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The Spring Floods of 1936:  
Picher and the Red Cross Unite

Allison Williford  
History 430  
May 12, 2011

In the early 1900s, the Great Depression, great droughts, a huge tornado, and great floods roared through the United States, hitting the East Coast, the West Coast, and the Midwest. These troubling periods and incidents left many families without homes or incomes. Therefore, these families had no choice but to reach out to others for help, the main source being toward the Red Cross and places in America where trouble was much less than the disaster's home front. Without the help of the Red Cross, the disaster stricken flood areas would not have survived.

The Red Cross started a massive campaign to help the victims of these times, mainly the flood victims of 1936, and accepted donations from every part of the United States, especially the Midwest. The Red Cross headquarters of the Midwestern branch was centered in St. Louis, Missouri and the Ottawa County branch of the Red Cross was in Miami, Oklahoma. These were the places where all the donations were sent after they were collected from the different cities and communities in the Midwest. Among those who gave the most when compared to their situations were those in Ottawa County, Oklahoma, mainly in the small community of Picher. While the amount donated from Picher was only fifty dollars, it was considered to be a large sum of money coming from the mining companies, schools, and other businesses in Picher.<sup>1</sup> Because this community had seen America come together to help them in their time of suffering with the tornado the year before, Picher gave much more than they had while trying to survive the Great Depression and the hard times of the early 1900s. They deeply understood the need for help and gave what they had and more to aid the struggling victims.

The smaller community of Picher was a booming mining camp when it was first started, creating much needed jobs for families. Mining was extremely important at this time; Ottawa County alone yielded "ten to thirty percent mineral for each ton of material hoisted to the

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<sup>1</sup> M. D. Harbaugh, Letter to Ottawa County Chairman, 1936, Box 38, Picher Collection, PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

surface,” versus the three to six percent yield of coal, oil, and zinc in Kansas and Missouri mines.<sup>2</sup> These statistics prove that Ottawa County mines were crucial to mining companies in America, as there was still ore to be found. These jobs were dangerous to the miners’ health, creating problems such as temporary blindness due to the large presence of hydrogen sulfide gas in the mines. This hazard only allowed miners to work two to four hours at a time to avoid the dangerous side effects. Cave-ins were also frequent in the mines and were much higher than those in Kansas or Missouri, the reason being that Ottawa County mines were up to 450 feet deep, while Kansas and Missouri mines reached 50 feet at their deepest. Although these mines yielded high profit for Ottawa County, their upkeep was very expensive because of the high level of heavy groundwater that constantly needed to be pumped. Wages during this time were higher, due to increased consumer demand, but the squandering of money was high in fashion at this time. Brothels, bars, and saloons dripped many families dry of funds. This only increased years later when mining demands drastically dropped and many miners were laid off and unable to find work.<sup>3</sup>

Other problems arose as the mines became more and more important in Picher. Debilitating sickness, terrible sanitation, and poor housing compromised miners and often cost them their jobs.<sup>4</sup>

The operators of mining companies were often in trouble for not taking better care of their miners. Investigations were held all over mines in Ottawa County. Specifically in Picher,

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<sup>2</sup> A. M. Gibson, “Early Mining Camps in Northeastern Oklahoma,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 34, no. 2 (1956): 193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Alan Derickson, “On the Dump Heap: Employee Medical Screening in the Tri-State Zinc-Lead Industry, 1924-1932,” *The Business History Review*, 62, no. 4 (1988): 656; Gibson, 182.

silica dust was found to be much over the legal limit.<sup>5</sup> Investigators reported their findings to the mine operators, as well as the government, and soon afterward laws were implemented, stating that miners were required to have medical checkups every six months. These miners were most often not allowed to view their medical reports, but the reports would only be viewed by the doctors and their employers. A diagnosis of A to K was given to the miners. An "A" meant the miner had little or no evidence of infection or sickness in the lungs, any ratings below a "C" symbolized a worker discharge, and therefore a "K" would mean that the miner was in the very late stages of sickness or infection and was unfit to work on the highest levels. Once it was found that a miner was in the late stages of tuberculosis, he would be discharged and was not allowed to go back to work. Many miners risked their health as much as they could without being caught so they could continue to bring wages home to their families. According to one investigation, 208 out of 309 workers had contracted silicotuberculosis, a combination of silicosis and tuberculosis.

To reduce the inhalation of dust, investigators proposed to the mining companies that miners should use more wet methods of mining, which would include wetting down the walls of mines and using more water in the mining process so that silica dust would be inhaled less. This also proved to make the mines more expensive, due to the constant pumping of water out of the mines. Along with these higher costs also came miner's insurance. The mining operators paid for workers' life insurance, while the employees would finance their own disability insurance and this was all done through payroll deductions.

