

# Accident Database

**Report ID# 1069**

Help

2006-05-27

Date

Craig Fliege

Victim

38

Victim Age

Fox

River

b) Yorkville

Section

Glen D. Palmer Dam, Yorkville United States Illinois, US

Location

Gage

**Medium**

Water Level

**N/A**

River Difficulty

**Caught in a Natural Hydraulic**

Cause

Cause Code(s)

- **Caught in Low Head Dam Hydraulic**

Injury Type(s)

- **Does not Apply**

Factors

- **One Boat Trip**

**Inexperienced**

Victim Experience Level

**Private**

Trip Type

**Kayak - Other**

Boat Type

Group Info

Bruce Sperling and Mark Sperling

Other Victim Names

Reported

Status

## Accident Description

<http://www.belleville.com/mld/belleville/news/state/14691354.htm>

Posted on Sun, May. 28, 2006

Three men drown near Fox River dam

Associated Press

YORKVILLE, Ill. - A kayaker and two brothers all drowned after getting caught by a powerful current near a dam in the Fox River, authorities said. Bruce Sperling, 32, and Mark Sperling, 27, saw Craig Fliege row his kayak over the Glen D. Palmer Dam near Yorkville and get caught in the swirling water around 1 p.m. on Saturday, according to the Yorkville Police Department. The brothers ran into the river to try and rescue Fliege, 38, and also got sucked into the current, the department said in a statement.

The men were taken to Rush-Copley Medical Center in Aurora where they were pronounced dead. The state had been preparing for two years to make safety renovations to the dam, located about 50 miles west of Chicago, said Gary Clark, director of the Office of Water Resources at the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Plans included a chute for canoes that would allow crafts to avoid the dam while traveling downstream, Clark told the Chicago Tribune. "We were hoping to get it fixed before we had another accident there," Clark said. "This was selected as our No. 1 project." Buoys near the dam warn people in the water of upcoming danger, and signs posted along the dam's bank list the dates of deaths by drowning there since the late 1960s.

From Chicago Tribune Online Edition

Dam risk echoed after deaths Concerns don't stop boaters, vendor says

Margaret Ramirez Tribune staff reporter

May 30, 2006

The owner of a canoe-rental business near a dam on the Fox River in Yorkville where three men drowned over the weekend said the fatal accident did little to deter people from getting out on the water on Memorial Day, one of the busiest boating days of the summer season. But Greg Freeman, owner of Freeman's Sports, said Monday that he was questioned several times about the details surrounding the deaths and whether they could have been prevented. "I don't let anyone who rents canoes or kayaks from us to go near the dam," said Freeman. "We always explain that to our customers. You can put up signs and warnings, but sometimes you just can't protect someone from himself."

The drownings occurred about 1 p.m. Saturday when Craig Fliege, 38, of Villa Park paddled his kayak too close to the edge of the Palmer Dam and was sucked in by an undertow. Bruce Sperling, 31, of Lombard and his brother Mark, 27, of Yorkville, who were about to rent a canoe, ran into the river to save Fliege but were pulled into the whirlpool-like currents.

Freeman, who saw the accident, said he forbids customers who rent canoes and kayaks to travel upstream near the dam because of the fierce undertow. At least 13 people have drowned there since 1960. Warning signs are posted along the dam's bank. Freeman believes the only way to prevent future fatalities is to reconstruct the dam in a way to diminish the force of the water's current. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources plans to make improvements, including a canoe chute to allow paddlers to avoid the dam while traveling downstream, officials said.

Bruce Sperling was a popular youth pastor at Lombard Bible Church in Lombard. Mark Sperling owned a home construction business.

