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The Eastland Disaster Killed More Passengers Than the Titanic and the Lusitania. Why Has It Been Forgotten?

Chicago's working poor were expecting a day in luxury. They instead faced a horrific calamity on Lake Michigan

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One of the greatest inland waterways disasters in the history of the United States took place in the Chicago River, Chicago, Ill., July 24, 1915, when the steamship *Eastland* capsized with a loss of near 850 lives. The photo shows the ill-fated ship after it had turned "turtle." © Bettmann/CORBIS

At 7:18 a.m. on July 24, 1915, the crew of the Great Lakes excursion steamer *Eastland* prepared for that morning's journey and hauled in its gangplank, forcing a tardy passenger to leap aboard from the wharf along the Chicago River.

Despite the cool, damp weather, 2,573 passengers and crew crowded aboard the *Eastland*, the atmosphere festive. The latecomer, E.W. Sladkey, headed to the promenade deck to join coworkers from the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne Works factory in nearby Cicero. The *Eastland* was one of five vessels chartered to carry Western Electric workers and their families on a day-long outing from downtown Chicago to a park 38 miles across Lake Michigan to the southeast. More than 7,000 tickets had been sold.

Among those aboard the *Eastland* were George Sindelar, a Western Electric foreman, with his wife and five children. James Novotny, a company cabinetmaker, accompanied his wife and their two children. Anna Quinn, 22, and

her neighbor and fellow Western Electric clerk Caroline Homolka, 16, had chosen their outfits carefully, for this was the social event of the year for many of the young workers—not only a rare Saturday break in the manufacturing and assembling telephone equipment, but also an opportunity to meet other eligible singles.

The *Eastland* was the first boat scheduled to leave, and employees had been encouraged to get there early. By a few minutes after 7 a.m., men, women and children were boarding at the rate of 50 per minute, with two federal inspectors keeping careful count, per normal practice. The *Eastland* was licensed to carry 2,500 passengers plus crew. As a steady drizzle began to fall, many of the women, especially those with young children, took refuge below decks. In the main cabin, a band played for dancing; on the upper deck, passengers jostled to find seats or leaned against the railing, calling out to arriving friends.

As the *Eastland* filled with passengers between 7:10 and 7:15 a.m., it began to list to port, away from the wharf. The movement didn't seem to alarm the partygoers, but it caught the attention of the harbormaster and some other observers on land. By the time Sladkey made his last-minute leap, however, the 275-foot-long boat had righted itself, if only briefly.

At 7:23, it listed even further to port. Water poured through the open gangways into the engine room. The crew there, realizing what was about to happen, scrambled up a ladder to the main deck.

At 7:28 a.m., the *Eastland* listed to a 45-degree angle. The piano on the promenade deck rolled to the port wall, almost crushing two women; a refrigerator slid to port, pinning a woman or two beneath it. Water poured into open portholes in the cabins below deck. The deadliest shipwreck in Great Lakes history—a calamity that would take more passenger lives than the sinking of the *Titanic* or the *Lusitania*—was under way.

Few, if any, of the passengers boarding that day noticed that the *Eastland* carried a full complement of lifeboats, life rafts and life preservers. It was in compliance with the law. And that created a serious hazard.

The 1912 sinking of the *Titanic* gave rise to a "lifeboats-for-all" movement among international marine safety officials. In the United States, Congress passed a bill requiring lifeboats to accommodate 75 percent of a vessel's passengers, and in March, 1915, President Woodrow Wilson signed what became known as the LaFollette Seaman's Act.

During the debate over the bill, the general manager of the Detroit & Cleveland Navigation Company had warned that some Great Lakes vessels, with their shallow drafts, "would turn 'turtle' if you attempted to navigate them with this additional weight on the upper decks." Too few legislators listened.

By July, 1915, the *Eastland*, which had been designed to carry six lifeboats, was carrying 11 lifeboats, 37 life rafts (about 1,100 pounds each) and enough life jackets (about six pounds apiece) for all 2,570 passengers and crew. Most were stowed on the upper decks. No tests were conducted to determine how the additional weight affected the boat's stability—even though it already had a troubled history.

The *Eastland* was built in 1902 to carry 500 people for lake excursions and to haul produce on the return trips to Chicago. The boat had no keel, was top-heavy and relied on poorly designed ballast tanks in the hold to keep it upright. Repeated modifications increased the vessel's speed and passenger capacity—and made it less stable.

"It was said of her that she behaved like a bicycle, being unstable when loading or unloading but stable when under way," wrote transportation historian and economist George W. Hilton, whose 1995 book, *Eastland: Legacy of the Titanic*, provides a meticulous investigation. Safety inspectors focused only on the *Eastland's* performance while underway, and the boat routinely was certified as safe.

In July 1904, the boat nearly capsized with 3,000 people aboard. Two years later, it listed heavily with 2,530 passengers onboard. The *Eastland* soon developed a reputation as unsafe, a "hoodoo boat," in the slang of the day. "The passengers appeared to recognize the potential dangers of the ship better than the management or the inspectors did," Hilton wrote.

