Illinois, landscaping company. In a 1989 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Nelson expressed his goal to “keep the memory of a moment in time alive and on the tips of people’s tongues.” When asked about the *Titanic*, both Nelson and his wife urged others to remember the victims and rescuers of the *Eastland*. Nelson’s grandfather, Elmer Nelson, worked as an ironworker blocks away from the incident. Soon after the boat capsized, police asked Nelson’s grandfather to assist in rescue efforts by cutting holes into the boat’s hull. Nelson’s dedication to remembering the *Eastland* relates to the stories his grandfather told him as a child. By relaying his own memories, Grandfather Nelson impressed young Dave with his own individual memory of the disaster. According to Nelson,

[Rescuers] were yelling in the streets for welders. If you can imagine back then how many people had that ability or training to do that and how many torches were around, it was lucky that there was an ironworker nearby. So, him [Elmer] and his fellow worker rushed to the scene and that’s when his story began. He started cutting holes in the ship . . . there was a reporter on board and he was watching what was going on and as my grandfather was instructed to cut holes by the firemen and police, the captain came up to him and tried to stop him . . . the captain actually stopped him and my grandfather stopped and the police and firemen

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dragged him away so my grandfather could continue. So was doing this for a period of three whole days.\(^6\)

Thanks to the reporter on board watching this scene, Elmer Nelson holds a special place in *Eastland* Disaster history. Newspapers reported several construction workers were called down to the boat to help the rescue effort. Elmer Nelson is the one of the few named individually because of his interaction with Captain Pedersen. Elmer Nelson stated, “He [the captain] told me to stop. I did stop for a minute, but the police arrested him and I went back to work again. From the hole I helped to make in the hull we pulled three persons to safety.”\(^7\)

Nelson finally realized his grandfather’s important connection to history in 1972, long after the event and his grandfather’s many stories of heroism. Nelson stated:

> It wasn't until 1972 when I saw the *Poseidon Adventure*. At the very end of the movie the people are trapped, they couldn't get out. Ernest Borgnine starts beating on the hull, hoping that someone on the other side of the ship would be able to hear them. And, of course, there was a knock they did make a connection and the welder cut a hole in the ship.\(^8\)

Growing up, Dave remarked that Elmer Nelson frequently showed off his Coroner’s Star, given to him for his service rescuing victims and recovering bodies from the *Eastland*. However, it was not until Dave saw the movie that he realized his grandfather’s place in history.

Nelson’s realization of his grandfather’s role in the *Eastland* Disaster took shape because of the genealogy boom of the 1970s. During the 1960s and into the 1970s,


\(^8\) Nelson interview.
Historians began to explore the experiences of the many types of ethnic groups that make up the American mosaic. Awareness of ethnic history and Alex Haley’s *Roots* ignited a genealogical boom in the United States which brought many average Americans to discover their own origins. Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson cites this as “Hansen’s Law,” or a distinct phenomenon where the third generation of immigrants sought to recover what had been lost during the ‘Americanization’ or assimilation into American culture of the family over time. According to Jacobson, the ethnic revival of the 1960s is the third generation’s interest in the experience of their grandparents and their desire to recover the history of their multi-ethnic roots.  

Alex Haley’s *Roots* amplified this historiographical trend when the eleven part television series premiered in 1977. The series was seen as a major turning point for the popularity genealogy and the growing interest of history from the bottom-up from average Americans.

Growing up, Dave had always listened to his grandfather’s stories, but the triggering of the *Poseidon Adventure* led him to explore the history of the disaster with greater depth. Finding no other official history of the event in the 1970s, Dave set out to honor his grandfather, but to also to be that authority the *Eastland* Disaster needed at the time.

Nelson’s connection to the *Eastland* Disaster deepened through his relationship to a survivor, Libby Hruby. Nelson and Hruby met through his interest in the *Eastland*

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11 Nelson interview.
Disaster in the 1980s and they connected through their shared knowledge of the disaster. Though she was not a blood relative of Nelson, the bond between them was strong. So intense Nelson stated, “I got to know her so well that I felt at times that, you know, I knew her better than my mom.” Hruby was one of the last known survivors of the Eastland Disaster, and throughout their relationship she shared her story of survival with him. Nelson and Hruby’s bond was so emotional, it is similar to a parent/grandparent and child relationship.

Hruby was ten years old at the time of the disaster and was a guest of her older sister and future brother-in-law, who were both Western Electric employees. Hruby frequently recalled how she and her sister survived the disaster by climbing over the railing of the ship after it capsized. She died November 6, 2004, at 99 years of age.

Dave Nelson’s dedication to collecting the history of the Eastland Disaster led to his being recognized as a local expert and someone the Chicago Maritime Society relied on. In March 2000, Nelson moved his Eastland collection from his small storefront museum in downtown Wheaton, Illinois, to a loft space on 310 S. Racine Avenue in Chicago, where it became the centerpiece of what would become the Chicago Maritime Museum. In a newspaper interview with the Chicago Tribune, Nelson said, “You go up the coast of Michigan and there is a little maritime museum in just about every little city. Chicago was founded as a maritime city and we don’t have a maritime museum.” At this time, the parties signed an agreement that called for CMS to pay him $50,000 for

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12 Nelson interview.


his artifacts with the understanding that Nelson would help CMS raise the funds to pay him.\textsuperscript{15}

However, the relationship between Nelson and the Chicago Maritime Society did not last very long. In July 2003, CMS filed a lawsuit claiming Nelson did not fulfill the terms of the agreement and that he had removed his collection and items belonging to the museum without permission. The group sought $60,000 in damages. At the same time, Nelson sold the entire contested collection for an undisclosed sum to his hometown museum, the Wheaton Center for History, twenty-five miles west of Chicago.\textsuperscript{16} According to their website, the \textit{Eastland} collection is a major component of their permanent exhibit.\textsuperscript{17} Wheaton has no immediate connection to the \textit{Eastland} disaster aside from its resident, Dave Nelson. Nelson's collection of \textit{Eastland} artifacts is a major asset for the Center for History, valued in 2013 at $83,260.\textsuperscript{18}

After the lawsuit settled, the Wheaton Center for History (also known as Wheaton Historic Preservation Council) formed the \textit{Eastland} Fellowship Authority (EFA).\textsuperscript{19} This membership organization is dedicated solely to the advancement of the history of the \textit{Eastland} Disaster and supports the Dave and Rose Nelson \textit{Eastland} Collection. Various


\textsuperscript{17} Wheaton Center for History Website, \texttt{http://www.wheaton.lib.il.us/whc/Info/index.html} (Accessed April 29, 2015).

\textsuperscript{18} Wheaton Historic Preservation Council, IRS Form 990EZ, 2013.

\textsuperscript{19} The exact terms of the settlement are not known. However, the collection remained in possession of the Wheaton Center for History and the contested dive suit returned to the Chicago Maritime Society.
membership levels within the Authority provide access to special discounts, news, and events. The organization boasts that it is the only group dedicated to promoting the history of the *Eastland* Disaster. Nelson also joined the Center for History’s Board of Directors after he sold his collection to the museum.

This discussion is important because while Nelson aimed to spread awareness of the *Eastland* Disaster, he also aimed to claim authority over telling the history of the event. Naming the new entity within Wheaton the *Eastland* Fellowship Authority was no accident. Throughout Nelson’s journey to collect as many *Eastland* artifacts as possible, he attempted to create spaces to establish his own historical authority over the event. He made money from his perceived authority inherent by having his collection in an established museum. From Nelson’s perspective, having Wheaton as the site for *Eastland* Disaster artifacts gives them greater legitimacy in the eyes of the public. He also benefited monetarily. By naming the new entity an “Authority,” the Wheaton Center for History and Nelson marked their territory. Their language implies a unique legitimacy and historical expertise regarding the *Eastland* Disaster, over any others who may want to share in this authority.

Nelson believes the attention he brings to the *Eastland* Disaster is the most important contribution he has made to the memory of the event. Through his connection to the media, Nelson personally drew public attention to the tragedy. However, his role

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20 “Opportunities to Advance the Story of the *Eastland* Disaster,” *S.S. Eastland Fellowship Authority Newsletter* (Wheaton: Wheaton Center for History, January 2005).


22 Nelson interview.
as an *Eastland* descendant is far more important because he is one of the first of his generation to begin sharing his grandfather’s experience of the event outside of the family unit. One of the projects Nelson is particularly proud of was his 1990 documentary, self-produced through the Wheaton, Illinois, public television station, WCTV. Though the documentary had limited exposure, Nelson believes the work put into the project was worth the effort:

> I was determined to make it happen because nobody had ever done a movie ever, and no matter how it was I wanted to get something out there. I felt I could show it to schools . . . It was shown at the *Titanic* exhibit . . . It was also shown at the Chicago Yacht Club several times. I was also honored to have it shown at the Chicago Center for History downtown with an audience, and I was really honored for people to see that.  

His documentary was screened on a loop in the special exhibit attached to the *Titanic* traveling exhibit at the Museum and Science and Industry in Chicago. The film provides basic facts about the disaster, and includes a special interview with Libby Hruby. The final scene of the documentary shows Hruby throwing a wreath into the Chicago River at the site of the disaster. Nelson hopes to produce a new documentary in the future with additional details that have emerged since his production premiered.

> Nelson’s contributions to *Eastland* Disaster history have been invaluable in helping to change the public narrative of the event. Without his collection, many details about people connected to the disaster would have gone unnoticed. People from across

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23 The Titanic exhibit Nelson mentions is the traveling exhibit displayed at the Museum of Science and Industry in 1999. Nelson interview.

the globe have traveled to Wheaton to see the collection. Nelson's attempt to establish historical authority with his collection has been successful. His collection and expertise have been called on many times by the media and local cultural organizations. However, to say that he and Wheaton are the only sources for *Eastland* Disaster history overlooks the efforts of other organizations with similar missions.

**Problems at Wheaton**

In October 2014, the Wheaton Center for History and the *Eastland* Fellowship Authority closed its main location on Front Street in downtown Wheaton, Illinois. Faced with an expensive lease and little support from the city, Wheaton Center for History moved their exhibits and collections out of the building after their landlord evicted them. This move leaves the future of the Wheaton Center for History and the *Eastland* collection in doubt. Wheaton CEO Alberta Adamson stated for the *Daily Herald*, “I want people to realize that once it’s gone it’s not coming back.” Adamson assures that Wheaton’s collections are safe and in storage offsite, but access is limited. This new development threatens their mission, but Adamson insists that they are still the authority for *Eastland* Disaster history and, with an appointment, the public can still see a small

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25 Visitors from Lithuania and other parts of Europe have visited the Wheaton Center for History to see the *Eastland* Disaster collection in person. Annual Report 2014.


exhibit titled *Heartbreak, Heroism, Healing* at their historic home location on Main Street. However, that property is also for sale.²⁸

According to newspaper reports, Wheaton’s troubles are not a new development. In 2009, the City of Wheaton eliminated its contribution to the museum’s yearly budget because of concerns about how the museum was managed and the downturn of the economy.²⁹ In December 2014, the Wheaton Preservation Council, the museum’s parent organization, published a retrospective newsletter for members that reflected on the organization’s thirty-five years. The publication asks for donations to support the organization, including honoring the centennial of the *Eastland* Disaster with “a new publication, several events and programs.”³⁰

Another organization dedicated to maintaining public memory of the *Eastland* was the *Eastland* Memorial Society (EMS). Much like Dave Nelson and the *Eastland* Fellowship Authority, EMS focused on collecting and displaying *Eastland* artifacts that were inherited or purchased on emerging internet commerce sites like eBay.

**Eastland Memorial Society**

Karl Sup, a descendant of *Eastland* survivors, established the Eastland Memorial Society in 1998. “After much coaxing,” Sup writes on the *Eastland* Memorial website, “my grandmother finally told me about her experiences on the Eastland in 1977. A

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rescuer pulled her out of the water by her long, flowing hair. My grandfather was rescued because he was fortuitously dressed as Uncle Sam for the parade that would never come. 'Grab Uncle Sam!' the rescuers shouted." Sup's creation of the *Eastland* Memorial Society came at a time when the Internet became more widely available in American households. The EMS website was the first on the web for casual researchers to find information about the tragedy, and for descendants like him to find information and a place to connect.

