

Thursday, August 25, 2005

River search shifts from rescue to recovery

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Enquirer staff writers

DAYTON, Ky. – Rescue workers have pulled the wreckage of a 36-foot houseboat out of the shipping channel of the Ohio River, reopening the river to commercial boats, Campbell County coroner Mark Schweitzer said.

What started as a rescue operation in the pre-dawn hours today after a barge struck a darkened houseboat, damaging and eventually sinking it, has changed to a “recovery” job, according to the U.S. Coast Guard.

The accident happened at about 3 a.m. Investigators say the houseboat was under the Daniel Carter Beard Bridge when it lost power. All four passengers were below deck trying to restore power when the boat was struck. Investigators do not know if the boat lost battery power or engine power, which could help them determine whether the boat’s lights were on.

The river was closed after the accident, which left one person dead and two missing. Investigators are now sweeping the river with sonar to locate the missing bodies.

A fourth person, believed to be from Cincinnati, survived the crash by climbing onto the barge after the boat was hit. He was waving and screaming to the barge crew to try and get them to stop, Dayton police said. He was rescued and taken to St. Luke Hospital, where he was treated for minor injuries.

Dayton Police Officer Bret Wiley said the barge pushed the houseboat upriver toward River City Marina & Restaurant in Dayton. The barge was eventually stopped and the crew is being questioned. They also have been given blood-alcohol tests, which is standard procedure in an investigation of commercial maritime wrecks.

The wreckage was pulled from the river at about 3 p.m., and the first barge after the river was reopened passed through at about 3:45 p.m., heading upriver.

When Jean Davis, 58, of Fairmont, looked out the window of her houseboat early this morning and saw that her neighbor had not returned from an overnight fishing trip, she knew his boat must have been the one lost in the river.

“They had asked my brother to go fishing with them Wednesday night, but he decided to stay with me, thank God,” Davis said. “He’s still pretty shook up. He really hasn’t talked much about it today.”

Davis docks her 36-foot boat at Aces Marina off Kellogg Avenue in East End, where it has stayed for eight years.

Davis said the boat that crashed had been docking behind for about the last month. It was purchased at a pawnshop next to a marina downriver for \$4,000. The boat, a twin engine, had a bad transmission in one engine, Davis said, so the owner would “routinely” take it out with only one working engine.

“(The owner) was so excited to have a boat, he would take it out with just the one working engine,” she said. “That probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do. It’s not something I would do. He obviously got himself in a pretty bad situation last night.”

Clyde Powers, the co-owner of the Aces Marina, said the boat was a 36-foot Gibson houseboat. Powers said it left his marina between 8:30 p.m. and 9 p.m. Wednesday night with the owner and a guest on board.

“This is a tragedy,” he said. “You can’t replace a life. It always hits home when it’s a fellow boater.”

Powers confirmed the boat only had one working engine.



ZOOM The Enquirer/Michael E. Keating
A houseboat was hit by a passing barge in the early morning hours before dawn.

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All commercial vessels should have working radar, searchlights and a deck hand on duty. U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Christopher Rose said investigators will check to see if the barge complied with those requirements.

The investigation is being led by the U.S. Coast Guard and Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife. They were using underwater cameras to look for survivors, and divers with Campbell County Water Rescue Squad are searching. The Hamilton County Sheriff's Office is sending a dive team to search under the bridge. The Bellevue-Dayton Fire Department, American Red Cross, Cincinnati Police Department and Boone County Water Rescue Team are assisting.

Names of the four people on the houseboat are being withheld, pending notification of family members. Police say the passenger who died and one of the missing passengers are from Cincinnati.

A staging area has been set up at River City Marina & Restaurant.

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