

For canoeists, unmarked dam is unseen peril

Four died at the Goodrich Dam in 1977, and two more last month. Despite state law, there's still no warning sign.

By Kathryn Masterson
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Something was wrong; she knew it immediately, Joanna House recalls. Her husband, Fred, who called anytime he traveled, had not checked in from his canoe trip with their 14-year-old son, Paul, the afternoon of May 24.

Her instincts were right. Fred and Paul House were missing, and soon search crews began to comb the Perkiomen Creek area by foot, boat and helicopter. It should have

been an easy trip for them, Joanna House and family friends said. Her husband and son were avid, yet cautious, outdoorsmen who had packed a map and a cellular phone in a plastic bag that day.

But rescuers concluded that the pair most likely got caught in the powerful hydraulics of the unmarked Goodrich Dam, where their mangled canoe and life jackets were found. It is a dam referred to by water-safety authorities as a dam of death, and one that a recent state

law required to be marked on both sides with danger signs and buoys. But it was not marked, state officials and rescuers agree.

"I honestly think they never knew it was there," Joanna House said, noting that her husband made his children wear life jackets if they were fishing from a pier. "If anyone would have stopped, it would have been Fred."

More than 20 years ago, other parents tried to ensure that the dam would be marked, to keep anyone else from dying there.

Daniel and Barbara Black of Wayne lost their son, Daniel, 17, who died with three of his friends

in a canoeing accident at the same spot in the Oaks section of Upper Providence Township.

In 1977, they sued B. F. Goodrich Co., which then owned the dam behind its tire plant. In addition to an \$80,000 out-of-court settlement, Barbara Black said recently, they were promised that the dam would be marked.

When Black read about two more people dying at the dam, she was stunned. "It's just too much," she said. "You see that again, and you say, 'No. No.'"

■
On May 24, Fred House came
See **GOODRICH DAM** on B2



SCOTT S. HAMRICK / Inquirer Suburban Staff

A sign warns against trespassing at the Goodrich Dam on Perkiomen Creek, but boaters in the creek have no warning of the danger the dam can pose.

Despite six deaths, dam lacks warning

GOODRICH DAM from B1
home early from his job at Lockheed Martin to take Paul on one of their frequent excursions. Paul bounded out the door, Joanna House said, and she made him go back to change his T-shirt, which he had been wearing for the last three days. "But Mom, I'm going canoeing," she remembered him saying. Fred left her with a kiss, she said, promising to return with a bottle of champagne to celebrate the 16th anniversary of their engagement.

Fred and Paul had a street map book, with tabs marking their intended route from the Collegeville Inn to the Betzwood Bridge in Valley Forge National Historical Park, family friend Clifford Roach said. Roach was supposed to pick them up at the park.

After more than a week of heavy rains, the Perkiomen was 10 times its usual height, according to a gauge at Graterford. The National Weather Service was calling for severe thunderstorms that evening.

Roach said Fred House had told him that if storms hit or conditions seemed bad, he would pull over and call him on the cell phone.

Witnesses reported spotting a laughing pair paddling down the creek. A fisherman said he helped them portage their canoe around the Weatherill Dam, a so-called "low-head" dam upstream from the Goodrich plant that was marked on the street map.

"It's a picture I'll never get rid of, the guys going down the creek, fine," Roach said. But the Houses never arrived at the designated meeting place, and after about 90 minutes, Roach called police.

The next morning, rescuers found their 17-foot canoe, bent in half, and their life jackets in the spillway of the Goodrich Dam. Roach, co-owner of the canoe, brought a kayak and searched for 10 hours every day, traveling up and down the Perkiomen and the Schuylkill, into which the creek flows.

He discovered Paul House's body six days later, in the river in Upper Merion.

Fred House's body still has not been found.

Low-head dams — simple-to-build structures once used for mills and agriculture — are especially dangerous because a boater cannot easily distinguish where the water level drops, said Dan Tredinnick, a spokesman for the state Fish and Boat Commission.

The drop-off causes a boil, which

pushes water down and back up again. The pull causes secondary hydraulic action farther downstream, sucking water from both ends of the dam.

State law says the owners of low-head dams are responsible for marking them to alert boaters and swimmers of this danger. Sometimes, though, the state has trouble finding the owners. The Goodrich Dam, built in the 1940s to supply water for tire production and abandoned when B. F. Goodrich vacated the Oaks plant in 1986, is one of 50 unclaimed dams in the state, officials said.

The state Department of Environmental Protection, charged by law with notifying dam owners of the sign requirement, originally contacted neighboring Lower Providence Township, said spokeswoman April Hutcheson. But the township said it had no record of having acquired the Goodrich Dam, she said.

The DEP then wrote to Oak Mills Inc. in Upper Providence, owned by Donald J. Neilson, who bought the Goodrich property in 1989, according to Montgomery County real estate records. The deed on file says the land transferred to Neilson by Goodrich extends to the banks of Perkiomen Creek.

The DEP's letter to Neilson was returned, Hutcheson said, and the agency is still trying to reach him.

Neilson did not return phone calls seeking an interview.

Clifford Roach has lived on Perkiomen Creek for eight years, just behind the Collegeville Inn. He's seen the usually shallow creek in all conditions, he said, and though the water was high, the Perkiomen did not appear to be dangerous the day Fred and Paul House set off for what was supposed to be a 3½-hour trip.

"It was not a problem at all," Roach said. "People were fishing and wading."

"I want people to understand, there wasn't this mystical storm that blew them out of the water. They [the rescuers] all think the dam is a deadly dam."

Said Joanna House: "That dam has got to go."

Fred, who adopted six children, took in more than 20 foster children, and during his lunch hour tutored youngsters struggling with math, would fight for that, she said.

"I don't care what it takes," House said. "This will be for Fred and Paul."

Kathryn Masterson's e-mail address is kamasterson@phillynews.com