

DANGER AT THE DAM SPECIAL REPORT

Drowning machines

Communities around the nation are removing low dams or altering them for safety, but it's an expensive task

By Steve Bennis
Staff Writer

Fifty-four miles west of Chicago, the Yorkville low dam has been nothing if not predictable.

In 25 years, 18 have drowned at or near the dam that sits in the center of town, police say. Last summer, three died when two men tried to save another who had taken his kayak over the dam and became trapped in the dam's bowl.

Today, the 5-foot-high dam that stretches 535 feet across the Fox River is being modified for safety and recreation, courtesy of a multimillion-dollar Illinois Department of Natural Resources project.

In the Miami Valley, the Christmas Day drownings of Craig and Patricia Wenner at the Englewood low dam came as low dams throughout the United States are being re-examined — and in dozens of cases dismantled.

Craig Wenner, 50, a manager with Five Rivers MetroParks, died trying to save his wife, also 50, after she entered the Stillwater River to rescue their Labrador retriever puppy. The animal had become trapped in the dam's deadly hydraulic churn. In a terribly ironic twist, Craig Wenner, an expert in construction projects, was to be the MetroParks manager of a \$1.2 million project to remove the Englewood low dam by 2008. His body has not been recovered. Her body was recovered Jan. 4.

"Craig knew the dangers of the low dam so he knew his wife was in terrible danger," said Charlie Shoemaker, MetroParks executive director.

Industries that needed the dams long gone

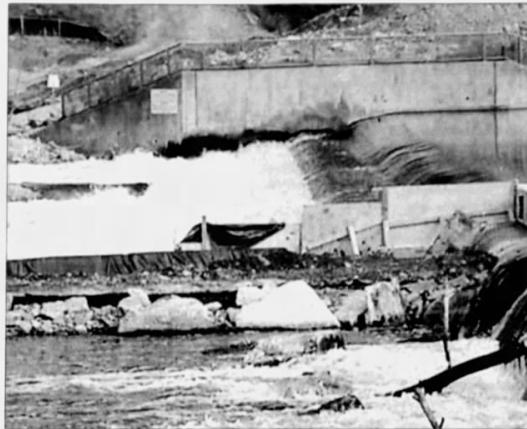
Once considered a desirable way to slow river flow and create pools of still water, low dams are increasingly under fire. States are removing them in large numbers. Besides posing deadly hazards, the dams block the movement of fish and the propagation of endangered fresh water mussels, both key factors in waterway health.

Ohio defines low heads as dams less than 15 feet high and built from timber, stone or concrete from bank to bank. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources has had a policy since 1973 to remove outdated dams that no longer serve a purpose. Since 1999, eight have been removed, according to ODNR.

Nationwide, 49 dams — many of them low heads — were scheduled for removal in 2006 in California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Pennsylvania and other states, according to American Rivers, a Washington-based nonprofit that pushes for restoring natural waterway flows. The organization has helped remove more than 50 in Pennsylvania in the past three years, said Stephanie Lindloff, director of the Restoring Rivers Initiative.

"A lot of these dams are remnants of an earlier time and served a function for industry," Lindloff said. "They have long outlived their useful lives."

There are 42 or so low dams in Butler, Clark, Darke, Greene,



The Yorkville Dam, about 50 miles west of Chicago, is being modified to improve safety and to help the environment. So far, the project has cost \$2.8 million. Contributed photo from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Miami, Montgomery, Preble and Warren counties, according to ODNR. Ohio has yet to adopt standards governing warning signs for the dams, which can be hard to spot from the water.

Laura Wildman, director of river science for American Rivers, calls the Yorkville dam a poster child for a dam that kills people.

"Removing them is one of the best things we can do to restore our rivers," she said.

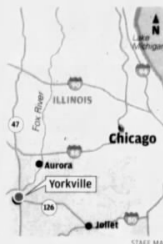
National estimates on the number of low dams in the U.S. start at 99,000 and extend to 2.5 million, Wildman said. No one knows for sure. "We can only guesstimate."

Dam in Illinois seemed to kill in groups

Yorkville, Ill., police Sgt. James Presnak, who investigated the triple-drowning, said that until he joined the force he didn't realize the sheer power of the dam.

"When I heard there were 18 (deaths) that was kind of shocking," he said.

Low dams are, in effect, drowning machines. They kill because water flowing over the drop forms a "hole," or hydraulic, at the base that traps objects. Recirculating current forms below the dam. A victim is



forced underwater, pushed away from the dam, then circulated to the top where the cycle repeats. It is nearly impossible to escape.

In Yorkville, workers have terraced the dam with an underwater staircase to make it survivable for anyone who goes over it. Plans would add a canoe channel and fish ladder.

The work so far has cost \$2.8 million, and there's no price tag for the rest of the job that is still in the design phase.

In all, the project is a welcome relief, said Greg Freeman, owner of Freeman Sports, a watercraft rental company along the Fox River for 35 years. Freeman witnessed the triple drowning in 2006 in which two brothers died trying to save a third man.

"It's great," he said of the proj-

ect. Yorkville police Lt. Rich Hart said the dam had a habit of killing or injuring multiple people in each of its deadly incidents.

"It seemed like it was never one person who drowned," Hart said. "It was always someone else who tried to do good, and it always ended up claiming more than one. It was a source of frustration for us for a lot of years."

Back in the Miami Valley, in Clark County along Buck Creek within the city of Springfield, four low dams are being considered for removal. They would be replaced with boulders to create pools and rapids for paddling sports, said Charles Swaney, secretary treasurer of the Springfield Conservancy District. The district is trying to get permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Ohio EPA.