Sup's postmemories from his grandparents inspired him to learn more about the *Eastland* Disaster and later create the *Eastland* Memorial Society. “Since childhood,” he explained, “the *Eastland* Disaster has fascinated, haunted, and driven me to thoroughly research every aspect of this ship and the disaster.” Like Nelson, Sup’s desire to change the narrative of the disaster to focus more on the people who died and survived that fateful day is directly related to the memories shared with him by his grandparents.

The Eastland Memorial Society’s mission is “to provide information and support for descendants of *Eastland* disaster victims, survivors and others, to promote historical knowledge and remembrance of the disaster, and to plan and facilitate activities and projects which contribute to the commemoration of the disaster.” Upon the group’s inception, the Eastland Memorial Society worked closely with Dave Nelson, and often organized memorial events at the riverside.

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In the late 2000s, Sup moved from the Chicago area to Phoenix, Arizona. EMS has since become inactive. The website remains live and directs traffic to find more information about the *Eastland* Disaster via the Wheaton Center for History and David Nelson’s collection. Sup donated his grandfather’s Uncle Sam costume to Nelson’s *Eastland* Collection. It was prominently displayed at Wheaton Center for History’s Front Street location until it closed. Sup’s role in the history and memory of the *Eastland* Disaster, though brief, is important because as a descendant, his postmemories of the tragedy inspired him to reach out and share those memories with the rest of the world. Through the creation of a website, Sup drew the attention of the casual researcher and of other *Eastland* descendants looking to find more information about the tragedy in which their relatives had connections.

Another organization formed in 1998 that also focused on promoting *Eastland* Disaster history. Focused on the global impact of the event, the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society aims to connect descendants of the event through their family histories.

**Ted and Barb Wachholz – Eastland Disaster Historical Society**

Ted Wachholz, co-founder and Executive Director of the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society (EDHS), claims that “the *Eastland* is not about a ship or just the people who died in it, but about the tens of thousands connected to it that day.”

Wachholz grew up in the Chicago area and is married to the granddaughter of *Eastland* Memorial Society website, [http://www.eastlandmemorial.org](http://www.eastlandmemorial.org) (Accessed April 29, 2015).

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survivor, Borghild Aanstad. He did not have knowledge of the disaster until he met his wife, Barb.

In 1998, Wachholz, his wife and sister-in-law established the Eastland Disaster Historical Society, a non-profit organization dedicated, “First, to provide education and information regarding the Eastland Disaster to ensure its place in history for future generations. And second, to commemorate those families whose lives were affected by the Eastland Disaster.”36 Wachholz stated his family believed the wreck was fading into obscurity: “we felt that if we didn’t do something then and now that after a couple more generations had passed it would be nothing more than a footnote. We couldn’t let Chicago’s greatest tragedy fade into oblivion.”37 The Wachholzs’ mission is to connect the general public to the event because the Eastland Disaster is not just the tragedy, it is also about the people involved in the story. “The Eastland Disaster,” Wachholz stated,

wasn’t a story about the ship. It was a story about all of the people. If you look at it that way and not just 844 victims. Not just 2,500 people that were on board but if you look at the tens and tens and tens of thousands of people that were directly impacted by that day including all of the doctors, nurses . . . the people who were the judges, the lawyers . . . all of the undertakers, all of the gravediggers, the funeral home directors. If you look at everyone that was significantly impacted or even lightly impacted that day, there are easily tens and tens and tens of thousands of people that day and then if you roll their families forward three generations . . . going on four now there’s easily several million people alive today that have a direct connection. I consider myself a part of that because I married into it. It’s not blood, but it does make a difference. I am now connected to that event.38


37 Ted Wachholz, email to the author, March 27, 2011.

38 Wachholz interview.
Ted considers himself directly connected to the disaster because of his marriage to Barb. Being a tight-knit family, Ted’s feeling of being directly descended from the disaster is not an unusual connection to make. In terms of EDHS, Ted and Barb take care to ensure the mission of the organization is focused on reaching out to the public and sharing stories of the disaster.

Barb’s grandmother, Borghild Aanstad, Bobbie for short, was fourteen years old at the time of the disaster. She was on the boat with her nine-year-old sister, mother, and uncle who worked for Western Electric. When asked how her grandmother remembered the disaster, Barb recalled:

I always remember as a young girl was how my grandmother would always tell my sister and I the story about when she was on, “The Big Boat”. Because we were young kids, she would refrain from a lot of gory detail but we knew she was on this big boat that had turned over, and she always stressed because she knew how to swim that’s what helped to save her. From what we recall, from the stories she used to tell us, they all boarded the ship and my great grandmother, their mother, had said that because the ship was so crowded she didn’t like the feel of the ship, and it felt unsteady. They proceeded to find seating in the middle deck . . . After the ship rolled over they were then stuck in between decks. They weren’t on the top deck where they could have just climbed over the railing like so many other people were able to do, and they weren’t on the very lower deck . . . where so many people were trapped. They were in the middle deck. The ship rolled over, and water did proceed to come into the ship, but never went above their heads. She had to hold on to whatever debris she could find. Boxes, crates, whatever, and those are all little fine details that we don’t know exactly. But, they were between decks for many, many hours . . . And so, she and her family were all right there together. Uncle Olaf, who had worked for Western Electric, was a big, strong, Norwegian guy and he knew how to swim very well. So, after making sure that his sister, and my grandmother, and great aunt . . . were okay, he proceeded to try to save other lives. Always keeping an eye on them (his family) to make sure that they were okay. [It was] many, many hours later they were saved through a porthole.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{39} Wachholz interview.
Barb Wachholz’s postmemory of the disaster is exactly the type of memory that survived the twentieth century – shared family memory, told in such a way that later generations took on as their own. Bobbie Aanstad shared her memories of the “Big Boat” when her granddaughters asked about it, but shied away from gruesome details until her audience was much older. This was not the case for Barb’s great aunt Solveigh, who “rarely ever talked about it to her family.”

The tragedy hit survivors in different ways. For Bobbie and Solveigh Aanstad, Barb describes the event as “very difficult for both sisters.” Their personalities were very different. The “vivacious and outgoing” Bobbie tried to not let the event control her life and “never really had a fear of the water” later in life. However, according to Barb Wachholz, Bobbie’s younger sister Solveigh preferred to not discuss the event.

Bobbie and Solveigh’s different reactions are not uncommon among survivors of trauma. In his analysis of the effects of traumatic memory on veterans of the First World War, historian Jay Winter observes that “some veterans have retreated into silence, but there were many storytellers among them.” For survivors and rescuers of the Eastland Disaster, these two categories of trauma survivors apply. Solveigh preferred to remain silent about her experience, while Bobbie was willing to share her story with her young granddaughters. Though Solveigh experienced the same events as Bobbie, they remained side by side inside the boat, her relationship with her memory is very different from her sister’s and indicative of how two people digest traumatic memory differently.

40 Wachholz interview.

41 Wachholz interview.

42 Jay Winter, Remembering War (New Haven: Yale Press, 2006), 45.
The Aanstad sisters’ story combined with Ted’s experience as an outsider who never knew about the tragedy until marrying into a family of survivors are the reasons the Wachholz family felt a need to create an organization that would promote the history of the *Eastland* Disaster. They felt the history of the event and the personal stories of victims, survivors, and rescuers were about to fade into darkness, and by creating an organization to promote those stories they would build awareness of what they believed to be Chicago’s greatest tragedy.

*Caring the Eastland Disaster Historical Society*

Eastland Disaster Historical Society filed for 501(c) (3) non-profit status on December 30, 1998. The EDHS website launched a month later in January 1999. The website receives several thousand hits a month from people who are curious about the disaster and from descendants of *Eastland* survivors, victims, or rescuers. Like Karl Sup’s website, EDHS’ visibility on the Internet helped the group share their family’s connection to the tragedy, and connect to other families like theirs who also had a desire to share their past.

Ted Wachholz credits the EDHS website for the organization’s growth since its inception in 1998. Visitors from across the globe contact EDHS with information about their relatives who died, survived, or were first responders during the *Eastland* Disaster. When an individual contacts the organization with information about a person connected to the *Eastland*, a file is created with that family member’s story. Over time, EDHS has

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The estimation of hits is Ted Wachholz’s. According to the traffic rating website, Alexa.com, [www.eastlanddisaster.org](http://www.eastlanddisaster.org) does not receive enough traffic to estimate its popularity on the Internet. Wachholz interview.
collected hundreds of individual stories and experiences. These files enable EDHS to build a collection of personal memories based on one event. EDHS’s archives also allow the organization to keep track of the requests for information they receive, and connect people when duplicate requests come in with information about the same person. Ted Wachholz felt that, “It’s not about the things. It’s about the connections . . . The Eastland Disaster split these families apart and now we’re bringing them back together.” In his oral history interview, Ted became emotional when recalling the connection he made between the family of Louise Schiff, a survivor of the disaster, and her unknown rescuer. For years, Schiff and her family recalled her rescue, but never knew the name of the man who pulled her out of the water and into his rowboat. They contacted EDHS and shared her story, but EDHS had no more information than what they offered. Years later, the family of Lawrence Frank Northrup, bridgetender at the Dearborn Street Bridge, contacted EDHS to tell his story. On the day of the disaster, Northrup had a “birdseye view” of the scene and immediately left his post to help when the boat capsized. Northrup pulled several people out of the water and was awarded a Coroner’s Star for his assistance that day. In 2012, documentation surfaced which listed the people Northrup saved. Schiff was on the list and with this new information EDHS connected the two families. The Wachholzs make it their mission to make the Eastland Disaster a personal event for everyone coming in contact with it. Like a stone dropped in a pond, the Wachholzs believe the Eastland Disaster has a rippling effect with the ability to touch

44 Wachholz interview.

45 Wachholz interview.
the lives of everyone that it surrounds. First, the Disaster touches the people who were there that day, those who died, survived, and participated in some manner. Then, there are the descendants of these people. After these immediate rings, the Wachholzs believe once an individual or individuals learn about the disaster they become connected. Through this logic, EDHS contends that the Eastland Disaster is more than just the 2,500 people loaded on to the boat that day, but the “literally thousands of people” that have been touched by the event.46

Part of the EDHS mission is to educate the public about the disaster. In addition to their website, EDHS reaches out to schools in the Chicago region during their history fairs, and awards scholarships to students who focus their projects on the Eastland Disaster. EDHS believes the history of the event will survive by fostering an interest with young people. They also hope to avoid the same reaction Ted Wachholz once encountered after first learning of the Disaster as an adult – the reaction of many people who cannot believe they never knew about the disaster before. Their goal is to have all Chicagoans, and possibly the nation, be able to recall the Eastland Disaster from public memory with as much ease at the Chicago Fire.

The Eastland Disaster Historical Society also reaches out to the public through the curation of public exhibits. In 1999, Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry announced it would host the traveling exhibit, “Titanic: The Exhibition,” beginning in February 2000. The exhibit featured more than 200 artifacts recovered from the wreck and many life-size recreations of sections of the ship. A special section of the exhibit

46 Wachholz interview.
was dedicated to telling the story of “Chicago’s Titanic,” the *Eastland*. The Eastland Disaster Historical Society assisted the Museum of Science and Industry by providing artifacts and oral histories for the 1,000 square foot *Eastland* room.

Newspaper reviews of the Titanic exhibit were not positive, though some negative reviews praised the inclusion of the *Eastland*. Mike Conklin, a staff reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, “What turns out to be the show’s more informative part for many has nothing to do with the *Titanic*. It is the section devoted to the SS *Eastland* and it probably comes as a surprise (there was no movie) to some visitors to learn that one of the worst disasters on water occurred in the heart of Chicago.” Criticism of the *Titanic* portion of the exhibit directly aimed at the exhibit’s “blurry” connection between the real artifacts and the fake movie sets created to look like the ones from the 1998 *Titanic* film starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet.

