

# The Eastland Disaster

All Chicago Mobilized for the Grim Work of Relief; the Beginning of Investigational Hearings; the Federal Inspection Service on the Defensive

By *Graham Taylor*

**I**F the government inspection of steamships had been as effective as the mobilization of Chicago's resources for the rescue of the Eastland's ill-fated passengers, it would have prevented a disaster unparalleled both in the occasion for it and the consequences of it.

While a small fleet of Lake Michigan's largest excursion steamers waited to embark 7,000 or more of the employes of the Western Electric Company, their families and friends, the Eastland was no sooner loaded than she began to list. Although at the start it attracted less attention from her officers and crew, who had become accustomed to the listing of the "cranky" craft, the captain soon became sufficiently alarmed to send a warning to some of the crew, but the twenty-five hundred or more passengers were singularly left without any warning except the continued tilting of the boat over from the dock, to which she was yet tied, toward the narrow river where she was about to start for her trip to Lake Michigan. But then Chicago mobilized. At once the alarm went everywhere.

The side of the big steamer had scarcely struck the water before a policeman had telephoned the "still alarm" to the fire and police departments. Immediately fire companies and police details, a half hundred patrol wagons and many ambulances rushed to the rescue. Steamboat whistles summoned life boats from the nearby vessels and tugs in river and harbor. From docks and bridges men dove for the sinking people and threw everything that could float to those still struggling on the surface of the stream. Firemen scaled the slippery hull of the overturned steamer to rescue the hundreds who had been caught in the cabins, staterooms and lower decks whither they had sought refuge from the rain.

The steel plates of the steamer resisted the sledges and axes of the firemen, but a police sergeant happily thought of the oxweld acetylene machines by which he had seen great steel girders burned loose from buildings being wrecked. Commandeering a passing automobile he rushed the device from a wrecking company yard to the firemen's assistance. While they were burning and chopping their way through the steamer's side, the

captain of the Eastland attempted to stop them, but was promptly arrested, not only for impeding the work of rescue, but to protect him from the menacing indignation of the crowd. Through the holes thus burned and chopped scores were rescued.

While the official forces of the city were thus deployed, volunteer co-operation was promptly and effectively extended. Warehouse floors were cleared to make room for the dead and for those who might be resuscitated. Great department stores ordered their auto trucks to report for service to convey the bodies of the dead to the temporary morgues. They also sent hundreds of blankets with which to cover the living. Pulmotors were hurried from the gas and electric companies, with crews to assist the doctors in trying to resuscitate every body recovered. Within an hour or two the office force of the Western Electric Company had a registration and inquiry bureau in operation near the disaster.

Red Cross nurses, doctors and helpers were promptly at hand to assist the coroner and police in collecting the hundreds of the dead from the scattered places where the bodies had been laid when recovered, to the Second Regiment Armory, a mile away on the West Side, where all of them could await identification. Here a day-nursery was improvised to shield children from their mother's gruesome quest for their dead.

The Red Cross relief station was opened at the Western Electric plant, about which most of the bereaved families live. The mayor's relief committee opened subscription lists, as did the newspapers. The Western Electric Company headed the list of subscriptions to the general relief fund by contributing \$100,000. It is thought that \$500,000 may be needed to meet the emergency, the extent of which cannot be estimated before the charnel ship has yielded all the dead from within and beneath its hold.

When the Western Electric plant opened its gates to check up those reported for future duty and those whose places were vacant, the scene inside the works was almost as sorrowful as that where the living sought the dead in the great armory.

But outside the gates gathered another pathetic group. Some 400 of Chicago's

unemployed stood there, in the silence due to the hesitancy of their hearts, with a persistency due to the stern necessities accumulated by a hopeless winter of unemployment and destitution. "No jobs given today; we must cheer up first," said the superintendent as he gently asked them to withdraw.

The commissioner of health issued a warning to those who in any way had been brought in contact with the polluted river water—police, firemen and divers as well as victims of the disaster—against the danger of infection from typhoid germs, offering freely any typhoid vaccine and treatment to all who had been exposed.

