

The Register-Guard

ARCHIVE

LOCAL NEWS

Walterville man drowns on Colorado raft trip

Retired labor negotiator Lon Mills and his sister's husband die after being ejected into an "icy cold" river

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Lon Mills, a retired union negotiator who lived in Walterville and loved the outdoors, drowned last week while rafting on the Arkansas River in Colorado.

Mills, 75, died Thursday at St. Anthony Hospital in Denver after a raft went over a diversion dam about two miles northwest of Salida, Colo., ejecting all four occupants, according to The Mountain Mail newspaper in Salida.

Mills was rafting with his wife, Myrna, 74, and Wanda and Milton Crosby of Sayer, Okla., the Salida paper reported. Lon Mills was the younger brother of Wanda Crosby. Milton Crosby, 79, died June 23 at Salida Regional Medical Center, the newspaper reported. Neither man was wearing a life preserver.

"My sister-in-law and I had life jackets on, and we survived and the guys didn't," Myrna Mills said Tuesday. "It was snowpack water, icy cold."

The two women extricated themselves from the river and were treated for minor injuries.

Lon Mills worked as an independent labor relations consultant for many years. He was chief bargainer for Lane Community College, and worked for Bethel and other school districts and other local governments. He served as the city of Eugene's personnel director in 1969.

Retired LCC faculty member Stephen John worked with Mills for about 20 years. Although on opposing sides of labor contract issues, the two men became friends, John said.

"He was just a good ol' Okie — he called himself that, being from Oklahoma," John said with a laugh. "He wore Levis, always had a big smile on his face, had a big belt buckle that goes with the cowboy type."

Myrna Mills, back at home in Walterville, said she's still in disbelief about her husband's death. "I haven't had good days. We did everything together," she said.

Lon Mills was the father of two sons, Darrell of Portland and Gary of Springfield, and a daughter, Rhonda Arbuckle of Eugene.

Lon Mills enjoyed fishing, rafting and boating, Myrna Mills said. No funeral arrangements are planned, per her husband's wishes, she said. His ashes will be scattered in the McKenzie River.

"We were just having a good time," Myrna Mills said of the ill-fated trip to Colorado. "He loved rafting, that's the only thing that helps me — he was doing what he loved to do."

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