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Decorah man drowns in Waucoma

By Sarah Strandberg, News Editor

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Christopher Spilde, 30, Decorah, drowned Sunday afternoon in the "Mill Pond" in Waucoma.

According to Waucoma Fire Chief Dave Wenthold, Spilde was attempting to swim across the pond, from the park area toward Main Street, when his girlfriend said he began yelling for help. She drove to the other side of the pond, but by the time she arrived there, she could no longer see him.

Wenthold said the Fire Department was called at about 5 p.m. Before members of the Department arrived, the woman flagged down three men who were boating on the pond: Mitch Langreck, Brian Kleve and Sam Wenthold, all of Waucoma.

"She was yelling that her boyfriend had been under the water for a while and hadn't surfaced. She couldn't find him ... she was real frantic," Langreck said.

Langreck then dove into the water twice, touching the bottom once, but he couldn't find Spilde. The pond is above a dam on the Little Turkey River and Langreck said his friends advised him that a spillway that leads to the bottom of the dam has a strong current and that he could get "sucked in" if he kept going.

Fire Chief Wenthold said the area is popular for boating, but swimming is typically confined to the area near the park.

"It's uncommon to be swimming in that area," he said, referring to the location where Spilde went under water. "It's a very deep channel."

Due to the floodgates there, Wenthold said there could be an undertow in the river. When firefighters arrived, they began a search and rescue operation, but when that was unsuccessful, they began dragging the riverbed. After about an hour and 15 minutes, Spilde was located near where he was last seen, about 15 feet from the river bank.

"He was about 90 percent across. I'm assuming he got in that undertow, and couldn't get through it," Wenthold said.

Langreck said he later questioned whether he should have continued searching, but after hearing that people trained in water rescue would be hesitant to conduct a search near a dam, he felt he probably made the right decision.

"It was a scary predicament. I was pretty shaken," Langreck said.

The incident remains under investigation, according to the Fayette County Sheriff's Department, which assisted the Fire Department. Also responding were Waucoma First Responders and Northeast Iowa Medical Transport.

Funeral arrangements for Spilde are pending at Schluter-Balik Funeral Home in Decorah.





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