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Law

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1-23-2006

DEPARTMENT OF SAFETY vs. \$603.00 in U.S.  
Currency, and One 1998 Chevrolet Blazer VIN #:  
1GNCS18WXWK140664, Seized From:  
Christopher Cheairs and Tonya Allen, Date of  
Seizure: March 30 & 31, 2005, Claimant: Tonya  
Allen

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**BEFORE THE COMMISSIONER  
OF THE  
TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF SAFETY**

<b>IN THE MATTER OF:</b>	]	
	]	
<b>DEPARTMENT OF SAFETY</b>	]	
	]	
<b>v.</b>	]	<b>DOCKET # 19.01-087263J</b>
	]	<b>D.O.S. Case # E-1144 &amp; E-1145</b>
<b>\$603.00 in U.S. Currency, and</b>	]	
<b>One 1998 Chevrolet Blazer</b>	]	
<b>VIN#: 1GNCS18WXWK140664</b>	]	
<b>Seized From: Christopher Cheairs</b>	]	
<b>and Tonya Allen</b>	]	
<b>Date of Seizure: March 30 &amp; 31, 2005]</b>	]	
<b>Claimant: Tonya Allen</b>	]	

**INITIAL DEFAULT ORDER**

This matter was heard in Memphis, Tennessee before J. Randall LaFevor, Administrative Judge assigned by the Secretary of State, Administrative Procedures Division, sitting for the Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Safety. Mr. Trey Phillips, Staff Attorney for the Tennessee Department of Safety, represented the State. The Claimant was not present, and was not represented by legal counsel.

The subject of this hearing was the proposed forfeiture of the described vehicle and U.S. currency based on allegations that their possession and/or receipt by the Claimant was in violation of the Tennessee Drug Control Act. Upon the Claimant's failure to appear at the hearing, counsel for the State made an oral motion for an order finding the Claimant to be in default, pursuant to TCA § 4-5-309. Upon full consideration of the evidence received at the hearing and the entire record in this case, the State's motion was granted. The Claimant was found to be in default, and the claim filed in this matter was stricken, as supported by the following Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law.

## FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Claimant's property was seized pursuant to law, resulting in the issuance of a Property Forfeiture Warrant. The Claimant filed a claim seeking the return of the vehicle and currency, and requesting that a hearing be scheduled to consider that claim.
2. The claim was scheduled for hearing on January 23, 2006, and the Claimant was notified of the hearing time and location by certified mail.<sup>1</sup>
3. The Claimant did not appear at the hearing.<sup>2</sup> Based on the Claimant's failure to appear, the State made an oral motion for the entry of an Order of Default.

## CONCLUSIONS OF LAW and ANALYSIS

1. Tennessee Code Annotated § 4-5-309(a) provides that "if a party fails to attend or participate in a pre-hearing conference, hearing or other stage of a contested case, the administrative judge . . . may hold the party in default . . ." An order holding an absent party in default at the *second* setting of a forfeiture hearing is authorized by Rule 1340-2-2-.17(1)(a), TENN. COMP. R. & REGS., *Rules of Procedure for Asset Forfeiture Hearings*.
2. Department of Safety Regulations governing asset forfeiture hearings also provide:
  - (d) No default shall be entered against a claimant for failure to attend [the hearing] except upon proof by the filing of the return receipt card, that the legal division has given notice of the hearing per Rule 1340-2-2-.11(3).
  - (e) Upon default by a party, an administrative judge may enter either an initial default order or an order for an uncontested proceeding . . .

Rule 1340-2-2-.17(1), TENN. COMP. R. & REGS., *Rules of Procedure for Asset Forfeiture Hearings*.

And, that

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<sup>1</sup> See Hearing Exhibit # 1.

<sup>2</sup> This was the second (or subsequent) setting of this forfeiture hearing.

Upon a default by a claimant, a **claimant's claim shall be stricken by initial default order**, or, if the agency requests, the agency may proceed uncontested.

See, Rule 1340-2-2-.17(2)(b), TENN. COMP. R. & REGS., *Rules of Procedure for Asset Forfeiture Hearings*. (Bold emphasis added.)

3. The legal impact of striking a claim is to render the claim void *ab initio*, as though it had never been filed.<sup>3</sup> Failure to file a claim results in the forfeiture of the property for disposition as provided by law. *See*, Tennessee Code Annotated § 40-33-206(c).

4. In accordance with the law, as set forth above, it is determined that the State's motion is well-taken. The Claimant was notified of the hearing, as shown by the certified return receipt, and failed to appear at the hearing to pursue his claim. Pursuant to the cited authority, the Claimant is hereby found to be in default for failing to appear at the hearing scheduled to consider his claim.

Accordingly, it is hereby ORDERED that the Claimant's claim is stricken from the record, and dismissed. The Claimant's interest in the subject property is Ordered forfeited to the Seizing Agency, the Whiteville Police Department, for disposition as provided by law.

Entered and effective this 10<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2006.

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J. Randall LaFavor, Administrative Judge

Filed in the Administrative Procedures Division, Office of the Secretary of State  
this 10<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2006.

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Charles C. Sullivan, Director  
Administrative Procedures Division

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<sup>3</sup> The effect of striking a pleading "is to posture the action as if [that pleading] had never been made." *See*, *INVST Financial Group, Inc. v. Chem-Nuclear Systems, Inc.*, 815 F.2d 391, 404 (6th Cir. 1987).