Contracts - Usury - Dual Contracts Designed to Evade Usury Prohibitions

Richard W. Young S.Ed.
University of Michigan Law School

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Contracts—Usury—Dual Contracts Designed to Evade Usury Prohibitions—Plaintiff applied to the defendant finance company for a loan of $100. The lender agreed to advance this amount and accordingly required the plaintiff to execute a note in the sum of $114.04 payable in one year and secured by a chattel mortgage on an automobile, but insisted in addition that plaintiff purchase an investment certificate in the amount of the note, issued by the defendant company and bearing 2 percent interest, which certificate was to be paid for in twelve monthly instalments. Contending that the interest thus exacted was usurious, the plaintiff brought suit for cancellation of the note and mortgage. On appeal from a judgment that the loan was not usurious, held, affirmed with a caveat. The sale of the investment certificate was essentially a part of the loan transaction, so that monthly instalments on the certificate were in effect repayment of the loan and the totality of the arrangement was usurious.

1 Ark. Const., art. XIX, §13 provides: “All contracts for a greater rate of interest than ten percent per annum shall be void, as to principal and interest, and the General Assembly shall prohibit the same by law. . . .” Although this mandate is self-executing, it has been implemented and amplified by statute. See Strickler v. State Auto Finance Co., 220 Ark. 565, 249 S.W. (2d) 307 (1952).
But prior holdings to the contrary which had become a rule of property could not be overruled retrospectively, and the judgment in the principal case was therefore affirmed with a caveat that a similar course of dealing would henceforth be considered a single transaction and subject to the constitutional mandate against usury. *O'Brien v. Atlas Finance Co.*, (Ark. 1954) 264 S.W. (2d) 839.

It is well settled that where the purpose of a lender is to frame a series of transactions devised to cloak an intent to exact excessive interest, courts will frustrate such evasion and ascribe to the scheme its contemplated illegal purpose. But the Arkansas court has consistently held that good faith collateral contracts will not invalidate a contemporaneous loan of money as usurious, although the practical effect of the aggregate of transactions might be to collect more than a legal rate of interest, even though the loan is made only on condition of the borrower's assent to the collateral agreement. The system of dual contracts used in the principal case, a loan contract and simultaneous purchase of an investment certificate, is a most palpable means of evading the constitutional limitations on interest, although it bears substantial similarity to approved systems used by building and loan associations and Morris Plan banks. The

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2 Simpson v. Smith Savings Society, 178 Ark. 921, 12 S.W. (2d) 890 (1929); Hickingbotham v. Industrial Finance Corp., 192 Ark. 429, 91 S.W. (2d) 1023 (1936). In these cases the Arkansas court found the note and the instalment investment certificate were separate and distinct obligations, and when thus viewed and construed did not separately disclose usury.

8 In a vigorous dissent, Griffin Smith, C.J., objected to the use of this "delightfully convenient judicial sedative spoken of as a caveat" to suspend the constitutional proscription against usury. Principal case at 841. Parties to similar contracts executed before the caveat became final were held to have no constitutional right to have the new rule applied to their transactions in *Criscu v. Murdock Acceptance Corp.*, (Ark. 1953) 258 S.W. (2d) 551, cert. den. 346 U.S. 910, 74 S.Ct. 239 (1953). On the propriety of the caveat when employed to announce a prospective departure from past holdings, see Lobinger, "Precedent in Legal Systems," 44 Mich. L. Rev. 955 (1946); Snyder, "Retrospective Operation of Overruling Decisions," 35 Ill. L. Rev. 121 at 130 et seq. (1940); Kocourek and Koven, "Renovation of the Common Law through Stare Decisis," 29 Ill. L. Rev. 971 (1935); Stimson, "Retroactivity in Law," 38 Mich. L. Rev. 30 (1939); Moschziker, "Stare Decisis in Courts of Last Resort," 37 Harv. L. Rev. 409 at 426 (1924).

4 See 2 Contracts Restatement §529 (1932); 6 Williston, Contracts, 2d ed., §1687 (1938); 6 Corbin, Contracts §1501 (1951); 55 Am. Jur., Usury §14 (1946).


6 Leavitt v. Marathon Oil Co., 186 Ark. 1077, 57 S.W. (2d) 814 (1933). Cf. 6 Corbin, Contracts §1501, p. 946 (1951): "... if the loan is made only on condition that the other transaction shall accompany it, a finding of usurious intent may be justified."

7 This practice was held usurious in State v. Whaley, 176 Tenn. 170, 139 S.W. (2d) 255 (1939).

8 The court in the principal case made clear that its caveat did not apply to loans made by "true" building and loan associations, as upheld in *Reeve v. Ladies' Bldg. and Loan Assn.*, 56 Ark. 335, 19 S.W. 917 (1892); Farmers' Savings and Bldg. and Loan Assn. v. Ferguson, 69 Ark. 352, 63 S.W. 797 (1901).

9 Mesaba Loan Co. v. Sher, 203 Minn. 589, 282 N.W. 823 (1938); Columbus Industrial Bank of Miller, 125 Conn. 313, 6 A. (2d) 42 (1940). For a rather comprehensive treatment of the entire area, see Collins, "Evasion and Avoidance of Usury Laws," 8 Law and Contem. Prob. 54 (1941).
device consists of a loan at a stipulated rate for the entire term and a requirement that the borrower purchase a certificate having a nominal value equal to the amount of the loan, the purchase price being payable in periodic installments. Since these payments are not credited on the loan, the effective rate to the borrower is practically doubled since he has the use of the full face amount of the loan only until the first installment on the investment certificate is payable, yet interest at the contract rate is collected for the entire term on the original sum lent. Surely, the Arkansas court is right, though somewhat tardy, in declaring this arrangement a single contract at usurious interest and clearly within the constitutional prohibition. ¹⁰

Richard W. Young, S.Ed.