

Currents prove fatal at Bullhole

Body recovered not far from where man went under at RiverPark at Cooleemee Falls

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COOLEEMEE — A drowning victim's body was found Saturday, hours after crews in rescue boats from Rowan and Davie counties had combed the South Yadkin River looking for him. The Salisbury man had disappeared downstream of the popular "Bullhole," now known as RiverPark at Cooleemee Falls.

The missing man was identified as Steven Tanksley, 45, of Salisbury.

His body was found just before 9 p.m., Rowan County Emergency Services Chief Frank Thomason said.

Earlier in the afternoon, four other people — three men and a woman — were pulled safely out of the river by rescue personnel. A dog also was saved.

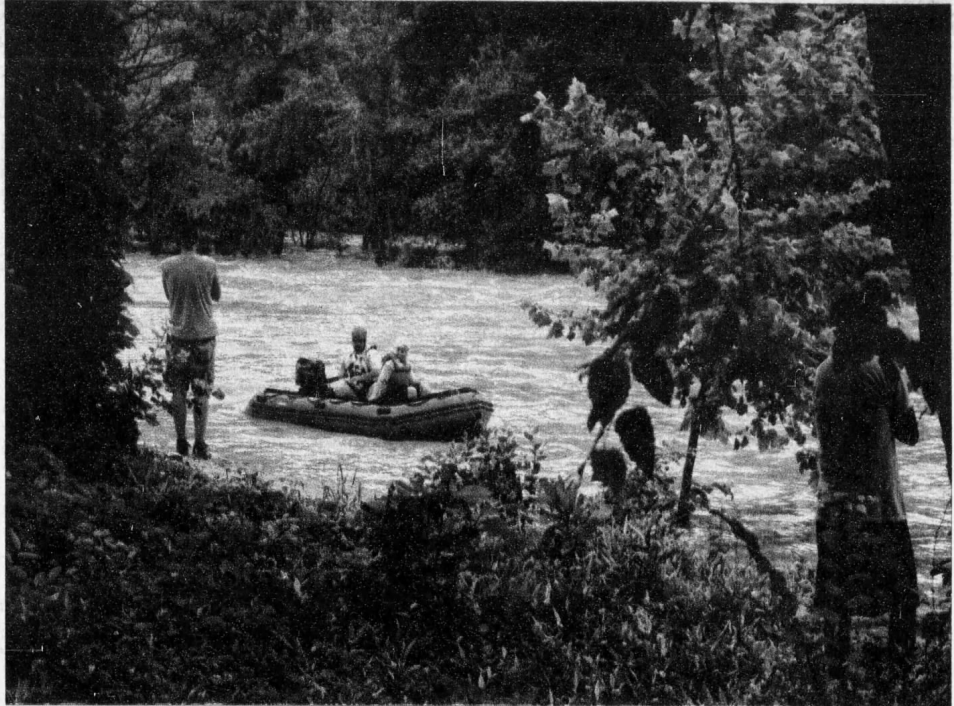
The search for Tanksley extended roughly six miles from the Bullhole to the confluence of the Yadkin and South Yadkin rivers at the Hannah Ferry Road access.

Recent rains have swollen the river, and the current is surging downstream of the falls, where water is pouring over the raceway with unusual force.

"I certainly wouldn't recommend anyone being out on the water on a day like this," Thomason said.

Kelly Shumaker was in the water with Tanksley as they both were trying to reach a dog caught in the strong current.

"He went under, and I couldn't find him," she said of Tanksley. Two other men swam farther downstream after the dog. One of



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Rescue crews search for a victim in the water below the Bullhole on Saturday. They also rescued four people from the high waters.

those men was brought up from the water with the dog near the N.C. 801 bridge.

Shumaker, who said she had been a trained lifeguard in the past, made it safely to a bank on the Davie County side of the river, where she was later picked up by a rescue boat.

She could not safely swim upstream to

Emanuel Christian, who had broken his ankle and was crying out in pain after falling off the top of the dam with the same dog that was later rescued.

Christian was taken by EMS to Novant Health Rowan Medical Center for his ankle injury. After falling into the surging water,

Christian latched onto a fallen log just below the dam and toward the Davie County side of the park.

That's where a rescue boat picked up him and Joshua Ijames of Cooleemee. Ijames was one of the men who had jumped into the river

See **Bullhole**, 4A

4A ■ SUNDAY, JULY 7, 2013

CONTINUED

SALISBURY POST

Bullhole

Continued from 1A

to try and save the dog.

After exiting the water downstream and running back toward the Bullhole for help, Ijames then swam out to Christian. He said Christian rested on his shoulder until the rescue boat took both of them back to shore.

Thomason said upwards of 75 people were at the RiverPark when the first 911 call came in. Numerous people, he added, said they saw Tanksley go under the water, but rescuers went on the premise he could have come back up downstream.

"That's our concentration at this point," Thomason said during the search effort.

The Woodleaf, Miller's Ferry and Ellis Crossroads fire departments were among the agencies involved in the search with the rescue squads. The Cooleemee Police Department also was on hand.

A brief storm forced the search crews to suspend their efforts at 6:14 p.m. until the weather cleared. The search operation resumed at 7:23 p.m. and the victim's body was found at 8:50.

Witnesses said Tanksley had been at the Bullhole with three sons who were fishing.

"I was fishing with his kids earlier," Ijames said of the missing father. "I didn't see him go in."

Mauricio Samuel Christian, Emanuel's brother, said Shumaker, his girlfriend, and members of his family had gone ahead of him to the Bullhole on Saturday.

As he was arriving later, Mauricio met one of the missing man's sons coming toward the parking lot. The boy said, "My daddy went under the water," Christian recalled. He took everything out of his pockets and ran toward the water, fearing his family members could be in trouble, too.

"I lost my mind, man," Christian said. "I lost my mind."

Once he knew all the members of his family were safe, Christian asked why rescue teams weren't calling in helicopters to look up and down the river for Tanksley.



Water rushes over the dam Saturday at the RiverPark at Cooleemee Falls. Currents at the Bullhole were treacherous from all the recent rain. PJ WARD-BROWN/SALISBURY POST



One of the Davie County EMS crew talks with family members of the missing man Saturday as the search effort continued.



A rescue team brings two men who were stuck in the middle of the South Yadkin River to shore.

If it were a manhunt for a criminal who had shot someone or blown something up, Christian said, helicopters would be flying up and down the river. "I don't appreciate not having aerial support," he said. "That's what we pay for."

Thomason said the dense tree canopy on both sides of the river would make it diffi-

cult for helicopters to search the river other than the very middle. Personnel on boats provide a better search approach for the whole width of the river in this case, Thomason said.

Martin Paularena of Statesville watched some of the rescue operation from the shoreline. He has brought his family here several times to

swim. "I came with the intention to (swim)," Paularena said, "but when I saw it — no way. The current, the turmoil, the

mud — that's not safe at all. It just takes one second."

Paularena said it was the first time he had seen the river at the Bullhole this high

and fast, with that much water running over the falls.

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