

Pontoon boat capsizes on rapids

by Laura MacLean - Wednesday, April 12, 2006

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SEARCHERS: Emergency crews search the waters and shoreline of the Muskoka River near High Falls on Monday after a pontoon boat capsized early Sunday morning, throwing five people into the water.

Photo by Jack Tynan Five thrown into icy Muskoka River late Sunday near Balsam Chutes

A pontoon boat capsized over rapids on the Muskoka River Sunday, claiming the life of 47-year-old Cora Gunby of Port Sydney. As of press time, police were still searching for a second woman, Kathleen Gough, 27, of Gravenhurst, who remains missing and is presumed drowned.

Huntsville OPP constable Harry Rawluk reports that shortly after midnight on April 9, five adults left a party at a residence on Pinewood Road, near Port Sydney, on a 20-foot pontoon boat powered by a 65 horsepower outboard motor. The operator, Michiel Gunby, 47, of Port Sydney, whom Rawluk confirmed was also the owner of the residence, lost control of the vessel in the strong swollen currents of Balsam Chutes. The pontoon boat continued south on a series of rapids and capsized. Two of the passengers on the boat, Steven Gunby, a 38-year-old Gravenhurst man, and Peter Waterson, 37, of the Oro-Medonte Township, swam to shore and located a seasonal resident from Toronto working in a maple sugar shack, where a call was placed to the Huntsville OPP shortly before 2 a.m.

Police initiated an immediate search with the assistance of the Port Sydney and Huntsville Fire Departments. At 4:40 a.m., Michiel Gunby was located walking through a wooded area near Hwy 11 and Stevenson Road 1, close to where the boat had capsized. The three men were taken to South Muskoka Memorial Hospital in Bracebridge for examination and were released.

Two additional passengers on the boat, the wife of the boat operator, 47-year-old Cora Gunby and Kathleen Gough, a 27-year-old Gravenhurst woman who was also the girlfriend of Steven Gunby, were unaccounted for.

Officers from the Huntsville and Bracebridge OPP, the Canine Unit, the Emergency Response Team, the Helicopter Unit and the Underwater Search and Recovery Unit conducted an air, ground and water search, which led them to recover the capsized pontoon boat five kilometres south of Balsam Chutes at approximately 11:15 a.m. on Sunday.

Shortly before 4:30 p.m., the body of Cora Gunby was recovered by police in the Muskoka River, 11 kilometres south of Balsam Chutes, less than 500 metres north of High Falls. A post mortem was scheduled to take place in Parry Sound on April 10.

Recovery efforts for the second missing female passenger, Kathleen Gough, are continuing.

According to Rawluk, statements made to the police from individuals who attended Michiel Gunby's party indicated that he had not consumed enough alcohol to put him over the legal limit. However, there are still no answers as to why the five were on the boat at such a time and where they were travelling to.

"He [Gunby] is familiar with the water conditions," said Rawluk. "The water level is about six to seven feet higher than normal and there's an increased current as well. There are some indications of mechanical malfunctions with the outboard motor."

Rawluk estimated that there is about a 10 foot drop off where the water flows out of Balsam Chutes and another 10 foot wall of water where it travels upward. He said there are indications that the pontoon boat went over the chutes and flipped over "end over end."

"It then came to rest upside down," Rawluk continued. "There was a vinyl shelter that was up and erected at the time of the mishap. The two men who swam to shore began to call out and could only hear Michiel's voice."

Rawluk went on to say that there is no evidence of life jackets being on board or of those involved in the incident wearing them.

“The Underwater Search and Recovery Unit is examining the pontoon boat and that’s one of the questions they’ll answer in the inventory, providing that the life jackets didn’t float away.”

Vic Milligan, who resides at 379 Balsam Chutes Road, said he witnessed the pontoon boat with five passengers aboard travelling north on the Muskoka River at around 3 p.m. on April 8.

“I recognized the boat from last year,” Milligan said, adding that the male passengers had their shirts off and were likely sun tanning. “Where they were travelling at the time was all right. But I guess they had a rough time with the current. My dock is actually tied on shore because the water is very high right now. It was a freak accident.”

Rawluk said he could not confirm any activity that may have occurred on the boat earlier in the day, nor who may have been on the boat at the time Milligan suggested.

“It was a preventable tragedy,” stated Rawluk. “The investigation is ongoing and that will determine if any charges will be laid.”

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