Critics of the *Titanic* exhibit agreed, the connection to the *Eastland* Disaster as the strongest part of the exhibition in Chicago. The *Eastland* exhibit featured Dave Nelson’s four-minute, looped video played with interviews of survivors, a display of


48 Wachholz interview.


foreign language newspapers documenting the disaster, and an interactive, hands-on display of what caused the *Eastland* to be top-heavy and unstable. Conklin's review deemed the *Eastland* Disaster section “the highlight of the entire exhibit.”

The *Titanic* exhibit was EDHS' first public exhibition. A large-scale exhibit at MSI provided an opportunity to reach thousands of people who may not have otherwise learned about “Chicago’s *Titanic.*” Ted Wachholz declared, “We saw an amazing opportunity to be associated with the *Titanic.* 800,000 people in six months. The *Tribune* said that the *Eastland* Disaster was the best part of the exhibit.”

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**Ted Wachholz’s The Eastland Disaster**

In 2005, Ted Wachholz and EDHS, in association with the Chicago Historical Society, published *The Eastland Disaster* as part of Arcadia Publishing’s *Images of America* series. The 128-page book features photographs from the extensive collections of EDHS and the Chicago Historical Society. Unlike George Hilton’s *Legacy of the Titanic*, Wachholz’s book is not technical on the causes of the wreck, but provides a history of the disaster and the people involved. The content is very approachable for a person with little to no prior knowledge the event.

For a time, Hilton’s and Wachholz’s works were the only two books available on the market that detailed any part of the disaster. In the introduction, Wachholz writes,

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52 Wachholz interview.
“this book is a nice companion piece to the works of both Hilton and Bonansinga.”

Indeed, the image-heavy work appeals to readers who may not be interested in reading Hilton’s technical history of the ill-fated boat, but are interested in knowing more about the tragedy.

Wachholz’s book is also a collection of visual memory of the disaster. Marianne Hirsch states photographs are the medium of postmemory that “outlive their subjects and owners function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost world.” The photographs in *The Eastland Disaster* are the most compelling evidence of support in changing public narrative to a more individually centered one. One of the most compelling photos of the disaster, taken by Jun Fujita of the *Chicago Evening Post* (shown in Chapter Two) is the cover of Wachholz’s book. It depicts a horrified man holding the body of a lifeless child. Police stand in the background looking on with others carrying bodies from the wreckage. The image is haunting and instantly personalizes the tragedy.

In 2014, the Eastland Disaster Historical Society prepared to mark the disaster’s 100th anniversary. In August, the group launched a new version of their website updated with better access to their interactive manifest and documents they have collected since their incorporation. The new manifest emphasizes EDHS’s mission to be transparent and share as much information as possible about the individuals involved.

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54 Hirsch, 115.
with the disaster. As Ted stated, “We share as much as we can. We are not proprietary.”

Figure 12 - Launched in August 2014, the Eastland Disaster Historical Society’s new website emphasizes individual experiences of the people involved in the tragedy.

As the 100th anniversary approached, EDHS geared up for an entire year of programming to commemorate the anniversary. During this phase of planning, EDHS reached out to the public to spread more awareness of the event in hope the centennial would not go unnoticed by the public. Blog posts on their re-launched website focused on the stories collected from Eastland Disaster families. EDHS also worked on several projects that focused on honoring the lives touched by the disaster. For example, after the disaster, the Bohemian National Cemetery became the resting place for 143 victims. Noted as “Section 16” of the large cemetery, the section is the largest known cemetery

section to contain victims from the same disaster. In July 2015, volunteers from the
Friends of the Bohemian National Cemetery constructed a monument at the section to
the mark the cemetery’s important role in the history of the *Eastland* Disaster.

EDHS used the centennial of the disaster to establish their organization’s future
as the authority of *Eastland* Disaster history. They positioned themselves as the
keepers of Eastland’s stories, and the only organization that was going to preserve and
promote each story with the same importance as others. This move to establish
permanency, however, was done alone and without involvement of other *Eastland*
organizations.

**Interaction between Wheaton and EDHS**

How do two different groups, both dedicated to promoting historical information
about the disaster, influence the memory of the *Eastland* Disaster? It might seem more
logical that the two groups would have more power in promoting their missions if they
worked together. However, both EDHS and Wheaton/Dave Nelson believe that the two
groups work better separately based on differing personalities within the organizations.

Both groups believe that they are the authority for *Eastland* Disaster history.
Dave Nelson’s emphasis on collecting *Eastland* artifacts has led his collection to be the
world’s largest accumulation of memorabilia. By creating his own museum, he
established an “official” site of *Eastland* history. At the time, there was no marker at the
site of the disaster, and the Chicago History Museum did not have an exhibit dedicated
to sharing the history of the event. Nelson, with his collection, initiated a movement to
recognize the *Eastland* Disaster as an important event in Chicago history. His museum
was small, but it was a way to share his growing collection. After selling his collection to the Chicago Maritime Society and then the Wheaton Center for History, Nelson has focused his efforts on promoting the mission of the Eastland Fellowship Authority (EFA), an entity within the Wheaton Center for History. EFA creates exhibits, produces programs, organizes commemorative events, and is fundraising for a new book about the disaster titled, *Heartbreak, Heroism, Healing: The Tales of the S.S. Eastland*, not yet published. The work, written by Wheaton Center for History CEO Alberta Adamson, features oral histories and stories collected by the EFA since the collection's inception. The work also shares translated Polish and Czech first-hand accounts of the disaster, never before printed in English.\(^{56}\)

The *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society also claims to be the authority of *Eastland* Disaster history because they are a repository for several family histories, and allow open access to anyone. As Ted Wachholz stated, EDHS is a “one stop shop” for *Eastland* Disaster history.\(^{57}\) EDHS' efforts to create an entire year of remembrance for the 100\(^{th}\) anniversary also claim to be the “official” commemorative events of the *Eastland* Disaster.

According to Ted Wachholz, the two organizations do not compete, but they focus on separate goals. Nelson stated that “There are other groups that are working on the Eastland. I don’t have a lot of contact with them. I’ve tried to have initial contact

\(^{56}\) As of early 2016, this work has not been published. The book’s author, Alberta Adamson, shared the table of contents, but no other accounts from her work.

\(^{57}\) Wachholz interview.
years ago, but they turned us down. Interviews with both individuals suggest that the animosity between the two groups stems from a personal disagreement at an early 2000s event where both groups participated. In addition, Nelson’s and Wachholz’s differing personalities seem to have exacerbated the troubles between the two individuals. In short, they do not like each other, which makes coordinating Eastland Disaster events difficult when personalities collide.

Historian Dolores Hayden notes in The Power of Place that the great strength in community-based public history is the shared authority that comes with individuals collectively contributing to an historical narrative. These groups are able to reclaim the history of the Eastland Disaster and recover memory lost after years of silence in the twentieth century. For both EDHS (Ted Wacholz) and Wheaton (Dave Nelson), their “authority” comes from the family memories that are shared with them from individuals connected to the disaster, not the artifacts that they collect. As stated earlier in this chapter, these groups formed out of their desire to share their generational postmemory and rewrite the official narrative of the Eastland Disaster to be more personal and focus on the individual experiences of the people connected to it. Yet, as long as the two groups remain at odds with each other, their efforts to put the Eastland Disaster at the forefront of Chicago public memory will waver. If there must be one authority, as their literature sometimes states, the recent setbacks at the Wheaton Center for History

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58 Nelson is referring to Eastland Disaster Historical Society in this quote. Nelson interview, 8.

seem to position EDHS as more likely to become the one “official” group for Eastland history.

The goals and motives of these groups point to a desire to create an official narrative of the Eastland Disaster that is more personal and focuses on the people affected by the events of the day. From those to who died in the water to the funeral directors who worked overtime to prepare the dead, EDHS and Wheaton are both motivated to retell the story of the Eastland with their family memories.

Their methods are not uncommon and are in line with the public memory-making process. EDHS and Dave Nelson, motivated by their personal family histories, desire to create accessible public memory of the Eastland Disaster. Acting as cultural leaders, they orchestrate commemorative events that tell the story they want to tell. The public accepts these interpretations and through frequent retellings of the story, their personal postmemories are creating new public memories. 60

**Their Missions at Work**

In the years since the Eastland Disaster Historical Society was established and Nelson’s collection moved to the Wheaton Center for History, efforts to remember the Eastland have increased dramatically. Yet, before these groups could grow their audiences through exhibits and public programming, the site of the disaster itself needed to be marked.

The earliest move to mark the Eastland Disaster’s site was made in 1988 by a class of high school sophomores from the Illinois Math and Science Academy at Aurora.

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60 Bodnar, 15.
Mbuyi Kazadi, a fifteen year old interviewed for the *Chicago Sun-Times* said, “I've been told that people who lived in Chicago all their lives didn’t know about it…I think that’s sad.” The children believed the *Eastland* tragedy was overlooked due to the lower class status of the victims. Another classmate, Nikki Hughes, said, “Tragedies where less people died have been more publicized. These were regular people – they were workers. If they had been a lot of rich executives, it would’ve been treated out of this world.” Soon after their project began, the students of the Illinois Math and Science Academy in Aurora received approval from the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency to erect a historic marker at the site of the disaster. On June 6, 1989, the students, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, and Dave Nelson celebrated the unveiling of the monument at Clark Street and the Chicago River.

In the late 1990s, rising interest in the *Eastland* led to a special expedition to search for lost artifacts. A group of divers from the Underwater Archaeological Society of Chicago organized the first search in December 1999. In a *Tribune* article outlining the exploration, “All are driven by the sense that this tragedy, more than others, was somehow allowed to slip from the city’s consciousness and that more of the Eastland story was being lost with each passing year.” The divers alluded to the possibility that nothing would be found, but they were consumed with the same curiosity and need to preserve the *Eastland*’s history as the founders of the historical societies. On December 

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62 EDHS did not participate because they did not form as an organization until 1998.

13, 1999, the Tribune reported that the divers found nothing at the site of the Eastland’s wreck. “We never really thought we would find anything,” said Ted Wachholz.64 Interestingly, both Wachholz and Sup attended the divers’ expedition not only to represent their specific societies, but also to represent their ancestors as the divers searched for lost items. Karl Sup, founder of the Eastland Memorial Society stated to the Tribune reporter, “The disaster was a disaster, but people forgetting about it is a tragedy.”65 Though the dive team was not successful in finding any artifacts relating to the Eastland, the interest surrounding the wreck grew among the museum and academic fields in Chicago.

By May 2000, the sign marking the spot of the disaster had been stolen, leaving nothing marking the site. In a rare occasion of working together, Dave Nelson, the Eastland Memorial Society, and the Eastland Disaster Historical Society convinced the Chicago Public Art Committee to replace the stolen marker with a smaller version and eventually a larger monument.66

The Eastland Disaster Historical Society’s most recent goal has been to fulfill the promise made in May 2000 by the Chicago Public Art Committee and establish a riverfront exhibit commemorating the disaster at the site. The plans have been approved by the City of Chicago and Wachholz was hopeful the exhibit would be installed in time


for the 100th anniversary in 2015, but it still remains in the project phase in 2016. In March 2013, the plans for the Chicago Riverwalk Project were underway with a 100 million dollar loan from the Federal Government to the City of Chicago. The portion of the project at the site of the Eastland Disaster finished in time for the 2015 centennial commemoration ceremonies.

