

VS

# VERDICTS & SETTLEMENTS

## Trailer Became Unhitched From Vehicle

### *It Crossed Median And Killed Deputy Sherrif*

#### \$1.2 Million Settlement



GOFF



REEVES



HARRIS

The family of a deputy sheriff who was killed when his patrol car was hit by a runaway trailer sued the trailer manufacturer for products liability.

On Sept. 29, 2001 Steve Ziegler, a 32-year-old St. Francois County deputy sheriff, was driving

south on Highway 67 in his patrol car. Doug Rector was traveling in the opposite direction towing a trailer.

The trailer became detached from Rector's vehicle, crossed into the southbound lane and hit Ziegler, who lost control and was killed in an accident.

In their products liability case, Ziegler's family claimed that the trailer hitch assembly was defective and susceptible to detachment because it was too

heavy in the rear. The trailer was a fabricated unit consisting of a welded angle-iron frame with a Goossen straw mulcher — a bale chopper — installed on it. The bale chopper could be mounted only at the very rear of the trailer, which did not have independent brakes.

The trailer hitch assembly was a ball-and-hitch reinforced by two chains designed to hook into the towing vehicle. One of the hooks was broken off before the accident.

The bale chopper was designed so that bales of straw would be fed into the unit, which chopped the straw and force-sprayed the particles through a hose. The chopper was leased out by the St. Francois Soil & Water Conservation District to farmers, contractors and other individuals.

Rector testified that the trailer was "tongue-light" as a result of the disproportionate weight on the rear of the trailer. The plaintiffs' engineering expert reported that the disproportionate weight made the trailer susceptible to detachment, and also said it should have had independent brakes adequate to accommodate the bale chopper.

Ziegler had two children from a first marriage, ages 15 and 12 when the accident happened, to whom he was paying \$387 in monthly child support. He was married at the time of his death to Racheal Ziegler, and the couple had children ages 5 and 3. His mother was also a plaintiff. The plaintiffs' expert projected lost earnings at \$800,000.

The plaintiffs settled with the trailer

manufacturer for \$1.2 million, agreeing to keep its identity confidential. A lump sum of \$600,000 went to the widow and Ziegler's mother, and \$600,000 in a structured settlement to the minor children.

**Type of Action:** Products liability

**Type of Injuries:** Death

**Court/Case No./Date:** St. Francois County Circuit Court 01CV613844/March 8, 2004

**Caption:** Ziegler, et al. v. Rector, et al.

**Judge, Jury or ADR:** Jury

**Name of Judge:** Sandra Martinez

**Special Damages:** \$800,000 future lost wages

**Verdict or Settlement:** \$1.2 million settlement

**Allocation of Fault:** N/A

**Last Offer:** N/A

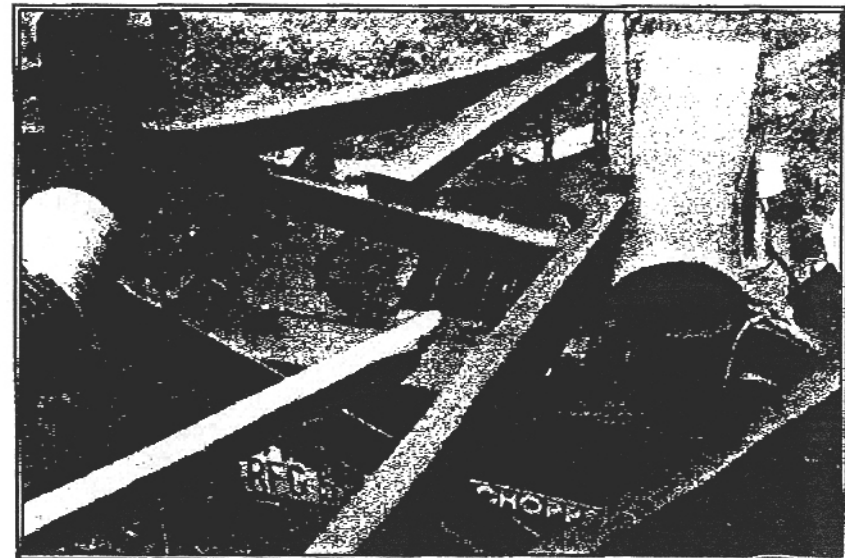
**Last Demand:** N/A

**Attorneys for Plaintiff:** Joseph L. Goff and William G. Reeves, Farmington, Mo.; Eric C. Harris, Park Hills

**Insurance Carrier:** Not disclosed

**Plaintiff's Experts:** Lawrence Botkin, Omaha, Neb. (engineer); Leroy Grossman, St. Louis (economist)

**Defendant's Experts:** Not disclosed



The trailer crashed into the deputy's car.