

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Theory and Practice: HIST430

History

Spring 5-12-2011

World War II from the Mining Shaft

Lucian Myers

Pittsburg State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/hist>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Myers, Lucian, "World War II from the Mining Shaft" (2011). *Theory and Practice: HIST430*. 28.
<https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/hist/28>

This Undergraduate Research is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theory and Practice: HIST430 by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@pittstate.edu.

World War II from the Mining Shaft

Lucian Myers
History Theory & Practice 430
May 12, 2011

One of America's most powerful weapons in World War II was its labor force. It was one of the contributing factors to the Allied victory in the war. Not only could the U.S. field better armies than its opponent, but it could supply them for a longer period of time over a longer distance. The labor force and the communities of those laborers in America were transformed during the war. People who had not previously worked outside of their homes now worked in the labor force. Also there were people in the labor force who left it to go enlist in one of the Armed Forces. One of the most important labor forces in the U.S. during and even before the war was that of the mining communities. The Second World War affected the area around Picher, Oklahoma and as a result, life in the Tri-State area was radically altered. This change in everyday life of the mining community caused the people living there to put aside their differences and support the war effort.

The Tri-State Mining District was located at the junction of the borders of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma. The mining community started there in "the Missouri section in 1848."¹ By 1880 "the Tri-State District was the world's leading producer of lead and zinc."² Also, by this time the mining communities had moved from Missouri over to Kansas and then to Oklahoma where the "most extensive and heavily mineralized"³ amounts of lead and zinc were found.

With the discovery of new veins of lead and zinc came more miners. Because of this increase in population levels there arose a very large mining community. In some ways the only reason that the region was ever populated was due to the expansion of mining. In the area around the mines small mining camps started to form that were based around the mining shafts. Then as

¹ Arrell M. Gibson, "Early Mining Camps in Northeastern Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 34, no.2 (1956): 193.

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

time went on there was the expansion from mining camps to towns, and eventually to cities in some cases.

These camps brought out people who would work 9 to 10 hours a day in the mines.⁴ These people would do all of this work in an attempt to make enough money so that they could obtain a loan for a grubstake. These grubstakes were actually just leases to property which allowed the miner with the lease to dig on that property in an attempt to find lead or zinc. This was similar to playing the lottery today. The odds of hitting it big were very small and it took a lot of the miner's resources and effort to sustain them while working on the grubstake.

At the start of the Tri-State Mining community life was rough and not for the faint of heart. There were lots of bachelors that made up the labor force for the mining companies and as one poet put it

Suez was still east of us and there were no Ten Commandments for way down yonder in Southwest Missouri, where women drink and curse like fury; where the barkeepers sell the meanest liquor which makes a white man sick and sicker, where the tin horns rob you a little quicker, that's where Joplin is.⁵

This is how the Tri-State area was born and the people who lived there carried that attitude of hard work, lots of fun, and determination on with them into the twentieth century.

By the time that the twentieth century rolled around, the Tri-State area had tamed down and had become more family oriented, but now there were new problems facing the Tri-State area. There was Silicosis and its damaging effects on the miners. Also like many hard labor jobs there were low wages so miners would strike to get better benefits in the way of better health care and unemployment benefits as well as better pay. In the Tri-State area there would be a strike in Granby, MO and you would have miners there from Picher and Granby. There would be

⁴ Arrell M. Gibson, "A Social History of the Tri-State Mining District," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 37, no.2 (1959): 183.

⁵ *Ibid*

a strike in Picher, OK and you would have miners from all around the Tri-State area. This game of give and take between the miners and the mining companies went on for years, but it was all put to an end with the onset of the Great Depression.

The miners in the Tri-State area no longer were as worried about benefits to the job as much as they were just concerned with having a job. By 1932, the employment level in the Tri-State area was down to an astonishing 1,331 miners.⁶ This was how hard the Tri-State area was hit by the Great Depression. It had to slowly make its way back to where it was before the depression hit. By 1938, the Tri-State area was up to 3,507 miners⁷ and was slowly growing each year.

