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Wrongful death case involves fatal wreck

By Matt Smith/msmith@trcle.com

Testimony in a suit against a drilling company filed by the family of a Cleburne woman began on Tuesday in the 413th District Court in Cleburne.

Rhonda Kay Henson, 41, died in a Sept. 11, 2008, accident near Venus after a large piece of oil field equipment fell off a passing tractor-trailer, crushing the driver's side of her Ford Explorer, said Fort Worth attorney John David Hart.

Henson's family filed suit against the tractor-trailer's driver, Daniel R. Armstrong, 21, of Springtown, and the company, Pioneer Drilling Company, a San Antonio company with a Springtown branch.

In their suit, the family asserts negligence on the defendants' part and assert a wrongful death claim in Henson's death.

The accident occurred at 3:57 p.m., according to a Texas Department of Transportation report. Henson was driving southbound on Farm-to-Market Road 157 with her husband, Thomas Henson, in the passenger seat.

Armstrong was traveling northbound on FM 157.

As Henson approached a curve in the road, Armstrong entered her lane, according to the family's court filing.

As Armstrong's truck turned, a large piece of equipment fell off onto Henson's truck.

During opening arguments, Hart told jurors the case would prove that the equipment, weighing more than 15 tons, was secured with two chains, not four as required by state and federal law.

This caused the equipment to become unsecured and slide around until it ultimately flew off the truck into Henson's Explorer, Hart said.

Jurors heard a 911 call from a woman who witnessed, but was not involved in the accident.

In the call the woman said something flew off the tractor-trailer, hitting the Explorer.

The caller tells the 911 operator that she yelled to see if anyone else was in the Explorer at which point Thomas Henson, who was out of the truck, told her his wife was dead in the vehicle.

Hart further alleged that Armstrong had several tickets, a suspended license and was not qualified to be driving the tractor-trailer.

At least one company employee was aware of those facts when he let Armstrong take the truck, Hart said.

Other company employees forged, backdated and fabricated Armstrong's records and driver qualification file after the accident, Hart said, which came to light after company employees came forward.

Company officials failed to heed earlier concerns about safety before the Sept. 11 accident, Hart said.

"That was the respect they showed Rhonda Henson's family," Hart said. "They said, 'We're not going to be held responsible. We're going to make up what we need to.' And they did. Because they didn't care at all. All they cared about was to keep making money and keep making bonuses. This was a company not taking care of business and absolutely disregarding safety."