

Searchers may be at mercy of dam's hydraulics

A week ago Saturday, a canoe carrying 25-year-old Scott Loeding of Mapleview was swept over the Ramsey Dam on the Cedar River just northeast of Austin. In the week following the young man's apparent drowning, dragging operations have continued daily, sometimes intensively, in the relatively small spillway. But no indication of the body, as of this writing, has yet been found.

Some area residents, while quick to praise the recovery efforts by local search-and-rescue units, still wonder out loud, "Why can't they come up with the body?" And all this, ironically, while officials have an educated guess as to where it may be located.

So why don't they get it and put an end to the suffering of family members and friends?

"Look at this," Mower County Sheriff Wayne Goodnature said one day last week. He produced a copy of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources publication, "The Minnesota Volunteer," dated March-April 1983, given to him by Vern Busho, operator of the Old Mill, adjacent to Ramsey Dam.

He pointed to an article on the threat to lives posed by dams by Kim Elverum, a DNR boat and water safety coordinator, which included this account:

"In late September 1975, a tragic chain of events in Binghamton, N.Y., taught river users and rescue teams valuable lessons in dam safety. By the time the episode ended a day later, three persons



Bruce
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were dead and four had been injured.

"An early fall storm had made the Susquehanna River unusually high. One evening, two rafters were swept over the Rockbottom Dam and trapped in the current below the structure. Witnesses to the accident summoned help, and a rescue boat was launched with three firemen on board. In the turbulent water, the craft capsized. All three were thrown into the river. One fireman drowned; the other two, along with the two rafters, were eventually pulled from the water.

"The next day, on a body recovery operation for the lost fireman, the fire chief and two firemen approached the dam from downstream. As their outboard-powered boat reached the base of the dam, the current caught it and the boat turned over in the roiling water. Desperate attempts to rescue the trio failed, including a try with the fire department's extension ladder.

"Twenty minutes later, a rescue boat carrying two sheriff's deputies arrived on

the scene. By this time, two of the firemen had disappeared, the third was bobbing in the maelstrom.

"As if to add horror to horror, this attempt once again ended in tragedy as the third rescue craft overturned in the turbulent water. Luckily, the two deputies and the remaining firemen were swept clear of the dam and eventually rescued."

Goodnature interjected, "There are some strange and powerful forces at work below that dam. It may not seem like it; it may appear to be pretty harmless. But if we don't use our heads, there's a threat to the lives of the rescuers, too."

Goodnature met with Geo. A. Hormel & Co. engineers last week about some of the hydraulics at work at the dam. He said he was told that because of the years of steady, revolving flow of water over the dam, in which a circular, churning action forces some of the water back up against the dam, "scouring" of the concrete surface has occurred. It's possible Loeding's body may be lodged in one of these pock-marked sections of the dam below the water's surface, held there by the water's steady flow, said Goodnature.

"While the runoff at this time of year isn't unusually high, the current force of the water coming over the dam is powerful. We need to see that water level drop another foot-and-a-half or two to safely search into the face of the dam itself."

Goodnature indicated that with the past week's warm, drying conditions, those efforts could take place within a matter of

days. A search boat will continue to make daily sweeps near the dam and the shoreline. Water depth below the dam is about eight feet.

Loeding was with three companions, two in each canoe, when his craft went over. Wayne and David Nystel and Rick Loeding survived the accident.

Goodnature said that when probing equipment has been placed into and in front of the dam, the roiling action of the water has repelled it. The runoff water pouring over the dam creates a churning backwash, a recirculating current which takes any object — including a person — down to the bottom of the river, releases it upward, and sucks it back to the face of the dam. This cycle, according to the DNR safety expert, can continue indefinitely.

Goodnature said that Giles Healy, who lives close to the dam, has seen this hydraulic action in the past. "Healy said once he saw some kids go over the dam on inner tubes and one of their tubes disappeared for two months. When the water had gone down some, they found that it had been pinned underwater against the dam."

Goodnature said in the process of the recovery operations, he's gained a new respect for the "incredible" forces which took Loeding's life. "Once he got caught in that powerful pull above the dam, there was no way of avoiding the fall. But we're doing all we can to get him out, without losing someone else."