This is the shape in which the Tri-State Mining District was in when World War II started. World War II caught the mining community in the Tri-State area rebounding from the Great Depression. By 1939, the mining community had rebounded to where it could claim a labor force of 3,845.⁸ This was also true with the production levels of the lead and zinc in the Tri-State area. Even though the U.S. economy had been in and now was coming out of a depression, the Tri-State area was so rich in lead and zinc minerals that it was able to keep its title of leading producer of those minerals in the world.

The market in which the Tri-State Mining District operated in also was rebounding from the Depression. On March 8th, 1939 the local paper, The Tri-State Tribune, ran the article "*Lead Prices up Zinc Steady Demand Good.*" The article covers how the price of a ton of lead was up to \$54.38 compared to the previous weeks price of \$52.95 and the price a year ago of \$49.33 per

⁶ William James Cassidy, "The Tri-State Zinc-Lead Mining Region: Growth, Problems, and Prospects" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1955), 82.

⁷ Cassidy, 82.

⁸ Cassidy, 82.

ton.⁹ Since the Tribune was a local paper it would run the increase or decrease of lead and zinc prices in the markets every time the Tribune was printed. With the publication of these numbers there was an obvious increase over time of the output of the Tri-State Mining District and an increase in the price of lead and zinc by the ton. On April 6th, 1939 the Tribune covered how the 47 mills that were operating over the week had an output of 7,960 tons and sold 7,290 tons on the Joplin market. This was the highest ore shipment in 19 weeks.¹⁰ These were all signs that the Tri-State Mining District was on a slow rebound from the Great Depression and moving to its status of being a healthy and vibrant mining community once again.

On the whole, the Tri-State area was on a slow increase in both production levels and price levels of lead and zinc. The increase in production was due to the increase in employment of the miners. There had been a large drop off in the late 1920s and early 30s, but as the U.S. economy came back so did paying jobs in the Tri-State area. Especially in the late 30s there had been the outbreak of war all over the world. In 1935 Italy attacked Ethiopia and that war did not end until 1936. In 1937 Japan attacked China. Also at this time Germany invaded Poland on September 1st, 1939. All of these nations now needed an increased amount of raw materials to drive their war machines.

This increase in the consumption of raw material by Italy, Japan, and Germany all added to the increase in output of the mines in the Tri-State area. Even the Tri-State Tribune of Picher, Oklahoma noticed that all of this saber rattling was putting a new demand on raw materials. In an article titled "*The Foolish Dictators*" the Tribune explains how Hitler and Mussolini were

⁹ "Lead Price up Zinc Steady Demand Good," *The Tri-State Tribune*, 8 March, 1939.

¹⁰ "Ore Shipment Reach High Mark for Year," *The Tri-State Tribune*, 6 April, 1939.

putting a strain on the resources of their countries. The Tribune makes the point that these wars were just burning up Germany's and Italy's raw resources.¹¹

These wars led to an increase in worldwide need for the minerals that were mined in the Tri-State area. On May 5th, 1940 there was an article published that was titled "*Coarse Grade Supply Short; Price Steady.*" In the article it states that the mining companies in the Tri-State area were mining the lead and zinc out of the ground just as fast as they could and they were selling it all. In the article it covers how the lead concentrates were mined out at 1,075 tons that week and the shipment aggregated to 1,055 tons.¹² By the time the outbreak of war hit the U.S. the Tri-State Mining District had stabilized and it had increased in production levels because of the wars started by other nations around the world. In 1941 you had 4,729 workers in the Tri-State mines.¹³ That rose to a peak in 1943 when you had 5,473 workers and then it dropped till after the war was over.¹⁴

The production levels of the output of the lead and zinc slowly increased the whole time and there was an overall rise in employment. One thing that was slightly different was the prices that were charged for the lead and zinc. The prices charged per ton followed the employment levels of the mining community in the Tri-State area. When there was a rise in employment normally there would also be a rise in prices for the lead and zinc and a rise in production levels the weeks previous. On March 30th, 1941 there was an article published that explained how the Defense Commission was going to limit the zinc market. The article also covers what the reason

¹¹ "The Foolish Dictators," *The Tri-State Tribune*, 8 June, 1939.