Englewood Dam removal could begin in summer. The project to remove the Englewood low dam is awaiting regulatory reviews from the Ohio EPA and Corps of Engineers, said Five Rivers' Shoemaker.

Once that is completed, work on gradually removing the dam could begin this summer. The dam in 2003 was the site of a drowning — when World Airways pilot Willis Lawson Hunter, 37, of Nashville drowned there.

Meantime, a proposal to alter the Monument Avenue low dam remains on hold. Shoemaker said a rock bottom figure for re-engineering the dam to make it safer is probably \$2 million to \$3 million.

A full-blown project to create a water sports park, including river bank facilities, is about \$10 million — an amount considered too expensive.

Shoemaker said he plans to discuss with the Miami Conservancy District options for other area dams to make them safer. Kurt Rinehart, conservancy district chief engineer, said that although the last study of the Monument Avenue dam came in with a high estimate, there might be cheaper alternatives.

Details of tragic day revealed

Interviews show how rescuers, family members and good Samaritans responded to the Wenners' deaths.

By Ryan Justin Fox
Staff Writer

Based on interviews and incident reports from police and fire departments, what follows is an account of what happened the day Craig and Patricia Wenner and their dog, Shadow, drowned in the Stillwater River.

About 3 p.m. on Christmas Day, vague reports from Montgomery County sheriff's dispatch crackled over Ron Fletcher's radio about a couple that had fallen into the river.

Fletcher, Englewood's assistant fire chief, rushed to the Englewood low dam, but he was skeptical because inaccurate reports of people falling into the river are common.

It wasn't until he came across Bret Kittle, an off-duty Sidney firefighter, and his wife, Shelly, with two weeping teenage girls that he realized the gravity of the situation.

The girls were Craig and Patricia Wenner's daughters. Their mother had entered the water to get the family's black Labrador retriever puppy, Shadow. Their father had gone in after their mother.

All three disappeared as the daughters watched.

Just moments before, the Kittles were passing over the dam in their minivan, on their way to Christmas dinner at a relative's home in Englewood.

Bret Kittle said he noticed what he thought was someone struggling in the choppy waters of the low dam. He almost dismissed it as debris until his wife told him she thought she saw two girls on their knees near the water's edge.

"It's hard to know what you're seeing when you're driving over the dam at 50 mph," he said.

The Kittles then spotted one of the girls in the road, frantically waving down the minivan. She told the Kittles her parents had just fallen into the river. Kittle, a 13-year veteran and a member of his department's water rescue squad, grabbed an ice scraper and a set of jumper cables and headed to the dam.

Shelly Kittle stayed with the younger Wenner and called 911.

Bret Kittle said that by the time he was able to jog down the dam, there were no signs of life in the water. The older daughter, who had been at the water's edge searching for her parents, joined her sister at the top of the dam. Shelly Kittle sat them in the back of the van to help them calm down.

Bret Kittle lay on the ground at the edge of the dam, calling for anyone in the water to reach for out for him.

No one answered. The Kittles and the Wenner girls waited at the minivan until Fletcher was able to make his way to the scene.

By the time Fletcher radioed Englewood police Sgt. Mike

Lang to their location, Fletcher had initiated deployment of the North Rescue Response Zone, an advanced rescue unit comprised of several northern Montgomery County fire departments.

Firsthand knowledge helps

Three years ago, a motorist passing over the bridge thought she noticed someone in the water. A search of Englewood MetroPark turned up nothing until the body of missing pilot Lawson Hunter washed up downstream two days later.

Three years ago "we didn't really know who or what was in the water," Fletcher said. "This was the first time we had reliable knowledge of someone in trouble in the river," which he said expedited the response.

The Wenner girls, fighting back tears, were able to tell Lang and Fletcher that the family was walking Shadow on the north side of the dam just south of the low head area along the west bank. When the dog went into the water, their mother, then their father, followed.

The daughters told the officers that their mother was not a good swimmer and that they knew their parents were dead.

'We're really just taking it one day at a time'

In the aftermath, Bret Kittle said he and his wife continued on to the relative's house to clean up and "try to have dinner" but eventually went home.

"It shook my wife up quite a bit. My wife kept commenting about how the oldest one (daughter) seemed so strong when everything was going on," Kittle said. "We will never have another Christmas again without thinking about them."

Shadow's remains were found on Dec. 29. Patricia Wenner's remains were recovered Jan. 4. Craig Wenner's remains have not been recovered.

Craig's father, Donald, said the couple had hoped to be cremated together. He also said the girls have decided to finish the school year.

"The girls are doing fine. We're really just taking it one day at a time," he said from his home in Bucyrus.

The wait for Craig Wenner continues

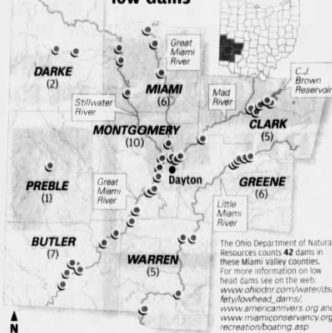
Fletcher said the northern rescue squad's search for Craig Wenner has pretty much concluded. Search teams performed "one final sweep" of the river Jan. 11, but cadaver dogs gave "no indication" of a body.

"We believe he is no longer in our jurisdiction," Fletcher said. "Agencies along the Great Miami River have been notified that he might surface."

Both Wenners were 50. "We would like to thank MetroParks and all the volunteers and firefighters and their efforts to help us find Craig and Patricia," Donald Wenner said.

Contact this reporter at (937) 225-2263 or rfox@DaytonDailyNews.com.

Number of Miami Valley low dams



Source: Ohio Dept. of Natural Resources

STAFF GRAPHIC




AMERICA'S REPLACEMENT WINDOW

Saving America's Energy One Home at a Time