### Three men drown in kayak mishap on Fox River

By Antonio Olivo and Jamie Francisco Tribune staff reporters

Published May 28, 2006

As the summer kayaking season kicked off its first weekend, three men drowned near the Glen D. Palmer Dam on the Fox River in Yorkville, a notoriously dangerous spot that state officials have been preparing to fix for two years. The accident occurred about 1 p.m. Saturday, when two brothers tried to rescue Villa Park resident Craig Fliege, 38, who had rowed his kayak too close to the edge of the dam. Bruce Sperling, 32, a youth pastor at a church in Lombard, and Mark Sperling, 27, owner of a home construction business, noticed Fliege caught in the whirlpool-like currents and ran into the river to try to save him, officials said. The brothers also

got sucked under in the currents, which have claimed the lives of at least 13 people since the dam was built in 1960.

As news of the accident spread Sunday, local activists who have long sought to tear down the dam criticized the state Department of Natural Resources for taking too long to eliminate the safety hazard. "It's something that has happened in the past, and if the dam is there, it'll happen again," said Tom Schrader, vice president of the non-profit Friends of the Fox River. "Sometimes people think it's a thrill to ride these rapids. They'll try to go over the dams." Since 2004, the DNR has been preparing a multimillion-dollar renovation of the dam that would make it less hazardous, said Gary Clark, director of the agency's Office of Water Resources. The planned improvements include a canoe chute that would allow boaters to go around the dam while traveling downstream, Clark said. "We were hoping to get it fixed before we had another accident there," Clark said. "This was selected as our No. 1 project." The dam's hazards are deceptive, with the river remaining shallow for several hundred yards before a sudden drop close to the dam's edge that creates a fierce rolling undertow that can knock a person off his feet, officials said. Signs posted along the dam's bank list the dates of drownings there since the late 1960s. On Saturday, Fliege rowed past buoys warning of the dam's hazards, said Greg Freeman, who rents canoes and kayaks near the dam and watched the rescue attempt unfold through binoculars. "When he got 30 to 40 feet away from the dam, he put on his life jacket," Freeman said. "It looked to me like he was talking on a cell phone right before he went over."

Freeman said he put down his binoculars to call 911. When he picked up the binoculars again, he saw the Sperling brothers who had been preparing to rent a canoe from him sprinting toward the water. "It's terrible the way it happened. They just didn't realize the power of the water," he said. "If you get into that boil, you're dead. There's no second chances."

Bruce Sperling Sr., father of the two brothers, said he has often worried about the dam's safety while visiting his son Mark, who lived across Mill Street from the structure. The two brothers had lately been canoeing a lot together as a way to get past the death last year of their mother, he said. "They were just trying to spend an afternoon together to relax," the elder Sperling said, his voice growing hoarse during a break in funeral arrangements for his two sons. He added that he was not surprised to learn that his sons tried to rescue Fliege. "Both of them lived their lives like that, doing whatever they could do to help people," he said. That commitment

was deeply felt at Lombard Bible Church, where Bruce Sperling had been a youth pastor the last four years.

On Sunday, church members spent hours sharing memories of how the energetic young pastor changed their lives and how he had often rescued many from their own roiling waters. "He was Christ-like," said Lisa McKay, whose son Mike turned to Bruce Sperling when she and her husband were having marital problems. He wound up counseling the entire family. On Saturday, hours before he died, Bruce Sperling and other church members helped renovate a Lombard senior citizen's home as part of a weekend message about the parable of the good Samaritan, McKay said. "That's what he was, the good Samaritan of Lombard," she said. "He was always going out of his way to help someone."

Several among a group of about 40 students who were part of Bruce Sperling's youth ministry wept openly over the loss of a man many considered their best friend. Bruce Sperling, a math wizard with a passion for practical jokes and Smurf figures, always listened when many adults didn't, they said. Steve Chavez, 19, said Bruce Sperling helped him overcome difficult times. "He was one of the first people I turned to," Chavez said. "When I met him, I had to be the shyest kid here. He really opened me up." Nathan Greene, 17, vowed to model himself after Bruce Sperling, whom he considered a mentor. "He always talked to me as if I were a leader and said he couldn't wait to see what I was going to become in the future," Greene said, sobbing. "When I heard how he died, I thought, 'That's exactly what Bruce would do.' He would always tackle everything head-on." [aolivo@tribune.com](mailto:aolivo@tribune.com)

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