From a tug in the river moored to the wreck, hot coffee and food were supplied day and night to the divers, policemen, firemen and others who in relays continued without ceasing their search for the dead in the flooded hold of the steamer and on the river bottom. At the initiative of the Woman's City Club, food was furnished by some of the hotels and served by settlement workers and other volunteers.

Clergymen and singers of many Protestant churches registered their willingness to render volunteer service at the funerals of the victims of the disaster. Church emergency headquarters were opened to facilitate quick response to calls for this service. Roman Catholic priests were promptly and continuously at the wreck to administer the last rites of their church to the dying.

The number of dead is still uncertain. There have been 834 bodies identified. Many who are known to have started on the excursion are still missing. Many more are still held within or upon the overturned ship. The dead number more than a thousand.

Just how many were aboard the steamer when she capsized is also uncertain. The government inspectors insist that they prevented all access to the steamer after she had received the 2,500 passengers which she was permitted to carry in addition to 70 of the crew. While the checking up corresponds with the number of tickets taken, how many mother children in arms or under five years of age there were, how many others were admitted without ticket, are still in dispute.

This and many other uncertainties

concerning the vessel and her management, give good ground for the imperative public demand for the most rigidly impartial and exhaustive investigation. It is justly insisted on all hands that the cause of the disaster must be sought beyond the captain, officers and crew who have been arrested, beyond the transportation companies owning or leasing the ship for this occasion, whose officials are also under arrest, and must be found somewhere within the United States inspection service of the Department of Commerce. The federal government assumes responsibility for passing upon the seaworthiness of all vessels, for determining their carrying capacity and for preventing overloading before permitting vessels to sail.

The officials of both the coast and lake seamen's unions and also of the Chicago Federation of Labor make the most specific charges against the federal inspection service for dereliction of duty, not only in this instance, but in the case of very many other vessels which have met disaster. Over a year ago at the opening of the excursion season, E. N. Nockels, secretary of the Chicago Federation of Labor, wrote Edwin F. Sweet, assistant secretary of the Department of Commerce, a letter under date of June 22, 1914, in which, after complaining that his charges of previous violations of law had not yet been answered, he issued this prophetic warning:

"We believe the conditions of the excursion passenger steamers are altogether too unsafe to be permitted to continue without a most vigorous protest from this federation, as a matter of record, in the event of any accident in the future, that we at least had registered a protest. For instance, we claim it is a crime to permit the Christopher Columbus, 3,800 passengers, with the excuse that she runs but five miles from shore. That crowded condition, regardless of sufficient life-boats or able seamen, in the event of an accident will prove to have sacrificed the lives of thousands of people, even if she were tied to the docks.

"This applies to the rest of the boats which are permitted to go out of here overcrowded. There is absolutely no comfort, and about one-half of the number of passengers to each boat would mean safety. Nothing else but the cutting down of the passenger list will lessen the danger."

Victor A. Olander, secretary of the Lake Seamen's Union, has the copy of a letter which he wrote to the inspection department under date of December 19, 1914, in which after naming thirty-one vessels which had gone down on the Great Lakes with all on board since 1905, he charged that the inspectors' and supervisors' "inefficiency, neglect and disregard as recognized by the Lake Seamen's Union is plainly dangerous and the loss of life can be traced to it."

In an interview with the writer, Mr. Olander insisted that "the Eastland cap-



RELIEF PARTIES AT WORK ON THE OVERTURNED STEAMER

sized because the United States steamer-boat inspection service permitted too many people to go on board. This and nothing else caused the loss of life." But he also insisted that "this is only the last of a long series of improper inspections, for which the supervising inspector general, the ten supervising inspectors are primarily responsible." This being the case, as he judges it, Mr. Olander enters a most vigorous protest, which the Chicago Federation of Labor has endorsed and sent to President Wilson and the Department of Commerce, against allowing "these inspectors to

investigate themselves."

Andrew Furuseth, president of the International Seamen's Union, was also interviewed as he was passing through Chicago and gave the following answer to these questions:

Why are government inspectors suspected of acting in the interests of shipowners?

"Because while properly required be masters or engineers, they are naturally recommended for appointment shipowners."

What is the remedy for this situation? "To put the specific regulations i

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TOO LATE, AS USUAL

inspection in the law passed by Congress and hold the inspectors responsible for enforcing it, leaving nothing to their mere discretion."

