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## Family missing after boat sinks at base of dam; witness describes doomed rescue attempt

**DAN SIMMONS / La Crosse Tribune**

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Dive Rescue units recover a boat that capsized near the Lock and Dam Seven near Dresbach. Erik Daily  
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DRESBACH, Minn. - The search will resume Sunday morning for two adults and two children whose 12-foot fishing boat sank in the deep, turbulent waters of the Mississippi River at the base of Lock and Dam No. 7 near Dresbach.

Winona County Sheriff Dave Brand said a multi-agency effort was called off at about 9:21 p.m. today after rescuers found no trace of the missing anglers.

A crowd of about 50 people stood on the docks at the nearby boat landing during the rescue, looking out at the river, hoping for the best and fielding calls on their cell phones. Many had been fishing at the same place on what was otherwise a perfect evening, with a blue sky dotted with rose-colored clouds.

The family of four - a man, his fiance and two children believed to be elementary-school age - were visiting from St. Paul, Minn., and borrowed a fishing boat belonging to Ter Yang of La Crosse, according to Yang's brother, Xiong Yang, 47, of La Crosse.

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They left the boat landing near the dam at about 2 p.m. Saturday, Yang said.

At about 5 p.m., the party packed up to leave, apparently at their limit of fish, said Mike Bakke of Sparta, Wis., who was fishing in another boat about 30 feet from them.

They had pulled up the anchor when the man went to start the motor. Bakke said it appeared a fishing line or anchor rope may have gotten tangled in the boat's propeller, and the man struggled in vain to start the boat's motor.

The dam's fierce current sucked the boat into the dam structure, forcing the boat up against a massive concrete wall. Two nearby boats went to the family's rescue, throwing them a rope, Bakke said.

Bakke said the man attached the rope to a metal loop at the back left side of the boat. He said all was calm, as it appeared the boat would be pulled to safety.

But as soon as the rescuers started to pull with their boats, the other boat and its four occupants sank.

"They went down instantly," Bakke said. "The boat disappeared and the four people disappeared."

The water was believed to be approximately 50 feet deep, Bakke said, with a strong, roiling current, similar in appearance to a pot of water at a boil, as is common at the base of dams. Lock and dam personnel reported a water temperature of 60 degrees.

Brand said his department was called at about 5:35 p.m. and started the search shortly thereafter. Rescuers found the boat and pulled it ashore at about 6:40 p.m. Its front was dented and misshapen. The back end contained a wire basket full of what appeared to be panfish and at least two fishing rods.

The family used to live in the La Crosse area but moved to St. Paul several years ago, Xiong said. The two children were believed to be wearing life jackets but it's unclear whether the adults were, Brand said.

Brand said rescuers were searching topwater down river as well as dragging the bottom near the dam. A helicopter from Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center assisted the search from above.

Ying Vang of La Crosse said that part of the river is popular with Hmong anglers and is a "hot spot" for all types of fish. Anglers are required to keep a safe distance from the dam. Two floating orange diamonds mark the line, which Bakke said is about 100 feet from the dam's base.

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