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Thermopolis  
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# Independent Record

SPECIAL INTERNET PREVIEW

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"Thumbs up," signals a rescuer, inset, after a Thermopolis boat penetrated the Sunday morning fog to rescue Rick Hilzendeger and Jeff Hoxsey after their Saturday night ordeal.

## Men battle sub-zero cold, high winds overnight until rescue boat plucks them off Boysen island

by Jonathan Green

Peril lurked underneath the low fog on Boysen Reservoir Sunday morning, when rescue teams from Hot Springs and Fremont counties plucked two Thermopolis men off an icy island.

Rick Hilzendeger and Jeff Hoxsey launched Hilzendeger's 16-foot boat shortly after 8 a.m. Saturday for a final fishing trip, Hilzendeger said. The weather was beautiful and calm at first.

### Temperatures hit 44, then plunge

(The weather station at Boysen recorded a high temperature of 44 degrees at noon Saturday.)

Hilzendeger said the weather changed drastically in a matter of minutes.

(From 11:45 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. the station recorded a wind shift from 9 mph from the east-south-east to a 23 mph blow from the northwest with gusts near 30 mph. The temperature also dropped 20 degrees in the hour from noon-1 p.m.)

Hilzendeger said the wind came up so fast he had less than five seconds to react. He and Hoxsey abandoned their attempt to reach the marina when it became obvious that would probably end with them in the water and dead.

### Swells reached six feet

In what Hilzendeger described as six-foot-tall swells, they managed to land on an island. (By 2 p.m. the air temperature had dropped to 19 degrees and the wind chill fell below zero.)

About 2:30 Boysen State Park officials became concerned when the two men had not yet returned. A park officer contacted the Fremont County sher-

iff's office, which mobilized the Fremont County Search and Rescue unit. Sheriff's captain Roger Millward said 25 deputies, search and rescue officers and state park officers began searching for the two men soon thereafter.

While Hilzendeger said there was little if any snow falling, the high winds hindered visibility and made the work of the volunteers both difficult and dangerous.

One of the volunteers later recounted how another man's four-wheeler had fallen through ice he thought to be snow. Millward estimated wind gusts on the reservoir exceeded 60 mph at times, enough to rip the face mask off one searcher's face and blow in the windshield on an all-terrain vehicle.

Radio traffic indicated at least one emergency responder searching the eastern shore of the reservoir could not even get out of his vehicle due to the wind. "I can't stand," he said.

Personnel aboard a helicopter thought they had spotted the pair's fire on the island, but no rescue was possible. With daylight failing, the search and rescue teams called off their efforts.

### Chill factor approaching -30

(Air temperatures had fallen to near zero and the wind chill was now between 20-30 degrees below, according to the Boysen weather station.)

Hilzendeger said he and Hoxsey focused on securing the boat and gathering what little firewood they could scrounge during the afternoon. He did not expect to be rescued Saturday.

With a small fire started, the two men took limited shelter behind a berm. Hilzendeger said they rationed the little wood they had found but they were down to "twigs" by 2 a.m. Sunday.

"We wanted to do what we could," he said.

The berm did not shield them from the wind, which "hit us hard all night," he said but did keep them out of the spray coming off the reservoir.

They did not sleep. Neither did they eat or drink. Hilzendeger said the rations they had with them froze and were worthless.

On Sunday morning Fremont County Search and Rescue personnel began preparing to extract the two men by boat. A helicopter rescue was ruled out because of the spray, humidity and possible icing on the rotors according to radio traffic.

### Thermopolis volunteers arrive

Thermopolis Fire Department volunteers including chief Mark Collins were monitoring the situation via radio. Collins said he volunteered a boat but Fremont County officials were confident they could locate one.

Finally, Collins said he "got tired of listening" to the struggle to find a ready boat. Fire department volunteer Rod McQueen's boat was ready, and Collins decided to go uninvited.

"I didn't give them a choice," he said.

Five Thermopolis firemen and four Hot Springs Search and Rescue volunteers set out for the reservoir shortly thereafter.

McQueen's boat was launched at 10:17 a.m. (The air temperature was still six degrees below

zero and the wind chill was -22, according to the Boysen weather site.)

The handheld radios used by the boat crew could not reach the cove from the launching site, so a man was dispatched to climb the hill to the northwest of the slip and relay traffic.

### "We got 'em."

At 10:26 a.m., he signaled back to the assembled rescuers on the shore, "We got 'em."

Nine minutes later the rescue boat rounded the point of the cove. With some assistance Hilzendeger and Hoxsey walked to a waiting ambulance, where they were checked out at 10:37 a.m., exactly 20 minutes after the boat launched.

Both men reported their only problems were soreness, cramping and chills. Millward said one Fremont County search and rescue officer did suffer minor frostbite in his fingers.

### "Awesome" response

Hilzendeger's wife, Maralee, said the response was "awesome" and praised the volunteers and officers who performed the rescue.

"They're very unselfish men."

She also said Collins' insistence in responding Sunday morning was "fantastic."

The two men on the island were relieved as well. With no food or water and their fuel supply spent, they were preparing to try to cross the reservoir in Hilzendeger's boat, one way or another.

"All we had was one twig left" when rescued, Hilzendeger said, adding his experience was "one I don't want to go through again."

## Deadline moved to Fridays

Early advertising and news copy is needed for the next two editions of the Thermopolis Independent Record.

The deadline is 5 p.m. Friday for the Christmas and New Year's editions, unless special arrangements are made in advance.

The Christmas and New Year's editions will be available on the newsstands Tuesday night and in the mail Wednesday.

Our office will be closed on Christmas Day and New Year's Day.



Shirley Towers and Santa and Mrs. Claus examine the decorations on her white Christmas tree during the Holiday Tour of Homes on Monday. Despite the cold weather, the annual benefit for the People for People food program attracted a big turnout.

## Schedule of Christmas programs at churches

The schedule of Christmas church programs and services includes:

Church of Christ, 701 Richards, Sunday, Bible study 10 a.m.; worship 11 a.m.; worship 6 p.m.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 625 S. Tenth, Sunday, service, 9 a.m.

Community Federated Church, 244 N. Sixth, Candlelight service Wednesday, 7 p.m.

First Baptist Church, 310 S. Sixth, Sunday Christmas cantata "The Greatest Gift", 10:45 a.m. Wednesday, candlelight service 6 p.m.

Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, 642 Arapahoe, Sunday, service, 9 a.m., Children's Program 10 a.m. Wednesday, Holy Eucharist 10 p.m.

Living Waters Assembly of God, 318 N. Eighth, Wednesday,

Candlelight communion 7 p.m.

Open Bible Ministries, 319 Broadway, Sunday, "Gifts for Jesus" offering 10:15 a.m.

Risen Son Southern Baptist Church, 342 Amoretti, Sunday, Christmas program "Celebrate Jesus Christ Birthday 10:45 a.m. Worship "Commemorate Christ's Birth" 6 p.m.

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, 129 Mountain View, Wednesday, Christmas program and candlelight service 7 p.m. Dec. 25 worship 9:30 a.m.

St. Francis Catholic Church, Eighth and Arapahoe, Wednesday Christmas eve mass 5 p.m. Midnight mass. Dec. 25, mass 5 p.m.; Dec. 31, New Year's Eve mass 5 p.m. Jan. 1, New Year's Day mass 9 a.m.

There is still time to add other churches that did not respond to requests for information. Call 864-2328.