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A dam's murky legacy

'Drowning machines' still taking lives, 10 years after Parkhill tragedy claimed 12-year-old boy, police diver

FRANCES BARRICK
RECORD STAFF

CAMBRIDGE

Ten years ago Tuesday, 12-year-old Mark Gage did what many youths had done for decades on a hot afternoon by the Parkhill dam in Cambridge.

He dived into the water.

But he didn't surface.

Later that day, Aug. 12, 1998, Const. Dave Nicholson, 32, died trying to recover Mark's trapped body from an underwater opening in the dam.

Their deaths changed forever the way people viewed this picturesque dam across the Grand River. "If there is one good thing that has come out of that tragedy is that people are more aware of the dangers," said Ralph Beaumont of the Grand River Conservation Authority, which owns Parkhill dam.

Today, signs warn swimmers and boaters of the hazards of the structure. Fire Chief Terry Allen says he no longer sees children swimming in the area or walking on top of the dam.

Yet people continue to drown at dams in Ontario.

Just two weeks ago, 16-year-old Josue Perez of Toronto and 20-year-old Matthew Janssen of St. Anns in the Niagara Region drowned within an hour of each other at two separate hydro-generating dams on the Muskoka River near Bracebridge.

In April 2006, Ken Jamieson died near Paris, Ont., when his canoe went over a dam and capsized. And in August 2005, the force of rushing water pinned 15-year-old Harriet Ash against a dam near Peterborough where she drowned.

From 1998 to 2004, the latest year for which there are statistics, eight people died at Ontario dams; a total of 20 died across Canada, the Lifesaving Society of Canada says.

Two years before the Parkhill tragedy, there had been two near-drownings at the dam.

The Waterloo Regional Police disbanded its dive team shortly after the deaths of Mark Gage and Dave Nicholson. In the spring of 2000, an inquest was held, the only inquest in Ontario to examine a dam-related drowning.

In a key recommendation, the jury called for legislation, similar to a Pennsylvania law, requiring dam owners to post warning signs and place buoys identifying the hazards above and below spillways. In Pennsylvania, owners who disobey the law and people who ignore the warning signs can be fined.

Eight years after the Parkhill inquest, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, which oversees provincial waterways, is still drafting the rules.

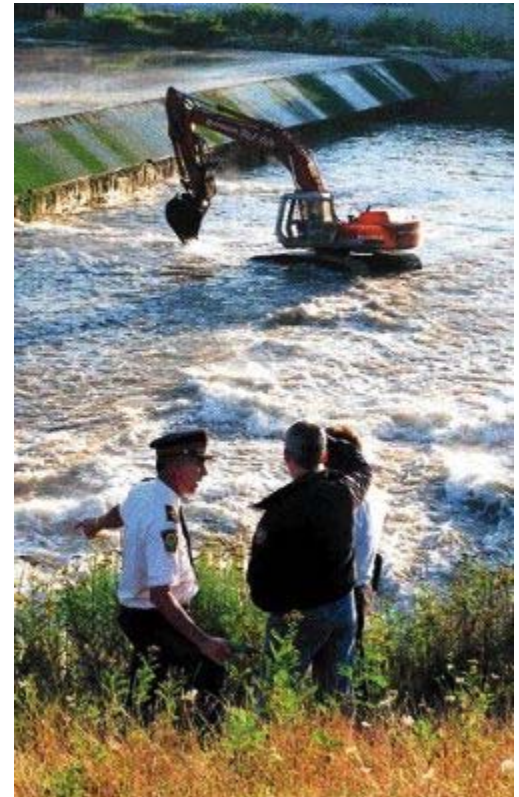
Ken MacDonald believes his wife would be alive today if the province had acted sooner.

"I think there remains a complete lack of urgency by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources to address a known problem," MacDonald said. "I think it is just sad that the province doesn't seem to believe it is a priority in light of continuing deaths."

In October 2006, MacDonald and his 53-year-old wife, Deb, were removing their boat for the winter at their Gravenhurst-area cottage when Deb was apparently swept down a spillway in a concrete dam on Loon Lake. She struck her head on the dam's edge.

Before, MacDonald never viewed dams as being dangerous.

"They look somewhat harmless," he said. "But what appears to be safe, isn't. You see dams everywhere which are completely unprotected."



FILE PHOTO BY ROBERT WILSON, RECORD STAFF



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Now he's pushing for tougher rules on dam safety and more public education about the dangers.

"It would have definitely prevented my wife's death," MacDonald said.

Wendy Hostetter, Nicholson's widow who has since remarried and lives in Michigan, said she's saddened to hear that the province hasn't implemented any rules pertaining to dam safety. This was one of the recommendations she herself asked the jury to consider at the Parkhill inquest.

Low-head dams, such as the Parkhill structure, are particularly dangerous.

They are hard to detect from a boat on the upstream side because they have a low profile in the water. On the downstream side, the "boil" -- where the spill meets the riverbed -- can trap and drown people. They are often called "drowning machines."

Both Mark and Nicholson drowned in a submerged sluice in the dam, pinned against debris by the force of the water.

In Ontario, there are about 2,200 dams, 1,000 of them privately owned. The bigger structures are owned by Ontario Power Generation, which has signs and warning devices surrounding them.

There are about 100 dams in the Grand River watershed, of which 32, owned by the Grand River Conservation Authority, are marked as a result of the inquest.

Many other conservation authorities across the province have also installed warning signs and devices at their dams as a result of the Parkhill tragedy, said Don Pearson, general manager of Conservation Ontario, which represents 36 conservation authorities.

Rob Messervey, Ministry of Natural Resources water-resources manager, said in an e-mail that the proposed dam guidelines will lay out safety measures for dams in Ontario that are accessible to the public. These measurements would include mandatory public-safety programs such as signage, inspections to ensure structural integrity of dams and guidelines for removing structures deemed unnecessary or too costly to fix.

Messervey said these regulations "are fairly imminent."

Barry Hurndall, executive director of the Canadian Dam Association, said only British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec have dam-safety legislation.

While Hurndall believes it is the responsibility of dam owners to post warning signs, "ultimately it is an individual's responsibility to heed the warning," Hurndall said.

Bracebridge OPP Const. Skeeter Kruger said large signs were posted at the two waterfalls where two young men died this summer, but even signs can't always stop what he called thrill-seekers.

"It is unfortunately tragic, when it takes a death to become a life lesson," he said.

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REMEMBERING VICTIMS

A brief ceremony marking the 10th anniversary of the drownings at the Parkhill dam in Cambridge will be held Tuesday at the memorial garden overlooking the dam.

"We just want to take a moment to pause and reflect on the lives" of 12-year-old Mark Gage and Const. Dave Nicholson who died at the dam on Aug. 12, 1998, said Insp. Bryan Larkin of Waterloo Regional Police.

Nicholson has been the only officer to die in the line of duty in the force's history.

Members of the Gage and Nicholson families will be present at the ceremony as well as Chief Matt Torigian.

The force commissioned a painting by Cambridge artist Rick Murphy, of which 589 prints were made. Nicholson's badge number was 589. The painting, titled Heroes in Life, depicts the memorial garden.

At the ceremony, the Gage family will receive print number 1. The Nicholson family has already received print number 589. A \$5,000 cheque will also be given to KidsAbility, a Waterloo-based agency that helps children with special needs. The money was raised through the sale of the prints.

The ceremony starts at 10 a.m.

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