Media

In 1997, the Titanic and Eastland wrecks were brought together and discussed in the PBS series, “Death in America.” The documentary came on the heels of the popular Hollywood film Titanic. In the documentary, the Eastland, Chicago’s own large-scale passenger ship disaster, is discussed as the legacy of the Titanic. The film follows George Hilton’s thesis that the Eastland capsized because of overzealous safety regulations made right after the Titanic sank. The film also discusses why the Eastland had been forgotten, especially in terms of class differences between the passengers of the two wrecks. Mainly, that no one remembers the nameless working-class people of the Eastland, while many remember the John Jacob Astors of the Titanic. However, the hour-long documentary focuses mostly on Chicago’s connections to the victims and survivors of the Titanic.

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A year after the “Death in America” segment aired on WYIN, the fifty-five minute documentary *The Eastland Disaster* aired on WTTW in Chicago. It was produced by Southport Video and featured the entire history of the ship, the disaster, and its afterlife as a naval training vessel. The video features four main interviewees who recapped the history of the wreck: Mary Boneville, a local historian and member of the Eastland Memorial Society; James Landwehr, a Great Lakes historian; Mark Braun, an author of several books about the Great Lakes; and, George Hilton, author of *Eastland: Legacy of the Titanic*. The interviewees discuss the historic significance of the *Eastland Disaster* and pose it as an important event to remember for the entire United States, not just Chicago and the Midwest. In fact, George Hilton states in a segment that the *Eastland* claimed more lives of passengers than the *Titanic*, though the steamship had a higher number of deaths due to loss of life among the crew.70 Ted Wachholz later said that the video “was a big deal.” Though EDHS did not participate in the documentary’s production, they supported its premiere with a “watch party.”71

In late 2001, Dave Nelson and the Wachholz family appeared in “The *Eastland Disaster*” episode of *Chicago Stories* on WTTW. The hour-long program featured dramatic reenactments of the capsizing boat as well as voiceovers of eyewitness testimonies. The film opens with host Harvey Moshman noting the timeliness of the documentary: "We began work on *The Eastland Disaster* before the events of September 11. And, although some viewers might not be in the mood to watch a documentary on Chicago's worst tragedy, we feel that this little-known story, however

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70 *The Eastland Disaster*, produced by Southport Video, 55 minutes, 1999.

71 EDHS did not participate in the production of the documentary because they were a fledgling organization at the time of production. Wachholz interview.
disturbing, is one worth telling.” This is the first time that *Eastland* is mentioned in the same context as the 9/11 terror attacks. As a national traumatic event, it seems fitting to connect the events. At the time that the documentary aired on WTTW, the nation was still processing the events of September 11, but it was clear that it would become an iconic event. Placing the *Eastland* Disaster in the same category allowed the viewer, who may have been unfamiliar with the history of the tragedy, to connect to the history of the event in a meaningful way.

In addition, the production featured interviews with survivor Libby Hruby, and descendants of survivors and rescuers, exposing the viewer to first-hand memory and postmemory of the disaster. Retelling her Uncle Frank’s experience of seeing babies floating lifeless in the water, Rosemary Pietrzak stated, “He lost his faith in God that day.” Clearly, the traumatic event made an impression on Frank Pietrzak and later, his great niece Rosemary.

Without interviewing audience members, it is hard to determine the impact this documentary made on viewers who may not have had prior knowledge of the disaster. However, this episode of *Chicago Stories* is still occasionally aired on WTTW, and its page remains live on the PBS website. The episode’s page directs visitors to find more information at the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society website.

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Conclusion

In the late twentieth century, individuals emerged who changed the official narrative of the *Eastland* Disaster to make it more prominent in Chicago’s and the Midwest’s public memory. These individuals, all third generation descendants of survivors or rescuers, formed historical societies with the intent to share their family stories with the public. The *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society and Dave Nelson have worked together and separately to make the public more aware of Chicago’s “greatest disaster.”

The activities of the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society and Dave Nelson and the Wheaton Center for History are a direct result of the postmemory developed from the stories shared by their *Eastland* survivor relatives. Postmemory of a traumatic event such as the *Eastland* Disaster is transferred within the family unit with stories, photographs, and general family life, allowing subsequent generations to acquire and perpetuate memory of the disaster even as they become removed from it in time.

In the 1970s, Dave Nelson realized his role in *Eastland* Disaster history after viewing the film *Poseidon Adventure*. Throughout his childhood, he heard stories from his grandfather about the terrible day when “the boat flipped over.” Elmer Nelson’s Coroner’s Star became a symbol of the disaster for Dave and inspired him to collect more of the disaster’s artifacts. Dave’s awareness of his and his grandfather’s place in history connects to the emergence of bottom-up history that blossomed in the 1970s.

In addition, by collecting *Eastland* artifacts, Nelson sought authority over the disaster’s history with his collection and later, museum. As his collection outgrew the space he could provide, Dave sought out a home for his artifacts, first with the Chicago
Maritime Society and finally with the Wheaton Center for History. Though the future of the Wheaton Center for History remains in question, Nelson’s collection remains the largest grouping of Eastland Disaster artifacts in the world. When on display, these objects are tangible pieces of the disaster. More than just a photograph, the objects give the museum visitor a physical connection to the tragedy.

However, Nelson’s removal of his collection from the Chicago Maritime Society indicated his intention to claim full authority over the disaster. By removing his collection from Chicago and restricting access for tourists, Nelson is not accomplishing his mission to share and promote the history of the Eastland Disaster. The collection could play a vital role in educating the public of the tragedy, but if no one can access it, its significance to aiding public memory of the disaster is nil. This has become even more problematic as Wheaton Center for History announced in 2015 that it would close its Front Street location. By further reducing access to the collection, the public loses that physical connection to the disaster.75

Nearly twenty years after Nelson recognized his place in Eastland history, the Wachholz family created the Eastland Disaster Historical Society. The society is dedicated to preserving the history of the tragedy and spreading awareness of the event itself. Ted Wachholz, married to the granddaughter of an Eastland survivor, leads the organization in its efforts to change the public narrative of the event to one that is centered on the people directly connected to the tragedy. The organization does not focus on collecting artifacts, but stands as a repository for stories of survivors, rescuers,

victims, and others involved in the disaster. They believe that the event itself is like a stone thrown in a pond, rippling out, and eventually touching the lives of everyone around it. They are motivated by their desire to make the disaster more prominent in Chicago public memory, and if possible, in national memory.

In the early twenty-first century, the efforts of the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society and the Wheaton Center for History have begun to change the narrative of the disaster. The history of the event became focused more on the individuals involved on that day--victims, survivors, rescuers, passersby--than on the story of the boat and who was responsible for the wreck. Postmemory of the disaster, passed on through the third generation, is changing the public narrative. In the next chapter I will discuss how these memories of the disaster and the changing narrative of the event have inspired others to launch the disaster into Chicago mythology, allowing the *Eastland* Disaster to live on long past the life expectancy of the direct descendants of the disaster.
CHAPTER FOUR

Creating Prosthetic Memory: Launching *Eastland* into Chicago Mythology

Between the 1990s and early 2000s, historic societies and individuals dedicated to the *Eastland* Disaster worked toward sharing the stories of the individual persons involved in the disaster so others outside their organizations would find them significant. These groups believe the *Eastland* Disaster is not merely about a boat, but foremost about the people involved in the tragedy. As the one hundredth anniversary approached, the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society (Ted and Barb Wachholz) and the *Eastland* Fellowship Authority at the Wheaton Center for History (Dave Nelson) made even greater efforts to expose the public to the history of the event through public programs and additional publications.

This chapter argues that the postmemories of *Eastland* Disaster descendants came to affect others who had no prior connection or knowledge of the disaster, creating prosthetic memory, and that these prosthetic memories were used to construct historical narratives that expanded the broader public’s awareness of the tragedy. The resulting creative works expanded the *Eastland*’s presence in the public sphere. Inspired by the family histories they encountered, authors and artists Jay Bonansinga, Marian Manseau Cheatham, and Andrew White sought to move the *Eastland* Disaster to the level of “myth” in Chicago. This common goal is important because both Bonansinga and White, in particular, believe that “myth” in this regard means to raise the event to the highest level of public consciousness—a state of permanent memory.
that gives the regular person, who is not personally connected to the disaster, the ability to recall the event with very little effort. An example of Chicago mythology is the infamous story of Mrs. O’Leary’s lantern and the cow that tipped it over, burning the city of Chicago in the well-known Great Chicago Fire of 1871.¹

According to theorist Alison Landsberg, audiences who have no prior experience of an event are capable of acquiring new memory through public cultural displays. She calls this form of memory prosthetic memory, which is formed after a person encounters a site of memory, like a movie or museum exhibit.² Although Landsberg explains how prosthetic memory is formed through the means of film and museums, this method of memory formation is also formed through literature and theater. Landsberg claims emotional responses trigger a person to form a memory because of their newfound connection to an event in history. As I will discuss in this chapter, Jay Bonansinga, Marian Cheatham, and Andrew White attempt to place the Eastland Disaster on the same level of importance in Chicago mythology as the Chicago Fire.

Elevating the Eastland Disaster to the same mythic level as the Chicago Fire presents a challenge. Beginning on October 8, 1871, and lasting for two days, the Fire devastated the city of Chicago’s infrastructure and killed over 300 people. The Chicago Fire is enshrined in the city’s mythology as the story of a city destroyed only to rise out of the ashes to unprecedented greatness. This narrative has been memorialized in the


city’s flag as the second star in the row of four. It was also commemorated during the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. Although the event was intended to celebrate the 400 years since Columbus’ voyage to the Americas, the World’s Columbian Exposition also proved to the world Chicago’s great rebirth after the Fire. Throughout the twentieth century, the Fire was commemorated with museum exhibits, films, and song.

To elevate the Eastland Disaster to Chicago Fire status, Bonansinga and White believe they must evoke an emotional response from the public, making the memory of the event an important part of the city’s identity. This chapter will discuss how these authors attempt to evoke an emotional response from their readers and create a prosthetic memory myth of the Eastland Disaster.

Jay Bonansinga

In 2004, Jay Bonansinga released The Sinking of the Eastland: America’s Forgotten Tragedy. The book recalls the events of the day of the disaster with a dramatic turn. Bonansinga is a novelist by trade, perhaps best known as the author of the popular series, The Walking Dead. Bonansinga was raised in Peoria, Illinois, and claims a lifelong residency in the state with the exception of the four years he attended Michigan State University. He calls himself a “Midwestern writer” who uses Chicago as

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Bonansinga chose to write about the *Eastland* Disaster because he recognized the immense gap of knowledge in the public about the event:

> I learned about it. I looked it up and sure enough there was a shipwreck there. There was a capsizing there. And then, even stranger, was no one knew anything about it. And even stranger than that, I started to realize it was one of the worst disasters in American history. It was the deadliest single incident that happened in the Great Lakes, or even Chicago, and you know, it’s not the same. It’s not apples and apples, but something like 311 people died in the Great Fire of Chicago. I learned that somewhere between 850 and 1000 people died on the Eastland, and I say between 850-1000 because at that point the history was so spotty and vague, you could find a chapter in a Chicago encyclopedia or a Chicago history book you would find a citation, and the facts would be all muddy and wrong.\(^7\)

Bonansinga felt that as a native Midwesterner he should have known about this event, and that if he had no knowledge of it, then it was also possible no one else would have either.

Years later, after completing another book, Bonansinga decided to take on the *Eastland* Disaster as his next project. The book is considered narrative nonfiction because the author is careful not to assume plotlines or fabricate events for the sake of the story. He does, however, use vague terms such as “would have said” in places where no record exists of actual dialogue. In his author’s note he states, “I have endeavored to create portraits based on public record, oral histories, and the remembrances of descendants.”\(^8\) Indeed, Bonansinga creates a gripping retelling of the *Eastland* Disaster from the early morning excitement of the crowds at the dock to the legal aftermath of the tragedy. *America’s Forgotten Tragedy* aims to draw the general

\(^6\) Jay Bonansinga interview with Caitlyn Dial, August 10, 2012.

\(^7\) Bonansinga interview.

\(^8\) Bonansinga, *Sinking of the Eastland*, vii.
public into the tale of the *Eastland* with the primary goal of entertainment, but stays true to the history of the event with documentation.