¹² "Coarse Grade Supply Short; Price Steady," 5 May, 1940. Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg KS.

¹³ Cassidy, 82.

¹⁴ Cassidy, 82.

that the prices had gone up so much was all due to the increased demand caused by the European nations that were at war.¹⁵ This all changed once the U.S. was brought into the war.

The weeks after the U.S. was attacked at Pearl Harbor there was an article that explained how the lead and zinc market in the Tri-State Mining District was firm at unchanged prices with the outbreak of war with the Axis powers. The article said

In wake of the outbreak of hostilities between the United States and the Axis powers in the Second World War, trading on the Joplin ore market last week continued on an even keel at firm, but unchanged prices, as district ore producers in annual meeting proclaimed "all out" production for the duration of the emergency and called for sound broad economic policy that would make it possible.¹⁶

This was all an attempt by the Tri-State Mining District to get behind the war effort even though they did not know what that entailed or for how long. The Tri-State area saw that this was going to be a war in which all of the citizens would need to support.

With the willingness provided by the Tri-State Mining Districts mining companies you had the U.S. government put a price ceiling on the amount that could be charged for the lead and zinc per ton. This was all in an attempt to help with the war effort. Unlike times before where miners would go on strike to protest a company policy, the miners did not care that there had been a price ceiling placed on the goods that they produced. They did not go on strike and actually slowly increased their production numbers in order to allow for the production of more goods to support the war effort. From 1942 to 1945 when the U.S. was in a state of war with

¹⁵"Strong Demand Continues; Lead Ore Price Hiked," 30 March, 1941. Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg KS.

¹⁶"Ore Prices Firm at Unchanged levels in Wake of War Outbreak with Axis," 1941. Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg KS.

other nations there was no price change in the amount charged for lead and zinc. Now in 1946, once the war was over the prices went back to a slow increase.¹⁷

That was how the mining companies of the Tri-State Mining District supported the war, but not the individual miner. The mining companies took cuts into the profits that they could have made. That was, for them, the way they showed their support. However, that was not how the miners who worked in the Tri-State Districts mines showed their support. They went into local recruiting stations and enlisted to help fight in the Second World War.

The Tri-State Tribune switched from being a local mining paper to a paper that connected the miners who went to fight, with home. The Tribune went from being concerned with the mining community to showing the readers that they were a vital part of the American war effort in World War II. The Tribune ran reminders to ration consumption of goods in the Tri-State area so the soldiers fighting at the front could have what they needed.¹⁸ Also, the Tribune ran a special section that was called the "News of our men and women in Uniform." This was story after story of what individuals in the Tri-State area were doing once they had enlisted in one of the Armed Forces.

In one of the first groups of stories in the "News of our men and women in Uniform" there was a bit about PFC (Private First Class) Hugh Leon Bass age 20 of Granby, Missouri. It said that he was now a PFC in the Marine Corp and before Hugh had enlisted he had worked for J&J Mining Company out of Picher, Oklahoma.¹⁹ There was also a story about CPL (Corporal) Ernest Garner who enlisted with the Army and had just become a Paratrooper after 4 weeks and

¹⁷ Cassidy, 18-19.

¹⁸ "Ration Reminder," *The Tri-State Tribune*, 30 March, 1944

¹⁹ "News of our men and women in Uniform," *The Tri-State Tribune*, 27 April, 1942

5 jumps out of an aircraft at FT Benning, Georgia.²⁰ The news though was not always good that came from the men and women in uniform.

