

## Choctaw couple wins \$1.8 million in suit

A Choctaw County couple this week was awarded \$1.8 million by a federal jury in Mobile against a Laurel, Miss., construction and heavy equipment company for injuries received while working on an oil drilling rig in Clarke County.

The jury of six women awarded Jessie Long Stafford, 51, of Butler, Ala., \$1.6 million, and his wife, Rose Marie, \$200,000. A third plaintiff in the lawsuit, John Mark Hartzog, 33, of Gilbertown, was awarded \$250,000 by the jury. The jury, however, failed to award Hartzog's wife, Freda, 32, any damages.

According to the lawsuit, the injuries occurred Nov. 15, 1983, while Stafford and Hartzog, who were working for Justice Oil Co., were dismantling the drilling rig. G.B. "Boots" Smith Inc. had been hired by Justice Oil Co. to assist in

dismantling the rig by providing a crane and operator, the lawsuit stated.

While Stafford and Hartzog were in the process of removing a tool shed, known as a doghouse, which sat on the drilling rig, the shed dropped about 20 feet with Stafford and Hartzog on it, injuring the two men, said Richard Bounds, who along with John Crowder, represented the Staffords.

The lawsuit alleged that G.B. "Boots" Smith Inc.'s crane operator was negligent in permitting slack in the cable line causing the hooks holding the shed to come undone.

"Boots Smith failed to furnish proper equipment — safety hooks that wouldn't come undone," Bounds said. He said the accident rendered Stafford "permanently and totally"

disabled, and Hartzog suffered back injuries. Hartzog was represented by Richard L. Seelman.

"Our position is they supplied the wrong kind of hooks. They didn't have safety latches. The hooks fell off the cables and the doghouse fell to the ground," Crowder said. He said both of Stafford's legs were shattered and he suffered nine broken ribs.

Boots Smith's attorney argued the hooks had never been attached to the shed. Crowder said he had five witnesses who said they saw the hooks attached and the defendant had three contradicting witnesses.

The three-day trial was tried before Chief U.S. District Judge Alex T. Howard Jr.