May not this disaster be due to faulty construction of the vessel?

"It was due to overloading and to the lack of fast, permanent ballast. No passenger boat is safe that will not stand up with its maximum load of passengers all on one side without water ballast. Water ballast is to be used not as a safety device, but only for trimming, to keep the ship on an even keel, reduce friction and cost of fuel and to make speed."

What was the captain's responsibility for the instability of the vessel?

"The captain knew the vessel lacked stability, but if he had ordered the passengers ashore and had refused to take his vessel out, he would have been tried and his license would have been suspended or revoked. Nothing short of the capsizing of the vessel would have been sufficiently convincing evidence to prove its instability and the fact that it was overloaded. On this account licensed officers are usually put on trial and made the scapegoats of these disasters whether guilty or not."

What have you to say in answer to the charge made by the manager of a transportation company in Detroit that the tragedy is due "to the presence of life-rafts and other heavy equipment required by the La Follette law?"

"The law does not come into effect until after this navigation season. The general manager of the company owning the Eastland protested to Secretary Redfield against compliance with the safety provisions of this law on the ground that 'it will be impossible to operate this boat and make expenses.' If this law had been in effect, the Eastland could not have carried more than half the 2,500 passengers allowed her."

How is the number of passengers allowed on any vessel determined?

"By the deck space allowed each passenger, according to the decision of the inspectors. At the hearing on the La Follette bill, Supervising Inspector Uhler was asked, 'Do you think a vessel can safely pack its deck space to the extent of eight square feet capacity per passenger with safety to passengers?' He replied, 'If she has deck space enough to do it, yes.' Yet no allowance is made for seats, baggage, or whatever else may occupy part of the space."

How can safety be made the first consideration with shipowners and managers?

"By making safety the owner's self-interest from a financial point of view. He should be made to assume personally a large part of the risk by being deprived of any opportunity to over-insure or completely insure his vessel. Our laws reduce the insurance of ships and cargoes to a simple gambling proposition, in which one may take out an insurance

policy on a vessel in which one has no insurable interest. And moreover, our laws limit or abolish the shipowner's liability to the passenger. Self-interest therefore puts a premium on taking the risks rather than upon providing for safety."

What should be the outcome of this investigation?

"Not merely to fix the blame for this disaster, or to punish some poor devil, as in the case of the burning of the General Slocum in New York harbor, but to get out of it a reasonable degree of safety by the reorganization of the federal inspection service."

Official investigations were at once instituted by the coroner, the state's attorney of Cook county, Judge Landis of the United States District Court and by Secretary Redfield of the federal Department of Commerce. The coroner's jury, the foreman of which was Dr. William A. Evans, formerly health commissioner of Chicago, recommended that six persons be held to the grand jury on the charge of manslaughter and for such other offenses as the facts may warrant: William H. Hull, vice-president and general manager of the St. Joseph Steamship Company, owner of the steamship Eastland; Henry Pedersen, captain of the vessel, Joseph M. Erickson, its chief engineer; Walter K. Greenebaum, general manager of the Indiana Transportation Company which chartered the ship, and Robert Reid and Charles C. Eckliff, local United States steamboat inspectors.

The verdict held that the ship was improperly constructed, loaded, operated and maintained for the service employed, and that the parties named are responsible, the passengers not having contributed to the disaster by any unusual acts. It recommended further inquiry for other members of the corporation or individuals responsible and for those accountable for the defects in the construction of the ship. The jury also arraigned the lack of government regulation of the construction of vessels, the lack of investigating the stability of passenger boats and the present method of determining the carrying capacity of these steamers.

Of Secretary Redfield's appearance before the coroner's jury, its foreman Dr. Evans, published this statement:

"Secretary Redfield undertook to answer. He launched into a long-winded dissertation on the service. He rambled around over a multitude of subjects. As he had been in town but a few hours and his witnesses were not yet in town and his inquiry was not to begin until ten o'clock the next morning, we could understand why he had seen no proof that the vessel was unseaworthy, or of the other supposed accusations. In the same emphatic way he supplemented his statements with a suggestion that the jury take no action with regard to his men until they had been heard, although holding to the

and jury and indictment by it on *ex parte* testimony is the legal procedure. When he left the room, the opinion was expressed that his talk was plainly an opening statement of the defense. I could not well understand how he could, or could have, such positive views on certain subjects as he had, and how he could argue as he did in view of the fact that his inquiry had not opened and would not open for eighteen hours. It impressed me as a special pleader for men in his service, with an infinite capacity for muddling."