The bad news had to be told just as much as the good news. It helped give the Tri-State Mining District its determination that had been ingrained into it since the first miners started mining there. One of those stories was of Lt James Cunningham who was MIA (Missing In Action) in Italy. He had been missing since February 18th and the Tribune had it in its March 30th edition. He had been missing for 40 days.²¹ Also there was a story about a former Tribune editor's son who was KIA (Killed In Action) while serving in the Pacific with the Navy.²² The good and the bad stories that were told by the Tribune were examples of how the Tri-State miners and community supported the war effort.

The combination of the factors of increased mining production after the Great Depression, the support for the war effort by the mining companies as well as the miners, and the cooperation between the miners and the mining companies go far to illustrate the fact that the Tri-State Mining District was very influential in the U.S. victory. All of these factors go to show that World War II had a big impact on the Tri-State Mining District. Yet, the effect that the Tri-State Mining shaft had was greater on the outcome of World War II.

²⁰ "News of our men and women in Uniform," *The Tri-State Tribune*, 30 March, 1944

²¹ *Ibid*

²² "News of our men and women in Uniform," *The Tri-State Tribune*, 17 November, 1942

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Tri-State Tribune, (8 March-15 June, 1939, 27 April, 1942, 17 November, 1942, 30 March-April, 1944).

Newspaper Scrapbook dated 1940. "\$2.50 Increase Spurs Trading; Wages to Rise" (8 September, 1940). Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

----- "Base at \$37.50 Production Cut by Snow and Ice" (6 January, 1940). Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

----- "Coarse Grade Supply Short; Price Steady" (5 May 1940). Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

Newspaper Scrapbook dated 1941. "Ore Prices Firm at Unchanged levels in Wake of War Outbreak with Axis" (December, 1941). Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

----- "Strong demand Continues; Lead Ore price hiked" (30 March, 1941). Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

----- "Zinc and Lead concentrate Prices are Unchanged from Preceding Week" (1941). Box162, Picher Collection, Pittsburg State University Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

Secondary Sources

Cassidy, William James. "The Tri-State Zinc-Lead Mining Region: Growth, Problems and Prospects." PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1955.

This is a scientific look at the Tri-State Mining District. It is filled with many good charts that cover output levels of the Tri-State mines as well as employment levels. This dissertation uses the charts to help explain the growth, problems, and prospects of the Tri-State Mining District.

Derickson, Alan "On the Dump Heap: Employee Medical Screening in the Tri-State Zinc-Lead Industry, 1924-1932." The Business History Review 62, no.4 (Winter 1988): 656-77.

This is a technology/science history of the Tri-State Mining District. This article talks about the medical procedures used to deal with miners and what the miners situations were like from a medical point of view.

Gibson, Arrell M. "A Social History of the Tri-State District." Chronicles of Oklahoma 37, no.2 (1959): 182-95.

This is a social history of the Tri-State Mining District. The author looks at the social functions in the communities that differ from religion, banking, and saloon/stores. The author also looks at the individual miner and whether they save money, how sanitary they are, and what was family life like.

----- "Early Mining Camps in Northeastern Oklahoma." Chronicles of Oklahoma 34, no.2 (1956): 193-202.

This is an article that covers the economic and specifically the labor portion of mining in the Tri-State Mining District. The article deals with the labor pushes and pulls on the works in the area.

----- Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

This was a general history of the development of mining in the Tri-State District. It covered the discovery of the minerals as well as the way the mining towns got started in this area.

Markowitz, Gerald and Rosner, David "The Street of Walking Death: Silicosis, Health, and Labor in the Tri-State Region, 1900-1950." The Journal of American History 77, no.2 (September 1990): 525-52.

This is a technology/science history of the Tri-State Mining District. This article talks about the medical procedures used to deal with miners and what the miners situations were like from a medical point of view. This was similar to the article by Alan Derickson. It gave the medical issues that miners dealt with on the job.