In terms of how the memory of *Eastland* survived in the twentieth century, Bonansinga poetically states the boat was best remembered in “family mythologies. At Thanksgiving meals, on porch swings late at night when the lonely sound of Chicago's ‘elevated’ clatters in the distance.”\(^9\) Bonansinga believes that the only way to bring the event out of family memory and place it within Chicagoans' identity is to turn it into myth, “I am not a historian. I always believed that that's what the Eastland disaster required. Before I wrote the book, I always believed it needed someone to turn it into a myth. To turn it into a narrative, a story.” He hopes that raising *Eastland* to the level of mythology like the Chicago Fire will raise the importance of the event in the minds of the general public. Social thinker Duncan S.A. Bell writes, “Myth is not synonymous with pernicious distortion or dissimulation, and as an antonym of history . . . A myth is as a story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation’s past and its place in the world.”\(^10\) Historian Michael Kammen also writes about the role of myth in American culture in his monumental work, *Mystic Chords of Memory*. He writes that Americans thrive on myth and while they may be based more on tradition than fact, myth draws Americans to history. In the case of *Eastland*, Bonansinga creates a


dramatic, documented story of the *Eastland* Disaster in hopes of raising it to that level of myth.\(^\text{11}\)

Bonansinga is also primarily motivated to sell a book with a good story. The biggest challenge Bonansinga faced when conceptualizing *The Sinking of the Eastland* was finding a hero to follow throughout his narrative. Bonansinga stated that in order for a story to be successful, it needed a hero, “a character that the reader identifies with. Without a hero, there is no narrative.”\(^\text{12}\) Having a protagonist for his story supports his mission to create the *Eastland* mythology.

While researching the *Eastland*, Bonansinga met Ted and Barb Wachholz of the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society. The couple aided Bonansinga with his research, including helping identify potential characters for his narrative. In his search for his main character, Bonansinga learned that not all organizations were open to his potential use of survivor stories. While the Wachholz Family aided Bonansinga with every request to find more information, Dave Nelson was proprietary of the oral histories in his possession, including Libby Hruby’s. Nelson “claimed he owned this poor old woman’s [story]. She was a survivor and I was going to talk to her, but . . . Dave Nelson, said he owned the rights to her story.”\(^\text{13}\) Bonansinga’s statement about Nelson’s ownership of Libby Hruby’s story is indicative of Nelson’s personal relationship with the survivor. As stated in Chapter Three, Nelson is possessive of Hruby’s story because he felt that she was as dear to him as his own mother. In order to continue writing, Bonansinga chose

\(^\text{12}\) Bonansinga interview.  
\(^\text{13}\) Bonansinga interview.
to focus his main character on Bobbie Aanstad, the teenaged grandmother of Barb
Wachholz.

Bonansinga’s selection helped shaped public memory of the disaster. His use of
Bobbie Aanstad as his central character makes his story relatable. In the book, the
character of Bobbie stays true to the memory of Barb Wachholz’s grandmother. She is a
young and adventurous girl who looks forward to this special day on the lake. Her
experience of the *Eastland* Disaster and the story of her emotional survival is what the
reader will remember.

Bonansinga’s supporting characters also shape the way the reader will
remember the event. He selects other people to exemplify the great tragedy of the day.
This selectivity has created a sense that the *Eastland* Disaster is about more than just
the event itself, but it is about the importance of the individual experiences of that day.
This approach helps personalize the story, but is ultimately unsuccessful in fully
achieving Bonansinga’s goal. *The Sinking of the Eastland* does not fully elevate the
disaster to the level of myth, but it is a stepping stone.

Bonansinga emphasizes the individual stories of the disaster because he
believes that an emotional connection to the story helps create a myth. The stories he
writes all weave together to tell the story of a Chicago hit by incredible disaster, an
event that brought an entire city to a standstill and into mourning. The Chicago Fire is a
great tale of the physical death and rebirth of a city into a great metropolis. The
*Eastland* Disaster is the tale of immense loss, not only of life but of the spirit of an entire
city. An entire city mourned the loss of 844 souls and struggled with the ability to find
reason in their deaths. There was no physical rebirth of the city like that following the Fire; as the families grieved, time passed and the city moved on.

In addition to Bobbie Aanstad, one of the most intriguing stories that Bonansinga tells is that of “Little Feller” or Willie Novotny. As described in Chapter One, Novotny’s story was detailed in the Chicago newspapers because his body lay unclaimed for days after the disaster. Bonansinga declares of the Novotny funeral, “No single event would capture the misery and grief of those days more powerfully than a funeral that occurred one week after the capsizing.”

Thousands of people, including boys from surrounding Bohemian schools, attended the Novotny funeral to honor the dead. Bonansinga uses this moment to emphasize the drama in his narrative: “One of the scouts stepped out of rank and raised a bugle to his lips. As the quavering, childish rendition of taps echoed across the mourners, a low din of sobs nearly drowned the music.”

This moment is an emotional peak in Bonansinga’s narrative. The death of a child is extremely sad, but this particularly sad moment is an opportunity for the reader to form a prosthetic memory of the disaster.

After the initial reporting of “Little Feller’s” story had faded, Willie Novotny’s story was rarely mentioned publicly for several decades. While the majority of families active in keeping the Eastland disaster alive are descendants of survivors or rescuers, Willie’s story survives because of the sad nature of his death.

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14 Bonansinga, Sinking of the Eastland, 208.

15 Bonansinga, Sinking of the Eastland, 209.

16 A search of online newspaper archives confirms this. Willie Novotny is not mentioned after 1915.
Written in the aftermath of 9/11, *The Sinking of the Eastland* is a reflection of the nation’s attitude toward the emergency response that came after the September 11 terror attacks. Victims, survivors, first responders, families, and funeral directors are represented in Bonansinga’s narrative. Historian Marita Sturken labels this phenomenon as reenactment. Reenactment is a means to process and make sense of a traumatic event. It is possible, though Bonansinga does not state this in his oral history, that *The Sinking of the Eastland* is Bonansinga’s attempt to process the trauma of 9/11 by writing and framing another traumatic event that involved the same type of characters. In this way *The Sinking of the Eastland* serves a tripartite purpose: it is Bonansinga’s personal processing of trauma, a constructed narrative that shapes the memory of the disaster for the reader, and aims to sell books.\(^\text{17}\)

Reggie Bowles, a first responder, experienced the real effects of risking his life to rescue and recover bodies in the Chicago River. He rushed to the scene after hearing about the disaster from a friend and recovered bodies for hours before firefighters physically restrained him. He later contracted typhoid from ingesting river water.\(^\text{18}\) Otto Muchna, a funeral director, was shocked at the horror of the disaster and the realization that there were not enough caskets for the deceased that day. Bonansinga bases his narrative from Muchna’s grandson’s recollections of his grandfather and father’s memories of the day. As an undertaker, Muchna held the very important role of helping grieving families find closure after a loved one’s death. In the aftermath of the disaster, Muchna answered the call of several of his neighbors to fetch the identified bodies of


their kin. Bonansinga wrote, “Otto felt as tired as his horse, but Muchna, ever the perfectionist, refused to give up or to neglect a call from a family in need. These were the relatives of neighbors and fellow Bohemians. Compounding these considerations was the unexpected crisis within Otto’s westside community. They were running out of caskets.”

*The Sinking of the Eastland* received mostly positive reviews, although Beverly A. Smith of Illinois State University felt that Bonansinga “unnecessarily sacrifices verisimilitude for drama.” In contrast, Mark Sorensen, formerly of the Illinois State Archives, believes that Bonansinga’s work achieves its primary entertainment purpose with the added benefit of being historically factual. Bonansinga is careful to note in his prose areas where his facts are not as clear. In places where dialogue occurs, Bonansinga noted he had taken artistic liberty for the sake of the story, or took lines directly from newsprint. This achieves Bonansinga’s goal to write something entertaining, and spread awareness about the historic event he grew up knowing nothing about.

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Merely Dee

In 2012, another Eastland-themed novel emerged. Merely Dee, written by Marian Manseau Cheatham. It is different from Bonansinga’s narrative nonfiction because Manseau created characters who were not actual people involved in the disaster, or involved in the tragedy. It follows Delia Pageau, a teenage girl, excited for the Western Electric Employee Picnic and the opportunity to become better acquainted with the object of her affection, a young man named Karel Koznecki. At the beginning of the story, Delia sets out from her home on the morning of July 24, 1915. She is excited for the chance to spend time with her girlhood crush and best friend Mae’s brother, Karel. The first person narrative of the story captures the excitement and anticipation that most young people working at Western Electric would have felt that day. As Delia states, “This outing was really the only way a hardworking girl could meet a fella.”

The story turns as Delia, Mae, and Karel are separated when Dee’s mother runs to catch up with them on their walk to the Chicago River docks with a warning of “mort,” or death if Dee continued on her trip. Dee ponders the warning, but decides to defy her mother and catch up with her friends who are trying to catch the first boat to Michigan City. At the docks, Dee is the last person to board the Eastland, and is able to find her friends before the boat begins to lean. Dee and Karel, happy to have found each other, move to the top deck on the order of crew. Mae is last seen dancing a foxtrot on the dance floor of the main deck when the boat starts to lean even more toward port. When the boat capsizes, Karel saves Dee from falling into the water by pulling her over the railing and on to the hull of the boat. Mae is nowhere to be found. As Karel jumps in to

save others, Dee is left at the dock and is about to jump in herself when Lars Nielsen, an *Eastland* crewmember, grabs her arm and saves her a second time.

As the story progresses, Dee and Karel discover in the temporary morgue of the Second Armory that Mae drowned in the disaster. Cheatham’s description of an entire community in mourning is gripping and stays true to the spirit of the historic accounts of *Eastland* funerals and wakes. Cheatham writes as Dee and her mother leave their home in Cicero for visitations, “A swell of people flooded the sidewalks on both sides of the street. Hundreds upon hundreds of mourners all dressed in their Sunday-best had turned out for the visitations.”

Though Cheatham takes care to convey the sadness of the week of funerals, she misses an opportunity to highlight the real families who were lost entirely, like the Sindelars or Novotnys, and instead uses fictional people in her narrative.

In addition, Cheatham’s story of teenage love muddles the history of the disaster. In the midst of her best friend’s wake, Dee is confronted by Karel and the dreamy stranger, Lars Nielsen, who finds her on the street outside the Koznecki home. Dee is forced to choose between the two young men after they both ask her on a date. The novel ends with Dee picking neither Lars nor Karel, but choosing to go back to work at Western Electric as Assistant Chief of the Coiling Department.

Author Marian Manseau Cheatham was inspired by her grandmother’s close encounter with the disaster. “My Grandma Manseau had a ticket to that picnic, but the night before the big event, my great grandmother had a premonition of danger and begged my grandmother to stay home. Grandma Manseau listened to her mother and

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remained safely at home, but my character Dee Pageau does not obey her mother and
sneaks off to the picnic. And of course, she finds herself aboard the *Eastland* on the
morning of the historic disaster." Cheatham’s young adult literature is significant
because, though her work is mostly fictional, it exposes a younger audience to the
history of the *Eastland*.

The literary social media website GoodReads lists *Merely Dee* with an average
rating of 4.17 stars out of five. The reviews, posted by readers, are favorable, but most
comment on the history of the disaster. In a March 2014 review posted by a user named
Jane, “I was curious about the event that this story is about. A tragedy as big as what
they say should have been more prevalent in Illinois history. As someone who grew up
in Illinois, I was surprised that I had not heard more about this. Intending to learn what I
could, I began the story knowing that at least one of the characters would have to die. It
is a sorrowful book because it is about a true tragedy.” Jane awarded *Merely Dee* with
four stars.

