

CURIOUS CASE OF THE SS EASTLAND DISASTER

AMERICA'S WORST MARITIME TRAGEDY EXCEEDED THE DEATH TOLL OF THE RMS TITANIC, YET IT IS VIRTUALLY FORGOTTEN TODAY

BY MARSHALL WAINWRIGHT

It was an unusually cool and damp morning on 24 July 1915 as the SS *Eastland* waited dockside on the south bank of the Chicago River between Clark and LaSalle Streets as Capt. Harry Pederson and his crew awaited an enthusiastic group of passengers, the majority being employees of the Western Electric Company, which was headquartered in Cicero, Illinois.

The company had hired the *Eastland* as well as four other Great Lakes passenger steamers —

Theodore Roosevelt, Petoskey, Racine, Rochester — to take their employees to a massive company picnic being held in Michigan City, Indiana. This was a major event in the lives of the employees and their families since most could not afford any form of vacation and over 7000 tickets had been sold for the all-day outing. Even though the mood was joyous at dockside, one of the great tragedies in maritime history was just a few hours away.

But first, let's examine the rather checkered history of the SS *Eastland*.

Commissioned during 1902 by the Michigan Steamship Company, the ship was built by the Jenks Building Company located in Port Huron, Michigan. Initially designed to carry 500 people for excursions on the Great Lakes and then haul produce such as fruit on the trip back to Chicago, she was built without a keel. Immediately before her inaugural voyage in May 1903, she was given the name SS *Eastland*. Almost immediately, she began to experience problems. On 27 July during her inaugural

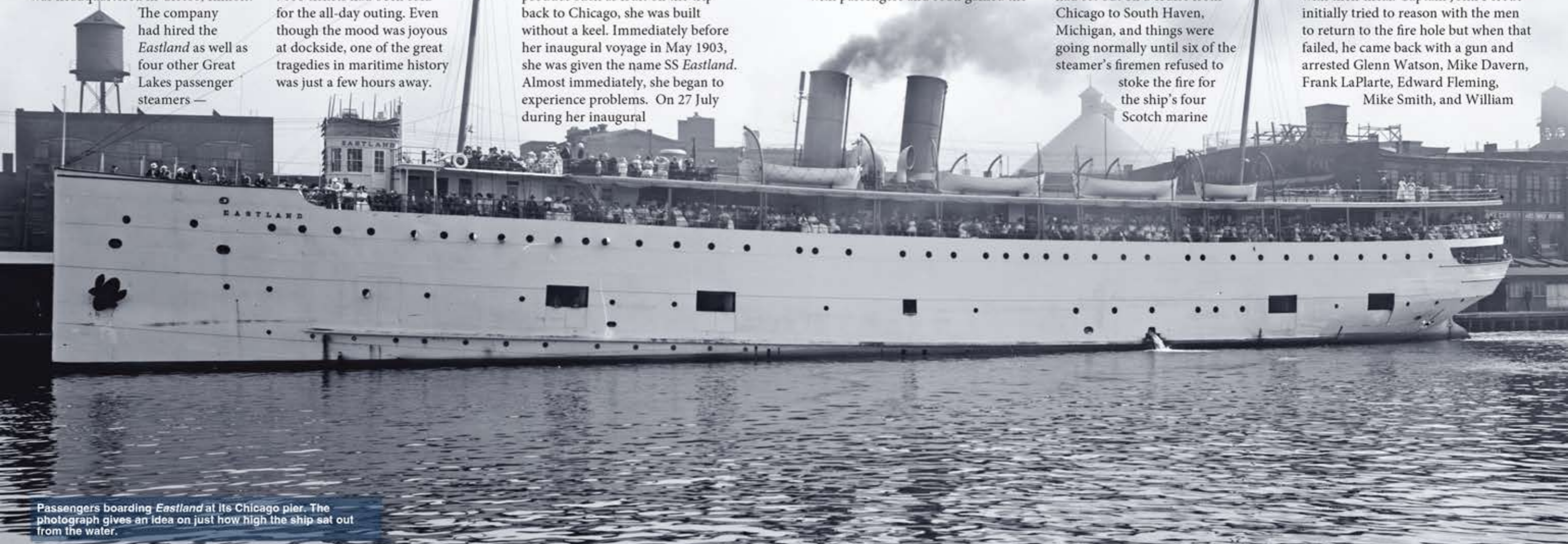
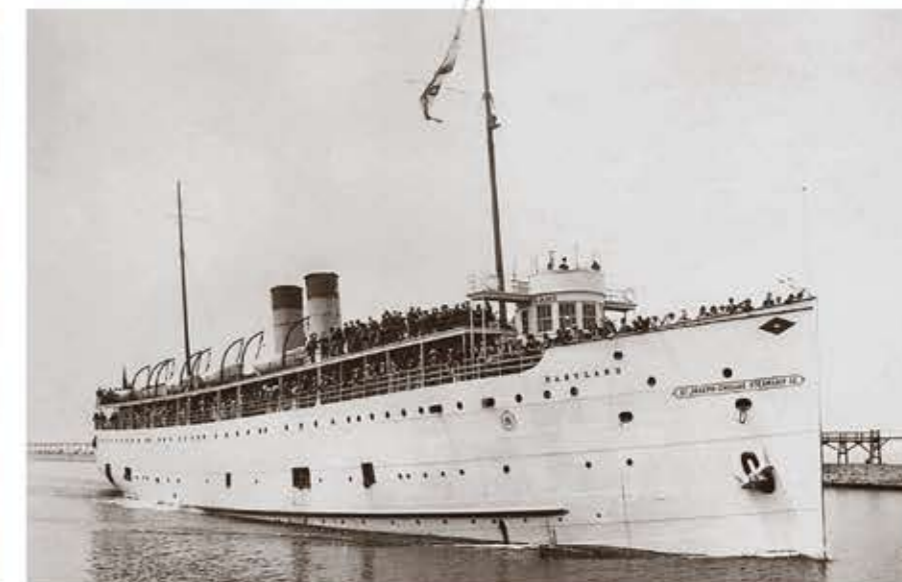
Advertisement for the picnic. season, she struck the laid-up tug *George W. Gardner* and the force of the impact was so violent that the tug sank at her Lake Street Bridge Dock in Chicago. However, *Eastland* received only minor damage and was soon back at work hauling passengers on the Great Lakes. She was popular with passengers and soon gained the

Eastland in the markings of new owner St. Joseph-Chicago Steamship Company. nickname "Speed Queen of the Great Lakes."

THE GREAT POTATO MUTINY

The inaugural year got even stranger when on 14 August, SS *Eastland* experienced, of all things, a mutiny. The ship had set out on a cruise from Chicago to South Haven, Michigan, and things were going normally until six of the steamer's firemen refused to stoke the fire for the ship's four Scotch marine

boilers that produced 1750-shp for a top speed of 16.5-knots via the two triple expansion steam engines. As the fires began to subside in the boilers, the 265-foot ship began to noticeably slow. The reason for the mutiny? The men claimed they had not received potatoes to go along with their meal. Captain John Pereue initially tried to reason with the men to return to the fire hole but when that failed, he came back with a gun and arrested Glenn Watson, Mike Davern, Frank LaPlarte, Edward Fleming, Mike Smith, and William



Passengers boarding *Eastland* at its Chicago pier. The photograph gives an idea on just how high the ship sat out from the water.