Indeed, an official of the St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company, which bought the *Eastland* for \$150,000 in 1914, testified at a coroner's inquest a few days after the accident, "I didn't know much about the boat except that we got it at a bargain. All I do is sign blank checks."

Critical to a boat's stability is what is known as its metacentric height. Floating objects are like an upside-down pendulum, with a center of gravity and the ability to roll, or heel, to either side before righting itself. The distance between fully upright and the maximum heel—the point beyond which it will capsize—is its metacentric height.

Referring to the *Eastland*, Hilton wrote: "For such a ship, where the distribution of passengers was highly variable, normal practice would have been to provide a metacentric height of two to four feet, fully loaded."

Changes made to the *Eastland* before July 24 had reduced its metacentric height to four inches.

Within two minutes after it listed 45 degrees to port, it rolled over, as reporter Carl Sandburg wrote for the *International Socialist Review*, "like a dead jungle monster shot through the heart."

Small boats attempt to rescue survivors gathered on the exposed side of the excursion boat SS *Eastland* which overturned in the Chicago River. © CORBIS

By 7:30 a.m., the *Eastland* was lying on its side in 20 feet of murky water, still tied to the dock. The vessel rolled so quickly, there was no time to launch the lifesaving equipment. As the boat settled on its side, many passengers simply climbed over the starboard railing and walked across the exposed hull to safety, never even getting their feet wet. Sladkey was one of them. So was the *Eastland's* captain, Harry Pedersen.

They were among the lucky ones.

"When the boat toppled on its side those on the upper deck were hurled off like so many ants being brushed from a table," wrote Harlan Babcock, a reporter for the *Chicago Herald*. "In an instant, the surface of the river was black with struggling, crying, frightened, drowning humanity. Wee infants floated about like corks."

About 10,000 people were milling about the riverfront that day—grocery and poultry merchants, their customers, Western Electric workers waiting to board other ships. Horrified onlookers raced to the rescue, some jumping into the river. (According to one account, a man contemplating suicide at the river's edge jumped in and began saving lives.) Others threw whatever they could grab to provide flotation for those struggling in the water, including boards, ladders and wooden chicken crates. Some of the crates struck passengers in the water, knocking them out and putting them under. Parents clutched children and disappeared together beneath the brown water—or lost their grip and watched their children sink out of sight. "God, the screaming was terrible, it's ringing in my ears yet," a warehouse worker told a reporter.

Helen Repa, a Western Electric nurse on her way to the outing, heard the screaming from blocks away. The trolley she was riding in came to a halt in traffic. When a mounted policeman told her an excursion boat had overturned, Repa assumed it was one of the boats chartered for the picnic. Dressed in her nurse's uniform, she hopped onto the rear step of a passing ambulance. "People were struggling in the water, clustered so thickly that they covered the surface of the river," she would recall. "The screaming was the most horrible of all."

When she arrived at the riverfront, Repa scrambled onto the *Eastland's* hull and saw passengers being hauled out of the river and others being dragged through portholes. Many were cut and bleeding. The injured were taken to a nearby hospital, which quickly was overwhelmed. Repa directed a hospital employee to telephone Marshall Field & Company, the department store, for 500 blankets. Then she called restaurants and asked for hot soup and coffee to be delivered to the hospital.

As survivors made it to the dock, Repa decided to send the less injured home. "I would simply go out into the street, stop the first automobile that came along, load it up with people, and tell the owner or driver where to take them," she later wrote. "And not one driver said no."

By 8 a.m., almost all of the survivors had been pulled from the river. Then came the gruesome task of locating and removing bodies.

"The crowding and confusion were terrible," Repa wrote. Rescuers, emergency personnel and curious onlookers flocked to the scene. By noon, divers and rescue workers finally reached bodies that had been trapped underwater in the portside cabins. "After that time all the bodies that came up seemed to be women and children," Repa recalled.

Seven priests arrived to hear confessions or administer last rites. "There was little work for them," one reporter wrote. "The results of the *Eastland's* somersault could be phrased in two words—living or dead."

Stretcher-bearers traversed the hull as bodies were lifted out. "I wondered dully why they waited for stretchers at all," wrote Gretchen Krohn in the *New York Times*. "All the bodies carried past were so rigid that poles to carry them by seemed superfluous; and the pitiful shortness of most of them." Sometimes, she continued, "they had to put two bodies on the same stretcher. Death had so tightened that final parting embrace." Because of a shortage of ambulances, American Express Company trucks were enlisted to transport bodies.

As news of the disaster spread rapidly through the city, families of Western Electric workers now feared the worst. Young Blanche Homolka and Alice Quinn, whose older sisters had left early that morning in high spirits, waited for hours at a streetcar stop, watching as passengers disembarked, their clothing muddy and disheveled. They waited in vain; Caroline Homolka and Anna Quinn were among the dead.