In her Author’s Notes, Cheatham thanks the Center for History for their
assistance and access to the *Eastland* Disaster collection. Though she does not
expressly thank the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society, she does recommend Ted
Wachholz’s book for those readers who may want more information about the disaster.
Cheatham also recommends Bonansinga’s *The Sinking of the Eastland: America’s

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Forgotten Tragedy and George Hilton’s Eastland: Legacy of the Titanic. Wheaton and EDHS’ participation in Cheatham’s work is important to know because it shows the level of influence and assistance they provided to aid her own storytelling of the Eastland Disaster. By providing assistance, they are fulfilling their own missions to make the wider public aware of the tragedy and grow public memory.

Published by iUniverse, Inc., Merely Dee has reached a very small audience. Aside from its reviews on sites like Goodreads and Amazon.com, its impact on the general public has been difficult to ascertain. In 2014, Cheatham reissued Merely Dee with a new publisher and new title, Eastland: A Novel. The chief difference between Merely Dee and Eastland: A Novel is the first chapter. The characters and plot are the same, but more time is spent in the first chapter developing the backstory of Dee and Mae’s characters as Western Electric employees.

Cheatham has a larger audience with her blog and Facebook page, Everyday Eastland. Launched in Summer 2014, Everyday Eastland is part of the larger ChicagoNow blog site, which features Chicago-themed blogs ranging in topics from lifestyle to food. Cheatham’s posts aim to connect the disaster to greater themes in popular culture, attempting to broaden the typical audience the Eastland Disaster draws. In one post, “Eastland Nearly Killed Da Bears!”, Cheatham shares the story of

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27 Cheatham, Merely Dee, 185.


George “Papa Bear” Halas, the famed organizer of the American Football League and founder of the Chicago Bears. Halas had a ticket for the Western Electric picnic, but arrived at the dock just after the boat capsized. He was delayed by a weigh-in for his college football team. Halas credits his brother for making him go to the weigh-in, saving his life, and ultimately leading him to a career in professional football. Much like Karl Sup’s first Eastland Disaster website and the Eastland Disaster Historical Society’s online manifest, Cheatham’s blog posts have the potential to relate the tragedy to a wider audience, creating awareness of the event where readers may not necessarily be looking for information about the disaster, but learn about it anyway. Now, almost twenty years after the first Eastland website launched, awareness of the tragedy is also growing on the Internet.

On the 99th anniversary of the disaster, Cheatham and parapsychology enthusiast, Eursula Bielski organized the first Eastland-themed ghost tour. The five hour tour featured stops at Hawthorne Plaza in Cicero, Illinois; Bohemian National Cemetery, where the greatest number of Eastland victims are buried in Section 16; St. Adalbert’s Cemetery, the burial site of George Halas; Oprah Winfrey’s Harpo Studios in downtown Chicago; and finally, the site of the disaster at the LaSalle Street Bridge. The tour was intended to interest Chicagoans and tourists who may have had a prior interest in the disaster, and possibly a particular interest in the paranormal. From the online promotion


of the event, Tour 99 operated completely independent from the established historical societies. Ghost tours like Cheatham’s have the potential to slide into the realm of popular entertainment, but these tours also have the ability to draw in a new audience that may not have known about the Eastland Disaster and having an impact on public memory of the event. By visiting historically significant sites, even with a slant toward “ghost hunting,” tour attendees are exposed to the personal, private stories of Eastland Disaster victims, survivors, and rescuers. If the tour strikes an emotional chord with the attendee, it is possible the stories shared will form prosthetic memories.

So Weird

Much like the young adult novel Merely Dee, So Weird is dramatic and superficial, but exposes the disaster to a different audience that may not have learned about it otherwise. The Eastland Disaster was the subject of a thirty-minute episode of the 1999 children’s program So Weird. In the premiere episode of the series, “Family Reunion,” the main character Fiona “Fi” Phillips, investigates paranormal activity in the nightclub where her mother’s band performs. During her investigation, Fi discovers that the nightclub was actually used as a temporary morgue after the Eastland Disaster. She then uses the information she gathers from her research to help the ghost boy from the nightclub “cross over.” So Weird was a Disney Channel show that ran for three seasons beginning in 1999 and ending in 2001. It was targeted for a preteen audience.\(^\text{32}\)

So Weird’s inaugural episode not only introduced the series’ theme of the paranormal, but it is also a commentary on memory after death. In an emotional scene between Fi and her brother Jack, Jack yells, “When you die, you’re history! You never come back! You’re gone forever!” Fi’s response: “I’ll never believe that.” Jack’s retort: “It doesn’t matter what you believe, it doesn’t change anything.” Fi believes that after death, as long as family is there to remember you, your memory always lives on. In the episode, the ghost of a little boy appears in the nightclub in which her mother plays with her band. Upon further investigation, Fi discovers that the ghost of the little boy is nameless and his ghost haunts the nightclub because no one came to claim his body after the disaster. Later in the episode, as she is investigating the ghost, Fi enters the attic of the building where the ghost makes furniture move and the room rock as if it is the inside of a boat. As she grips the wall for support she sees other ghosts grab at a railing and yell for help, just as Eastland victims would have done. She then sees the little boy, grabs for his hand and instead grabs his jacket. Fi’s brother asks, “What did you find?” Fi responds, “A name.” Fi discovers the boy’s name is Brian McGuelly and after reading through the list of the drowned, she matches him with his parents who are also victims.  

This content was heavy material for the Disney Channel, but the overarching themes of family, memory, and love helped the viewer understand the history of the disaster in an age-appropriate way. The imagery of the room turning over and the ghosts grasping to hold onto railings was an emotional trigger that portrays to the

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audience the terrible, awful moment for so many families that were separated or perished entirely on the day of the disaster. This So Weird episode was the first of many to address memory and is considered one of the darkest dramas the channel produced in the early 2000s, but its attempt to capture a preteen audience is no less significant than Cheatham’s Merely Dee, and shares the history of the Eastland Disaster with an audience much larger than Cheatham’s novel might have reached.  

Andrew White and Eastland: A New Musical

In June 2012, the Lookingglass Theater in Chicago, Illinois, premiered Eastland: A New Musical. The musical focused on the real-life characters from Jay Bonansinga’s narrative nonfiction work, The Sinking of the Eastland: America’s Forgotten Tragedy. Eastland: A New Musical is written by Andrew White, Artistic Director of the Lookingglass Theater Company. A transplant from Los Angeles, White moved to Chicago to attend Northwestern University in 1983, but had never learned about the disaster until 2004 when he saw a documentary about it on WKTY.  

After reading The Sinking of the Eastland, White knew he had a potential story:

I read his [Bonansinga’s] book the Sinking of the Eastland: America’s Forgotten Tragedy . . . Of course the subtitle, “America’s forgotten Tragedy” certainly set that idea up for me. It’s something that I was acutely aware of, but I had never heard of this thing . . . No one I knew had ever heard of this thing.  


35 Andrew White interview with Caitlyn Dial, September 24, 2012.

36 Andrew White interview.
White and Bonansinga met while attending a function at their respective children’s school in Evanston, Illinois. White felt that the story could be told as some sort of musical. In 2005, he wrote what was the first draft of the song “The Green and Gold” which followed the imagery of a beloved gold pocket watch sinking in the green of the Chicago River.\(^37\)

\(^37\) White interview.
Figure 13 - The cover of Eastland: A New Musical playbill, June 2012
The first production of the play was at a Millennium Park event called, “In the Works.” At this event, theater productions still in the draft phase could test their material in front of a live audience. White submitted “Eastland: A New Musical” to the “In the Works” series in 2011. The production came away from the experience with good feedback and confidence that the final product would be ready for a June 2012 premiere.38

White’s work supports Jay Bonansinga’s desire to raise the *Eastland* Disaster into Chicago mythology. Through his selection of characters and story, White sought to evoke an emotional response from his audience in order to imprint the importance of the Disaster in the minds of his audience. His attempt to create prosthetic memory leads his audience, who may not have prior memory of the event, to leave the theater feeling connected to the history of the *Eastland*. From beginning to end, the process of writing *Eastland: A New Musical* took seven years. It premiered on June 6, 2012.

*Eastland: A New Musical* opened to fairly positive reviews. Barbara Vitello of the *Chicago Daily Herald* raved that the production “reminds us” of the fragility of life and the ease in which we forget our local history.39 Critics as far away as Toronto, Ontario, felt the production added value to the historical understanding the city of Chicago, “The new musical has a minimal script. Despite that, the show is memorable and affecting, thanks to a wonderful cast and score by Andrew Pluess and Ben Sussman. This

38 White interview.

unusual show also adds an important chapter to our understanding of what Chicago went through on the way to becoming the great and glittering city we see today.”

Chris Jones of the Chicago Tribune gave Eastland: A New Musical three stars. Jones felt the production was muddy and pretentious in certain areas of the plot, but his review agrees with other critics, the musical hauntingly reminds the viewer of the fragility of memory.

Lou Harry of the Indianapolis Business Journal noted that the musical left him “shaken” and that the production was a reminder of how heroes are remembered. “A hero? Yes, this show has one - sort of. But he exists in a real world where even jaw-dropping acts of courage and selflessness are quickly forgotten while showboating celebrities (here personified by Harry Houdini) are burned into the public consciousness. I don’t know about you, but I can’t name any of the heroic people who ran into the World Trade Center.”

In the musical, Reggie Bowles is the “Human Frog,” an ambitious young man who strived for the level of fame of his idol, Harry Houdini. In real life, Reggie was just as ambitious though it is not certain whether he idolized the magician. On the morning of the disaster, Reggie rushed to the scene on a motorcycle and dove into the water. He


42 Lou Harry, “Chicago second to none as theater town: I love New York. But, frankly, there are more exciting offerings in the alleged ‘Second City,’ Indianapolis Business Journal (June 25, 2012), 25A.
pulled forty bodies from the Chicago River until firemen at the riverside physically restrained him. After hours of recovering bodies, Reggie contracted typhoid from ingesting the water of the river.

In the musical, the Houdini character serves as a reminder of the cruelty of memory for real life heroes like Reggie:

HOUDINI
So sad, Reggie Bowles
But it doesn’t matter
If you beat my record or not
The Great Houdini
Shall live forever!
While you will be forgot

Well, well done, Reggie Bowles
You’ll have one day of fame
Then your memory will vanish in fog
In just a few years
No one will know
The brave deeds of the Human Frog
Just like the boat
Your name will vanish in mist
While forever
We live on
Who are by fortune kissed
So goodbye, Reggie Bowles
Good work, today
I hope you enjoyed your swim
But your fame’s come and gone
Now it’s time to move on
And so your brief spotlight dims.  

The real life Reggie Bowles had a rocky life. He married four times, held several jobs, had several children, and died relatively unknown. His family carried on his heroic story

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with an iconic photograph that was taken just moments after firemen pulled Reggie out of the water.\textsuperscript{44}

Andrew White also uses the story of Willie Novotny to strike at the emotions of his audience. Using the information shared in Bonansinga’s work, White embellishes Willie’s story for dramatic effect. In the musical, the audience is introduced to Ilsa, a beautiful young woman who is wide-eyed and hopeful about her future as she reads books and imagines an “extraordinary light” in her life. In the song, “Ilse Part Two,” the

\textsuperscript{44} Bonansinga, \textit{Sinking of the Eastland}, 238.
audience learns that Ilsa is pushed into an ordinary life of work at Western Electric. There, she meets a man who is “good enough” and marries him. She realizes in this sequence that life is just filled with “ordinary light.” She grows bored with her life until the birth of her first child, a boy she names William. Throughout this song and as her story progresses during the musical, the audience never learns their family surname.

William is an invisible character in the musical. The audience learns about him through the lyrics of the songs and by pantomime gestures Ilse and other actors make in the play. Ilse and William’s relationship is fictional. In reality, William Novotny’s mother’s name is Agnes.

