

Con Artist Tenant Coolly Poses as Serious Executive

By Mark Fitzwater

Those experienced in the rent fraud game can often pass themselves off as upstanding tenants with good intentions and then use the system to scam months of free rent.

Their favorite targets are inexperienced landlords who are in dire need of a tenant.

Landlord Mark Johnson, who happens also to be a tenant, said his \$1,500-a month three-bedroom ranch-style house sat vacant for five months before he rented it to a man whose credit came up clean on a TRW report. It wasn't until later that he learned the man had at least three aliases and no intention of paying a penny toward the rent.

Johnson said his first mistake was letting the man into the house before he received the check so the man could get his phone installed.

"He told me because he used his home phone as a business phone too, it was very important to him to have his phone hooked up," he recalled.

That day, the tenant moved in and delivered a check and the lease with his part filled out.

"I didn't mention to him that our original arrangement was that I was to receive the check before he moved in, but he appeared to be doing this in good faith," Johnson said. Then I kind of chastised myself because I thought, gee, I sold this guy short."

But when he did try to cash the check, he learned the account had been closed for nearly two months.

But by then it was too late. Johnson learned from an eviction attorney that even though he'd never signed the lease himself or given the tenant the key, by cashing the bogus check, he was in effect accepting the terms of the lease.

After trying with no success to get the money, he in desperation called the local police department to report someone had broken into his house.

"I shamefully admit I lied and said I wasn't sure who they were," Johnson said. "We went up to the house and the tenant opened the door, cool as a cucumber and invited us inside."

The tenant, who remained affable and maintained an

innocent veneer, ended up costing Johnson \$2,200.00 in legal fees, more than \$6,000.00 in lost rent and \$5,500.00 in damage to the house.

For some reason, however, the tenant who filed for bankruptcy as a delaying tactic, decided to leave after four months, without a formal eviction.

Johnson's credit, meanwhile, has been damaged. He's been forced to make special payment arrangements with his lender and is still behind in payments. But, he said, he remains grateful: "As long as this lasted, (the tenant) could have used all his options and could have been there another four months."

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