

Peril persists in small, old dams on Big Sioux



A cross hangs on a tree in memorium of Andrew Hanneman. He drowned after tubing over a low-head dam on the Big Sioux River in Baltic. Low-head dams are "silent killers," says Steven Dahlmeier of the South Dakota Canoe and Kayak Association. DEVIN WAGNER / ARGUS LEADER

Ownership voids leave dangers unchecked

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Low-head dams such as the one in Baltic where Andrew Hanneman, 17, of Chester drowned July 11 often exist in a regulatory no-man's land. Neither federal, state nor local governments claim ownership of them.

Consequently, no government entity feels it can take the initiative to mitigate the safety hazard associated with the

dams, which have claimed so many lives they are widely known as drowning machines.

The dams, typically less than 15 feet in height, are estimated to number in the thousands throughout the U.S.

On the Big Sioux River, there are low-head dams in Flaudreau, Dell Rapids, Trent, Baltic — where there are two — Sioux Falls, at Klondike between Sioux Falls and Canton, in Canton and in Hawarden, Iowa. Another spans Split Rock

Creek in Garretson.

Many date to the early days of settlement. They are the legacy of lumber and gristmills, small hydropower plants and ice harvesting ventures that long ago passed into history. Others were built as public works projects during the Great Depression.

"These are not typically the dams we monitor," said Garland Erbele, director of the

See DAMS, Page 3A

LOW-HEAD DAMS

THREE OLDIES: In Minnehaha County, Frank Rice built the mill dam at Dell Rapids in 1872. The St. Olaf Roller Mill dam, where Andrew Hanneman died July 11, was built in 1881 by Frank and Justin Pettigrew. The Queen Bee Mill dam in Sioux Falls was built in 1878.

DELLS DAM: The Dell Rapids dam was rebuilt by the city in 1916 and again in 1933. That year, \$1.7 million in federal loans to South Dakota from the Relief Finance Corp. was used in part to fund the work at Dell Rapids and to build the dam at Garretson, designed to create a municipal swimming facility.