Ilse’s story continues as she fades back into an ordinary life. She is bored with her husband, and on an innocent outing with her son, she begins a flirtation with a grocer. This new relationship leads Ilse to discover that “extraordinary light” again in her life. Her new love is forbidden, but it is sweet. As her story continues, her dedication to her son and her desire for happiness consumes her. On the day of the disaster, Ilse and her family board Eastland and gather at the rails to view the crowd saying goodbye. Just as the boat begins to lean, Ilse sees her grocer in the crowd and waves. As she says goodbye to her lover, she lets go of William’s hand and the boat capsizes.

After the boat capsizes, Ilse panics and is frantic when Reggie Bowles attempts to rescue her. She begs him to leave her and look for her son. Reggie assures her that the “Human Frog” will not fail her. In the song, “Reggie 3,” Reggie finds young William in the water:

REGGIE
Nothing down here
_Back up towards the up_
_To the green greener—_
Wait. Stop.
*A flash of gold
Boy of seven
Maybe eight
Around his neck
Shining like
A firefly
A gold medallion
Oh mama
You were wrong
Jesus Christ
Is merciful
*But not today
Still and all
She'll be glad
To have him back
Even if
It’s just to bury\(^{45}\)

As Reggie reaches the surface, the boy is declared “Boy Three Ninety-Six.” People familiar with the history of the *Eastland* Disaster know exactly who the boy is without having his last name revealed. The aftermath of the disaster continues into the song, “A Small Mystery:"

**REGGIE**
For days afterward, a small mystery
A tiny footnote to this strange history:
Lying among the dead and the maimed
A perfect little body remained unclaimed
Perhaps once prone to mischievous tricks
Now simply known as:
Boy Three Ninety-Six…

**MUSICIAN 7**
No one knew his face or his name
Or why his parents never came
To find this boy with the prominent ears,
Thin-boned, perhaps of seven years
But where was his mother? Did nobody tell her?
Until, one day, an old woman came by.

\(^{45}\) *Eastland: A New Musical*, 69-70.
GRANDMOTHER
Sorry to trouble you, but my
Neighbor’s boys told me they’d been
Down here to the parlor
They said they’d seen
My William here, my dear grand-baby
I don’t want to see him
Just tell me if maybe

(She holds out a pair of Knickerbocker pants)

His picnic suit
It came with two pair
So if these match
The ones that he’s wearing

MUSICIAN 7
She didn’t need proof.
She already knew.
His parents were lost
And now the boy, too.
All on the boat,
As she soon explained:
Of the whole family
Only she remained.
But now, at least, the boy had a name.

OTTO
Boy three ninety-six

GRANDMOTHER
William Novotny46

This moment is the height of sadness in the musical. The actors rest for a few beats, as if to give a moment of silence for the boy.

Though the family structure of Willie Novotny is fictionalized in the musical, the way he is identified is factual. Willie’s grandmother was the sole survivor of their family unit. She identified him at the funeral home with the extra pair of pants she purchased

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46 Eastland: A New Musical, 74-75.
with his brand new picnic suit. After learning the name of Boy Three Ninety-Six, the audience is left with an image of a precocious boy, whose life is cut short because of the disaster. White’s use of Novotny’s story and building him into an invisible character is instrumental in constructing prosthetic memory of the disaster for the audience.

White uses invisible characters of the musical to emphasize the deep emotion of the event and its impact on memory. In addition to Willie Novotny, the Chicago River is an invisible character used to frame the tragedy for the characters. The songs, “Only the River Remains” and “Into the River” are sung by the musical’s entire company and convey to the audience that the river has a long history of carrying away secrets, stories, and memories of the things thrown into it. The first stanza of “Into the River” describes the virgin riverscape, untouched by humans. Yet, the body of water already kept secrets:

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It’s hard to believe
Before clay and concrete
Locks and canals
And alleys and streets
For centuries
The reeds and trees lined
A place where deer drank
And raccoons dined
Fed by three streams
The current was steady
The Indians watched
The whirlpools and eddies
To see where the perch
Played and slept
Learning the secrets
That this river kept
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48 *Eastland: A New Musical*, 37.
The song continues along the life of the Chicago River from Jean-Baptiste DuSable to the beginnings of industrialization. The song reminds the audience that once settlers arrived at the Chicago frontier, the river became a means of removal of all disposable things. At the end of the musical, the entire cast gathers together as souls rising from the wreckage to sing the last verse of “Only the River Remains,”

   And only the river remains
   The river remains
   Ain’t no heaven above
   Ain’t no fire down below
   And this whole damn thing is over
   Far faster than we know
   The photos will fade and the pages will rot
   All of us here will soon be forgotten
   The rest of us rises, like smoke, like steam
   Gone in a flash like a dream.
   And only the river remains
   Everything else fades away
   All of our losses and all of our gains
   Gone at the end of the day
   And only the river remains
   The river remains.
   Only the river remains
   Everything else fades away
   Our fallings and failings, our hopes and our fears
   The lies and the cries and the laughter and tears
   Every secret and memory we’ve held through the years
   Gone at the end of the day
   And only the river remains
   The river remains

White’s use of the river as an invisible character can be considered a metaphor of the impermanence of memory. Within a moving body of water, unless it is anchored to something, an object can be swept away and forgotten. The Eastland Disaster is forgotten because the river of memory has swept it away. No one had anchored the

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49 *Eastland: A New Musical*, 76.
Eastland Disaster in Chicago public memory. After the city moves on and the boat is moved, only the river remains.

The Eastland Disaster Historical Society made themselves available as a resource to Andrew White and the Lookingglass Theater throughout the creative and production process. White stated:

I had lots of interaction with the Eastland Disaster Historical Society. Ted [Wachholz] . . . made himself very available very early on . . . He had lots of information and collected material that we could have access to if I wanted, and of course his wife as featured, as his wife’s grandmother was a prominent character in the play. In terms of being able to ask her questions as to what she knew . . . It was extraordinary to know that they were available and I found them to be very willing and enthusiastic partners.50

Ted Wachholz’s book, The Eastland Disaster, also provided many of the details needed for White to write the musical. Many of Barb’s memories of her grandmother helped White write the musical’s main character, Bobbie, who is based on her grandmother, Borghild Aanstad.

White also allowed the Eastland Fellowship Authority and the Wheaton Center for History’s Chief Executive Officer, Alberta Adamson, to create an exhibit for the theater’s visitor’s center while the musical was playing. White stated, “It was a good opportunity for them [to reach a wider audience]. It was an amazing opportunity for us to be able to draw on their expertise and their depth of experience with it [the disaster].”51

Although the Center for History did not participate in the early creative stages of the musical, Adamson and the Center took the opportunity to share their mission through public programming about the Eastland Disaster before select shows.

50 White interview.
51 White interview.
On Saturday, July 21, 2012 the Eastland Disaster Historical Society organized the 97th Anniversary memorial service at the site of the disaster. Several cast members of the musical attended the ceremony and performed “A Summoning” and “Only the River Remains.” After the cast performed “A Summoning,” EDHS President Ted Wachholz read a letter from a survivor addressed the day after the disaster, which described the horrifying scene the author of the letter saw.

Figure 15 - Members of the Coast Guard salute after placing a wreath at the site of the Eastland Disaster. July 21, 2012. Author's photograph.

After Wachholz’s reading, a U.S. Coast Guard vessel made its way up the river and circled the site. The boat idled in the middle of the river; three Coast Guard officers placed a bouquet of flowers in the water, and saluted. The solemn moment was then

52 Author’s notes and photographs from the ceremony.
followed by silence on the riverfront. Andrew White also spoke at the event, thanking
the attendees and marking the importance of the event with the new musical. The
ceremony ended with the cast members singing “Only the River Remains.” Several
descendants of survivors and victims of the disaster attended the riverside ceremony,
including the great nephew of Reggie Bowles, the “Human Frog.”

Later that day, Lookingglass Theater presented a special production of the
musical in honor of the 97th anniversary. Alberta Adamson of the Wheaton Center for
History presented a short program before the musical, which detailed the rescue and
recovery efforts made by emergency responders and riverside bystanders. After the
production, White and Ted Wachholz held a brief question and answer session, which
focused on the history and memory of the disaster. During the panel, White and
Wachholz asked if there were any victims or survivor families in the audience and
opened the discussion to their personal stories. This interaction personalized the
musical for several members of the audience. When asked why the disaster may have
been left to fade into memory, an audience member answered, “The immigrant
experience was more important than dwelling on tragedy.”

Several questions and
answers from the session discussed the lives of the real people whom several of the
characters were based.


54 Through the musical’s entire run Lookingglass Theatre scheduled free panel
discussions after the Sunday matinee shows. Panel discussions focused on a variety of
topics relating to the disaster and were free to the public. Author’s notes from the pre
and post sessions of the July 21, 2012 production of Eastland: A New Musical.
By the end of August 2012, 15,537 people saw *Eastland: A New Musical* at The Lookingglass Theater. Among these ticket holders were Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his family. Although he did not give a statement about the show, his presence toward the end of the musical’s run at the Lookingglass Theater indicates its significance.

When asked about the impact of art and culture on memory, White believed that theater, specifically the musical, had the potential to effect change:

I think it has at least a temporary impact on memory. Maybe there is an outside chance that if Rahm Emanuel saw this show, maybe Ted [Wachholz] will have a better shot a more enduring memorial at the site then he did beforehand. Maybe? Maybe not? I have no idea. It would be awesome if he did because of the show. Which in turn would have an additional ripple of memory, it would produce more longevity if there was a more permanent thing [at the site]. The thing about theatre is that, unlike a painting, or even a piece of music is that it’s temporal it goes away.

Rahm Emanuel had visited the musical when the author interviewed Andrew White. Months later, Emanuel announced plans for the Riverwalk Project which includes plans to interpret the site of the Eastland Disaster. Emanuel did not state the musical had any impact on his decision to help the project move forward. White makes an interesting

55 White interview.

56 Eastland Disaster Historical Society Facebook page. On August 15, 2012, Mayor Rahm Emanuel casually met EDHS President, Ted Wachholz in the lobby of the theater. Later, Wachholz sent Emanuel a copy of his book *The Eastland Disaster* and a DVD of the WTTW documentary about the ship. Mayor Emanuel’s office sent the EDHS a letter of thanks for the gift and indicated that the two items would be place in the City’s gift log. [https://www.facebook.com/EastlandDisaster/timeline](https://www.facebook.com/EastlandDisaster/timeline)

57 White interview.

comment about the impermanence of memory in theater. While *Eastland: A New Musical* was a successful production for Lookingglass Theater, the play had a small window in which to have an impact on Chicago public memory. This does not detract from the effect the play had on its actual audience and their potential to create a prosthetic memory of the disaster.

As of August 2014, there are no plans to take *Eastland: A New Musical* to a national audience. Although the musical was well received at the Chicago theater, White believes that the lack of knowledge of the disaster beyond the region would hinder the play from success outside of the market.59

Jay Bonansinga believes that *Eastland: A New Musical* helps bring the disaster into Chicago mythology. When asked about how he felt about the musical, Bonansinga stated, “The play is everything I had always dreamed of.”60 His statement about the musical is his own determination of the *Eastland* Disaster in Chicago mythology. While thousands of Chicago residents and visitors saw the musical, how the incident impressed on their memories is hard to determine. Nonetheless, Bonansinga believes that the musical helped the incident move into the realm of Chicago mythology.

At the end of the musical, Bobbie Aanstad, as portrayed by Claire Wellin, reminds the audience of their purpose when she hauntingly sings:

*So all we can do
Beneath these poor stars
Is sit and tell each other*

59 The production is seeing life outside of the Chicago area. In 2013, Baldwin Wallace University’s Musical Theater Class of 2015 performed a medley of *Eastland: A New Musical* songs. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsEXHTXG6SY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsEXHTXG6SY) (Accessed August 27, 2014).

60 Bonansinga interview.
These stories of ours
Sing them aloud
In pitiful chorus
The stories of those
Who’ve gone along before us
But tell me, is there any better way to pass the time?
Is there any better way to pass the time?  

