



Photo for the Tribune by Alan Hawes

Geneva firefighters retrieve a small rowboat from the Fox River Monday morning. A 27-year-old Batavia man was last seen clinging to the boat as it plunged over a dam near Illinois Highway 38.

Drowning feared at Fox dam

By Art Barnum

Geneva firefighters suspended the search Monday for a 27-year-old Batavia man who was seen plunging over a Fox River dam clinging to a small rowboat just after midnight.

After searching most of Memorial Day, Fire Department officials said they believe Matthew J. Rowe, 27, drowned in the river after going over the dam, just north of Illinois Highway 38, in downtown Geneva.

Rowe and Joslyn V. Midgley, 23, of Geneva, were trying to cross the river in a flat bottomed boat shortly after midnight Monday, police said.

Midgley, who was uninjured, told police that when it became apparent that the boat would not reach the opposite bank because of the strong currents, Rowe told her to jump and swim to safety.

After Midgley reached the shore, she told police she saw Rowe clinging to the boat, which had capsized after going over the dam.

Midgley called police from a nearby restaurant, but when she returned to the riverbank Rowe had disappeared. The boat was recovered after it became lodged in rocks below the dam.

Fire Department officials said they believed Rowe's body could be in a deep hole of water just

below the dam.

Fire Chief Frank Johnson said crews searched the river from the dam downstream to Batavia, a distance of about 1½ miles.

Johnson said he did not know why the boat was on the river so late at night or why it was so dangerously close to the dam.

Fire officials believe that Rowe went over the dam and soon lost his grip on the boat as he fought a strong churning undertow at the base of the dam.

Neither person was wearing a lifejacket, officials said.

The searchers used drag lines across the base of the dam, where the river, usually about 6 feet deep, drops off to 14 feet.

Kane County Coroner Mary Lou Kearns, said that drownings at the dams are "one of the biggest causes of accidental deaths in our county."

Although she said that Rowe's apparent drowning is the first this year, the county could have as many as 12 such deaths a year.

"It's hard to say how many of these accidents are avoidable," she said. "Some involve drinking, and some involve just being too close to the dam."

"I don't know the facts to this case, but being on the river at that time of night, you can't really see the dam and your perception is limited," Kearns said.

Most of such dams in the Chicago area, including 10 on the Fox River in Kane and Kendall Counties, were built in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration. They were built to help control the energy of the river along its path, as well as prevent erosion along its path.

But the design of the dams creates a large "roller" or "boil" of water at the base of each dam, which creates an undertow that holds on to logs, boats or people that go over the dam.

They are particularly dangerous because the waters above the dam appear tranquil and serene.

The powerful undertows below the dams become death traps to anyone who gets caught up in them, officials say. In the last decade more than 100 people have drowned in accidents at Chicago-area dams.

Officials warned that playing near such dams can be extremely dangerous.

"There is a roller created as the water goes over the dam. ... It will hold on to a log, or to a body," said Martin Stralow, chief dam safety engineer for the Illinois Department of Transportation.

"It is not a place to play. It is like playing in the middle of the interstate."