As the casualties mounted, the nearby Second Regiment Armory was converted to a morgue. Corpses were placed in rows of 85 as the identification process began. Just before midnight, the public was admitted, 20 at a time, to look for family members. The morbidly curious elbowed their way in as well, along with some thieves who stole jewelry from the bodies.

When Chicagoans awoke on Sunday, the magnitude of the disaster was nowhere more apparent than in the close-knit Polish, Czech and Hungarian communities near the Hawthorne Works in Cicero. House after house was draped in black crepe and families sat in mourning.

Just 10 weeks earlier, the *Lusitania* had been torpedoed and sunk, with a death toll of 785 passengers. In 1912, 829 passengers had died aboard the *Titanic* (plus 694 crewmembers). Both of those disasters took place on the high seas.

After the *Eastland* rolled, 844 passengers died on a sluggish urban river, 20 feet from the dock. Seventy percent of them were under the age of 25.

Victims of the Eastland Ship Disaster in Chicago. Photograph, 1915. © Bettmann/CORBIS

An estimated 500,000 people arrived to view the disaster scene, crowding onto bridges and the river's edge. Boat owners charged 10 or 15 cents to ferry the curious past. Newspapers around the country gave the story front-page coverage for days.

On Wednesday, July 28, Chicago was a city of funerals. So many were scheduled that there were not enough hearses. Marshall Field & Company provided 39 trucks. Fifty-two gravediggers, working 12 hours a day, couldn't keep up with the demand. Nearly 150 graves had to be dug at the Bohemian National Cemetery alone. By day's end, almost 700 *Eastland* victims had been buried.

Among them were the seven members of the Sindelar family: George, the Western Electric foreman; his wife, Josephine, and their five children, ages 15 to

3. Their white caskets arrived at the service stacked precariously on the back of a Model T Ford.

By July 29, all of the bodies lying in the armory morgue had been claimed except one, a boy identified only as Number 396, who had been nicknamed "Little Feller" by police and morgue workers. The body was taken to a funeral home, where two children recognized him as their friend Willie Novotny, age 7. He had lain unclaimed because his parents—James, the cabinetmaker, and his mother, Agnes, had died on the *Eastland* along with his 9-year-old sister, Mamie.

Novotny's grandmother confirmed the identification when she took a new pair of brown knickerbockers to the authorities. "If it's Willie, he's got pants like these," she said. "It was a new suit he went to the picnic in, and two pairs of pants came with it. These are the others."

"'Little Feller' now has a name," reported the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

When the Novotnys were buried, on July 31, more than 5,000 people attended. The funeral procession stretched more for than a mile.

Affixing blame for the accident began immediately. *Eastland* Captain Harry Pedersen, chief engineer Joseph Erickson and other crewmembers were taken into custody on Saturday—in part to protect them from the angry crowd that had gathered at the scene.

Within three days of the accident, seven inquiries were underway. Cook County officials asserted their jurisdiction immediately. After interviewing witnesses and crewmembers, County Attorney Maclay Hoyne told reporters: "The United States [Steamboat] Inspection Service is directly responsible for this disaster. Now is the time to inspect the inspectors. Chicago... should demand that and nothing else."

U.S. Commerce Secretary William C. Redfield, dispatched to Chicago by President Wilson, seized the *Eastland*, enlisting the help of U.S. District Judge (and future major-league baseball commissioner) Kenesaw Mountain Landis, in whose courtroom federal proceedings would be heard.

Despite the haste, it would take 24 years to conclude litigation related to the *Eastland* disaster.

In the end, blame was pinned largely on Erickson, the chief engineer, for mismanaging the ballast tanks in the hold to right the *Eastland* before it capsized.

Erickson, who initially was represented by Clarence Darrow, died as the proceedings dragged on. That made him—in the view of Hilton, the historian who analyzed thousands of pages of maritime and legal documents about the *Eastland* disaster—a convenient fall guy.

Although evidence strongly suggested that Pedersen had been negligent, he was not prosecuted. Nor were officers of the steamship company. All criminal charges were dropped and the owners avoided any legal finding of negligence.

The blame, Hilton concluded, rested in a poorly designed boat that had been rendered top-heavy as a result of the post-*Titanic* safety measures.

Civil lawsuits to resolve more than 800 wrongful-death claims dragged on for two decades. Maritime law limited liability to the value of the *Eastland*, set at \$46,000. Claims filed by the salvage company hired to tow the vessel from the accident scene and the coal company that supplied fuel took precedence. In the end, victims and families received little or nothing.

Ted Wachholz, president of the Eastland Disaster Historical Society, has a theory on why the *Eastland* looms so much smaller in the American memory than the *Titanic* or the *Lusitania*: "There wasn't anyone rich or famous onboard," said Wachholz. "It was all hardworking, salt-of-the-earth immigrant families."

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