Claire’s soft sign-off tells the audience that they have just witnessed a terrible, important event and the only way to make sure that it remains in memory is to share the story. As Bonansinga pondered in his oral history interview, “Could there be any other way to spend your time telling your story of something that happened for future generations? So it’s never lost? It’s part of the fabric of who we are, and the play touches on that at the very end. Which it just blew my head off, it was so beautiful and right and perfect the way it ended.” Andrew White created a myth with his musical, and charges the audience with the responsibility of sharing their experience with others when they leave.

Bonansinga’s and White’s conclusions about myth and public memory signify that familial storytelling and public memory are inextricably linked. Throughout the entire twentieth century, public memory of the disaster was practically nonexistent except for few reminders published in local newspapers near the anniversary and a small historic marker at the site. Memory of the Eastland Disaster survived through the personal and private memories of victims and survivors of the tragedy. These stories, shared within the confines of the family unit, survived two generations before finding a broader public audience in the twenty-first century. Traumatic memories, supported through historical documentation, are now part of the official narrative of the disaster.

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61 *Eastland: A New Musical*, 76-77.

62 Bonansinga interview.
Bonansinga, Cheatham, the So Weird episode, and White have added their own contributions, fictional and nonfictional, to the official narrative of the disaster. They have aided the missions of EDHS and the Eastland Fellowship Authority by sharing stories and emphasizing their missions to make the Eastland Disaster an important part of the public memory. Their works are emotional, and have the possibility of creating prosthetic memory of the disaster within the minds of their audience.

Jay Bonansinga and Andrew White both believe that in order for the Eastland Disaster to be remembered it must be made into a myth - like the Great Chicago Fire. While their works have been instrumental in creating awareness of the tragedy, Eastland has yet to establish itself as an iconic event in history, and has not raised itself to the level of “myth” that Bonansinga and White sought. During the 100th anniversary commemorations, awareness of the disaster reached a level not seen since the day of the tragedy, but outside of the Chicago region, the event remains a footnote in public memory. Still, with the continued efforts of Eastland Disaster descendants to share theirs and others’ personal memories, awareness of the tragedy may continue to grow as time moves forward.
CONCLUSION

The Eastland Disaster 100 Years Later

In July 2015, Chicago, the Midwest, and the surrounding Great Lakes region took notice of the centennial of the disaster with news coverage unseen since the disaster itself. In the month leading up to the anniversary weekend, the Chicago Tribune and area newspapers printed stories, shared events, and released new materials discovered in local archives. Television stations reached out to Eastland Disaster Historical Society Executive Director Ted Wachholz for on camera interviews, disseminating the history of the disaster to a broad audience. A few of these stories shared family histories and local connections of the disaster. In Duluth, Minnesota, the Duluth News Tribune shared a story of the city’s connection of the disaster through rescuer John O’Meara, captain of the tugboat Kenosha. O’Meara wedged the tugboat between the Eastland and the dock to create a bridge to safety.1 Interestingly, it took a century for O’Meara’s hometown newspaper to report his participation in the rescue efforts of the disaster.

During the weekend of July 24, I attended several commemorative events in Chicago. The Eastland Memorial Society (inactive but came to Chicago for the event), Eastland Fellowship Authority, and Wheaton Center for History organized a ceremony at the site of the disaster at 10 a.m. on July 24. At this ceremony, Dave Nelson welcomed attendees with a brief introduction about the disaster and the plans for the

1 Mike Creger, “Neighbors: Duluth home’s history includes a hero of the Eastland maritime disaster,” Duluth News Tribune, July 26, 2015.
morning’s ceremony. Alderman Edward M. Burke, Chicago’s longest serving alderman, gave historical commentary of that day’s importance and shared the story of Dave Nelson’s grandfather. The ceremony was based largely on recognizing the efforts of Eastland Disaster rescuers with remembrances from Nelson, Frank Jeffers, and Andrew Johnsen, all grandsons of Eastland heroes. The event continued with a flag tribute to the Coast Guard, Chicago Police and Fire Departments as they idled in their respective boats in the river. Nelson also shared plans for an Eastland Disaster monument at the site of the catastrophe.

Figure 16 - At the 10 a.m. ceremony, Dave Nelson led with his own retelling of his grandfather's experience as a rescuer. He led the remainder of the morning's ceremony.

In January 2015, Nelson presented his plan to the City of Chicago, and the City Council passed a resolution approving a monument at the site. They resolved to review
by committee a plan for commemorative bronze artwork to be installed along the south bank of the Riverwalk. However, the monument was not erected by the July centenary.  

In keeping with their history, the two major historical groups that focus on the Eastland Disaster organized separate events and did not recognize the other during the day’s events.

The Eastland Disaster Historical Society organized an entire weekend of activities, which focused on bringing together families of Eastland descendants for a family reunion-like event. EDHS’s first event of the weekend honored the victims, survivors, and rescuers of the disaster with a riverside ceremony similar to Nelson’s earlier in the day. The ceremony, also held at the Riverwalk Theatre between Clark and LaSalle Streets, included comments from Alderman Burke regarding the importance of the event in Chicago’s history and how after a century the public cannot let the event slip back into obscurity. The ceremony held on July 24th focused primarily on the first responders of the Eastland Disaster and ended with a flower tribute on the river placed by representatives from the Coast Guard and Chicago’s Police and Fire Departments.

On the morning of July 25, 2015, EDHS organized a riverboat tour for guests who purchased tickets in advance. The boat docked at the site of the disaster and loaded passengers where Western Electric Company employees and their families did so one hundred years and a day earlier. As a participant in the event, I can say that this moment was particularly moving. Many of the passengers on the boat that morning were descendants of Eastland survivors and rescuers, a few of whom were also

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2 City of Chicago, Tribute extended to victims and survivors of capsizing of S.S. Eastland and call for approval of plan of review by committee for commemorative bronze artwork to be positioned along south bank of Riverwalk on 100th year commemoration, Resolution (January 21, 2015).
descendants of victims who perished in the water. As the boat left the dock and headed toward Lake Michigan, a Wendella Boats tour guide shared historical facts about the city and its past as a commercial port, but when the boat entered the Chicago Locks, a passenger suggested to Ted Wachholz that participants on the cruise be allowed to share their family stories of the Eastland Disaster. What transpired was an hour-long storytelling session from families who spanned the globe.

Figure 17 - Eastland Disaster Historical Society organized a boat tour for ticket-holding attendees, many of whom were descendants of Eastland survivors, rescuers, or victims. The boat docked at the same site as the Eastland Disaster. Author’s photograph.

Eleanor Fitzmaurice traveled from Ballingarry, Ireland to find the burial site of her two great aunts, who perished on the boat. She explained on the tour boat that her two great aunts, Hanora and Catherine Moynihan, moved to Chicago after their mother returned to Ballingarry with their two youngest siblings (one was Fitzmaurice’s
grandmother). The story of her great grandmother’s return to Ireland from America fascinated Fitzmaurice, and she wondered what had happened to her great grandmother’s other American children she left behind, Fitzmaurice’s great aunts and uncles. She found what she described as “pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.” In official records, Catherine and Henora, both Western Electric Company employees, had the same death date. Fitzmaurice said it only took one Google search of the date to put the puzzle together. Her great aunts both perished on the *Eastland*. The event was never spoken about in her family, and her two aunts were rarely mentioned at family events. In an interview with DNAinfo.com, Fitzmaurice vowed to erect small markers for her relatives buried in Chicago.³ Fitzmaurice’s experience with *Eastland* memory is quite different from Dave Nelson and the Wachholz family in that she, upon her own investigation of her genealogical roots, discovered her family’s place within the history of the tragedy. By connecting with the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society, Fitzmaurice has been able to connect with other descendants of the tragedy, and see photographs her great aunts for the first time.⁴

After the boat tour, EDHS then held another commemorative ceremony at the site of the disaster. Ted Wachholz stated in his introduction that this ceremony was a “pledge to remember” the disaster and the thousands of people affected by the events

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of that day. During the ceremony, Wachholz invited Michelle Woods, a representative of Mayor Rahm Emmanuel’s office, to make remarks and share her family history of the Eastland. Later, representatives from the Coast Guard, Police and Fire Departments once again laid flowers in the water for the 844 victims of the disaster. In another poignant moment, to close the ceremony, EDHS invited descendants down to the riverfront to scatter the petals of 844 white roses into the water. Tears were visible on several faces.

A common theme throughout EDHS’s weekend activities was the importance of sharing family histories. After lunch with descendants of Eastland survivors, EDHS hosted a program where authors of various Eastland Disaster works discussed their works. All authors stressed the immense influence family memories had on their works, especially those that came from the Wachholz family.5

The weekend concluded with a sunset ceremony at the site of the disaster. Performers from Lookingglass Theater sang three songs from Andrew White’s musical Eastland: A New Musical while attendees lit votive lights. The weekend’s events were a profound reflection on the personal connections of both Dave Nelson and the Wachholz family and their desire to make the Eastland Disaster an important part of public memory. It is because of these two groups that the Eastland and the 844 souls lost were remembered at all on July 24, 2015. Their respective efforts to remember the Eastland began as a personal mission to find meaning in a historic event, but as the centennial approached, both groups guided the public narrative to focus on the

5 As a disclaimer, I also presented that afternoon where I discussed the nature of my research in history and memory and the importance of family storytelling.
thousands of working class, immigrant people who gathered on the docks for a ride to a company picnic one century earlier.

This dissertation has argued that public memory of the *Eastland* Disaster had been lost for much of the twentieth century due to the working class, immigrant backgrounds of the people on the boat that day. However, their private memories survived through storytelling within families of survivors, rescuers, and victims. Descendants of the *Eastland* Disaster began sharing these memories with the world, and through their efforts to share their family’s stories, began to re-inscribe the tragedy in public memory. Through this project, I have explored how people create personal memories and meanings from historic events and how these personal memories influence public memory.

This project explored the many ways in which the *Eastland* Disaster meets Patricia Leavy’s criteria for an *iconic event*. Through its use in commercial culture, appearance in political and social discourse, and the intense interpretive practices immediately after the tragedy, the *Eastland* Disaster should have had what is necessary to lift the event to a “mythic” status. However, because of the passengers’ backgrounds as primarily working class, the event misses the mark. Unlike the Chicago Fire, there is no redemption story to be told, or the *Titanic* where rich and famous passengers on the maiden voyage of an “unsinkable” ship grabbed international headlines. The *Eastland* Disaster, though the greatest loss-of-life tragedy on the Great Lakes, failed to earn status as an iconic event in the twentieth century, and though the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society and *Eastland* Fellowship Authority have dedicated their time to

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spreading awareness of the tragedy, the *Eastland* Disaster falls short as an iconic event.

*Eastland* continues to fall short as an iconic event because of limits on how personal memories can effectively reshape the public memory. As time passes and generations grow older, family memories of the disaster are at risk of being lost if not shared outside of the family unit. Family memory has reshaped public memory by reorienting the public narrative from blaming the boat’s chief engineer and the passengers on the boat for the capsizing to a narrative that is more personal and focused on the individual people on the boat in addition to blaming the owners of the boat for their negligence. Family memory can only go so far to change the narrative of this historic event, but it can continue to enhance and reinforce the new public narrative.

The centennial of the *Eastland* Disaster has passed, and the greatest difficulty for groups like the *Eastland* Disaster Historical Society and the *Eastland* Fellowship Authority lies ahead. How can historical groups like these, dedicated to one specific event in time, maintain the momentum of public memory after a major milestone like the 100th anniversary? Both groups have their own ideas of how to effectively commemorate the tragedy, but only time will tell if these family memories remain a fixed part of the narrative and public memory of the disaster. Or, as the musical lyric suggests, as time fades and stories are left untold, will only the river remain?
Date: February 1, 2012
To: Mitch Kachun, Principal Investigator
    Caitlyn Dial, Student Investigator for dissertation
From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair
Re: HSIRB Project Number 12-02-03

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “The Wrecks of the Eastland and Edmund Fitzgerald: Great Lakes Shipwrecks in American Public Memory” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: February 1, 2013
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