

EASTLAND DISASTER, CHICAGO: JULY 24, 1915

On Saturday, July 24, 1915, over 5,000 men, women, and children boarded five large charter boats on the Chicago River to travel to a daylong company picnic in Michigan City, Indiana. Among the boats chartered by the Western Electric Manufacturing Company for the excursion was the *Eastland*, a twelve-year-old, 2600-passenger vessel nicknamed the "Speed Queen of the Great Lakes." As passengers were boarding the *Eastland* for a 7:30 AM departure, the boat "listed" (or severely rocked) from side to side but the crew was not alarmed. When the full-to-capacity *Eastland* pulled away from the dock, however, the listing continued and the boat rolled onto its side.

The *Eastland*, which was less than forty feet from the dock, quickly settled on its side in the Chicago River, as the water was only twenty feet deep. Because the boat capsized so quickly, however, there was no time to evacuate the lower decks and compartments. Many passengers on the upper deck easily swam to safety, but those below deck were trapped inside the boat. Of the 70 sailors aboard the *Eastland*, all but four were able to escape, as they had trained for such incidents. The trapped passengers, on the other hand, were helpless and over 840 men, women, and children (roughly one-third of the total passengers) drowned in or around the capsized boat. The death toll still ranks as the highest for any Illinois disaster.

The Chicago Fire Department mobilized quickly, wielding axes, ropes, poles, and cutting torches, but the *Eastland* officers and crew initially tried to stop them from cutting into the hull to rescue trapped passengers. The crew fortunately relented and the firefighters were able to pull dozens of trapped passengers out through holes in the hull. Several civilian industrial welders also arrived on scene with their cutting equipment, but they were turned away by police officers that were controlling the scene. Firefighter Frank Krivanek, who drove a horse-drawn steam pumper, raced to the river believing his wife, who worked at Western Electric, and their five children were aboard the boat. The family had actually remained at home that morning, but Krivanek stayed on the scene all day aiding with the rescue efforts and looking for his family. Krivanek was relieved to learn that his family was safe, but he rarely spoke of the *Eastland*, refusing to discuss details of the disaster for the rest of his life.

The day after the tragedy, H.B. Thayer, President of Western Electric, drafted a memo to his employees that stated: "We are the victims of a disaster so awful that the world has stood aghast at its horrors...Many are mourning for members of their families, and many for friends and acquaintances. Gloom hangs heavy." The following day, many employees, including fourteen-year-old Augusta Houillion who was still sick from the dirty river water she had swallowed when she was trapped in an air pocket inside the boat for hours, returned to work. Western Electric had informed its employees that anyone who did not report to work that day would lose his or her job.