Personally conducting his own inquiry, Secretary Redfield at once began asking not only leading but argumentative questions of his inspectors, who had been summoned from other localities, some to testify, and two others to assist in judgment. Here are specimens of his questioning, taken by court reporters and published verbatim in the Chicago papers:

And they [excursion steamers] are operated by thoughtless men who put their good money into them without knowing they have no keels? That is astonishing. You astonish me very much. I knew it was true, but I thought these people knew it. Now look back and think of the time when you were not a mere government official; think of the time when you were a man and remember when you were a seaman whose judgment was valued, and then tell me, based upon your judgment as a man, before you lost out and became a government official, tell me whether you really think as a seaman that the Eastland was a good sea-going vessel?"

Of one of the indicted inspectors, whose son-in-law was chief engineer of the Eastland, upon whose seaworthiness and safety this inspector had passed, Secretary Redfield inquired:

Can you understand from the vigilant watchdogs of the press that you are guilty of having a son-in-law? Is that fair? Did you arrange for him to become your son-in-law and then arrange for him to get a job on the Eastland

so her passenger-carrying capacity could be increased?"

So, on and on, for a whole day or two this cabinet officer thus disported himself before this grief-stricken community, apparently oblivious of the fact that the great city had heart only to press one serious, solemn inquiry, Why did this disaster occur, and how can its recurrence be prevented? It is a simple statement of a stern fact that the entire press and people of Chicago have been outraged by Secretary Redfield's cynical bearing and by his indecent indulgence in sarcasm, persiflage and special pleading in the face of an overwhelming public sorrow.

A storm of protests at once arose, coming not only from the Chicago Federation of Labor, the Women's Trade Union League, as voiced by Mrs. Raymond Robins, and the Lake Seamen's Union officials, but also from a committee of the City Council, from five great Polish societies, many of whose members were lost, from the Woman's City Club and many other organizations. These protests went to the President of the United States, accompanied by insistent requests for an absolutely impartial, thorough-going investigation, not only of the Eastland disaster, but of the whole steamboat inspection service of the United States.

Perhaps the most significant rebuke to the procedure in Secretary Redfield's departmental hearings was administered by Judge K. M. Landis of the United States District Court, who in instructing the federal grand jury to ascertain "all the facts as to the construction, equipment, management and navigation of the boat," added:

"One word by way of caution. Wide publicity has been given to declarations, purporting to emanate from official sources in vindication of the conduct of persons with whose acts you will be concerned. Of course, you will not be impressed by any such publications, no

matter how high their purported authority may be."

Judge Landis further ordered

"that no witness appearing or summoned to appear before the grand jury shall present himself as a witness, or testify elsewhere, respecting the said subject matter until the further order of this court."

The intended effect of this order upon Secretary Redfield's inquiry, as well as upon the further procedure of the county court and states attorney in indicting those presented for indictment by the coroner's jury, is to give precedence to the procedure of the United States court.

The lieutenant governor of the state, who is one of three citizens sitting in an advisory capacity at the hearings before the Department of Commerce, requested, "without meaning in any way whatsoever to reflect discredit upon either Secretary Redfield or his department or his investigation, that its scope be widened to cover the steamboat service for the last fifteen years, and that representatives of organized seamen and interests employing seamen have an opportunity to testify." This brought Secretary Redfield to a climax of self-exaggeration, as irrelevantly contrary to the actual situation as most of his other utterances have been;

"I am willing and ready to search every corner and cranny for the ultimate truth as regards the United States inspection service and the Eastland disaster. I came to Chicago for that purpose and my purpose has never wavered.

"I am sorry, I am hurt and I am willing to admit it at this time. I have been mistreated and prejudged by the Chicago press and by Chicago citizens. My record should have protected me, but it did not. My life is an open book—my thirty years of public life—and yet when I come here to make an investigation, I am judged in advance."