

Woman drowns, family rescued at Enka Dam on Nolichucky River

- By Robert Moore, Tribune Staff Writer
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Deputy Lt. Eddie Hefner throws a lifeline to family members stuck in a raft at the Enka low-head dam on the Nolichucky River. Rescue workers saved the five people in the raft. The mother of two of the children, Anna Last, who tried to swim the raft to shore drowned.

Cocke County resident Anna Last drowned Thursday afternoon as she tried to free her children and others from a raft caught in the currents above and below the Enka low-head dam on the Nolichucky River in Hamblen County, authorities say.

In a perilous and complicated rescue effort, first responders saved Last's children, along with two other children and one adult, who were in the spinning raft, according to Danny Houseright, director of the Morristown Emergency Medical Service.

Houseright said another child, 13, was saved by a fisherman downstream. The circumstances of that rescue were not entirely clear at press time

Last, a 29-year-old woman who lived on Fowler's Ridge Road near the Nolichucky, wasn't wearing a life vest when her body was recovered in a debris field about a half-mile downstream, according to Houseright.

“I’m extremely happy that the rescue of those children was successful,” Houseright said this morning. “It was bittersweet, though, knowing the kids you saved ... their mother had just perished.”

Houseright said the rescue effort was probably the most important in his 25-year career.

“We had children to rescue out of a very dangerous situation. Things could have gone (badly) and there’s nothing we could have done.

“You can’t dive in that water and save them,” he added. “You would just drown yourself.”

The complicating factor in the dramatic rescue was a hydraulic, a circular current created beneath the 4-foot dam. Not only was the hydraulic enough to keep the raft in one place, the highly aerated water creates less buoyancy, which hampered Last as she tried to pull the raft to safety.

As the raft, which was basically a large inner tube with mesh inserts for seating and a mesh floor, approached the dam, Last tried to swim the raft to the shore, according to Sgt. David Cribley with the Hamblen County Sheriff’s Department.

“As (the raft) went over the dam, Anna continued to try and swim the raft out of the circulating dam water, but was unsuccessful,” Cribley’s offense report states. “(The adult) said that numerous attempts were made to get Anna in the raft, but she continued to try to swim the raft to safety.”

At some point, the current began pulling Last beneath the water. She surfaced and swam back to the raft at least two times. Cribley said the mother apparently had drowned prior to the current taking her downstream.

Houseright had high praise for the cooperation between the sheriff’s department, the Hamblen County Rescue Squad and EMS personnel.

After two weighted 25-foot throw bags were tied together, Deputy Lt. Eddie Hefner threw the line toward the spinning raft, according to the EMS director, who said the vessel certainly would have gone under if it would not have had a porous floor.

Hefner had to time his throw precisely so that the lone adult in the raft could catch the line as the raft traveled in circles, according to Houseright.

“I was terrified,” Houseright said. “If the edge of that raft dips down in the water, they’re gone.”

ANNA JEAN LAST

Anna Jean Last, 29, of Newport, passed away Thursday, June 1, 2017.

She was preceded in death by her father, John C. Redman.

She is survived by her mother, Mary Redman of Newport; husband, Geoffery Last of Greeneville; sons, Silas Walker Last, John Dillard Redman and Dakota Last, all of Newport; sister, Grace Redman of Newport; many nieces, nephews and friends.

The family will receive friends from 5 to 7 p.m. on Saturday, June 3 with funeral services to follow in the Manes Funeral Home Chapel.

Burial will be 1 p.m. Sunday, June 4 in the Point Pleasant Cemetery.