While miners were allowed to have workers' insurance, it was a difficult task to separate the work related injuries from the non work related injuries because miners seemed to work themselves to death. Medical personnel did their best to prevent such hard work by sending out

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<sup>5</sup>Derickson, 662.

nurses to educate miners and their families at their own homes. This education was meant to prevent miners from working too hard and was also a way of helping miners understand how to better take care of themselves and their families, although many miners turned to drinking fresh milk, alcohol, and using patent drugs instead of listening to the awareness education. This was also difficult to do because there were many families with multiple members living in their households such as their widowed mothers or sisters who had lost their husbands to mining work.<sup>6</sup> The miners were not going to rest when they have several more mouths to feed, and there were certain motivators that stimulated this view. If a miner were to find a new striking of ore, that miner would be promoted from his position to a higher paying one. Miners were not paid on salaries; they were paid per bucket of ore they filled in their shift. If ore was dwindling that day, the miner was hiding an injury, or was suffering from the effects of silicosis, the miner's wages would surely be affected that day.

Many mining operators tried to hide silicosis and tuberculosis by passing them off as the side effects of the "lifestyles" these miners were living so they would not have to take credit for silicosis, other toxic diseases, or the conditions of their miners.<sup>7</sup> However, there were also those operators who were actually very sympathetic toward their workers. Many of the workers that were laid off were actually young bachelors that had no families to support. This saved many older miners and allowed them to provide for their families while they were still well enough to work. Once the Great Depression hit Picher, however, unemployment went up very quickly. Worker's insurance was dropped due to the high liability of the sick miners, and only 15 out of

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<sup>6</sup>Derickson, 667, 672-673.

<sup>7</sup> Markowitz and Rosner, 527, 529.

114 mines survived in the entire Tri-State District.<sup>8</sup> Mining ore in Picher failed at this time and was only done in small quantities afterward.<sup>9</sup>

While the health investigations were carried out, there were also safety inspections. These inspections looked at the current safety regulations, which were few and very unstable, and then went to the actual mines to see if these regulations were being carried out, and which regulations needed to be updated. Some of the inspectors were unreliable and either never showed up or had mistakes in their reports about the mines. Those who did their jobs correctly found that ventilation in the mines was practically nonexistent, that miners were possibly passing off their diseases to their families by bringing their soaked clothing home, and that the poor circulation of air was causing temporary blindness in miners working in water tainted with hydrogen sulfide.

New regulations were put in place when these reports were filed and new buildings called dog houses were to be placed at each mine. These dog houses were full of lockers and showers for the miners to clean up before they went home to their families. Once the day was over, the miners would shower in these dog houses, change clothes, then return home to their families without bringing silica dust or tainted water home on their working clothes.

Ventilation systems were also updated and reinstalled inside the mines so there was better air circulation for the miners. These systems allowed the toxic hydrogen gas to circulate outside the mines, allowing the water in the mines to be less toxic, so that the miners were less at risk of temporary blindness. This allowed miners to work in longer shifts than before and proved to make working less hazardous in the mines. If the gas was gone, fewer explosions could happen and fewer miners would be injured or killed. These regulations were implemented and created

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<sup>8</sup> Derickson, 666.

<sup>9</sup> Gibson, "Early Mining Camps," 202.

much less tension among miners and their families. After these inspections were completed, miners received better dog houses, better wet drilling, better air circulation in the dog houses and mines, clean drinking water and outhouses, and regular chest x-rays for the miners and their families.<sup>10</sup>

While many health problems were caused by the mining itself, some were also caused by poor housing and sanitary conditions. Miners and their families had very modest dwellings, many considered to be glorified slums in their mining communities. They had little interest for actually doing anything about them because they spent most of their hours and days working in the mines. Their “hovels,” as they were called, were located as close to the mines as possible, which led to a runoff of the toxic conditions of the mines themselves. It was later found that the poor housing was not due to lack of funds; it was due to the fact that the money earned was going into the mines rather than the conditions of the miners.

Poor sanitation in outhouses and dog houses was extreme as well. The drinking water was contaminated and the miners and families did not have good sanitation practices. The outhouses near the mines were very close to the miners’ houses, and that made the poor sanitation even worse. Picher was an especially difficult place to be because the tailing piles from mining were so tall and so many. It was difficult to go anywhere without stepping around a tailing pile. Miners seemed to not care about better housing, clean water, or good sanitation. They were very concerned with working the mines.<sup>11</sup> Once investigations were held at length, many officials and physicians came to the conclusion that while silicosis made miners

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<sup>10</sup> A. M. Gibson, “Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma,” (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1972): 179-251.

<sup>11</sup> Gibson, “Social History,” 186-187.



susceptible to tuberculosis, other causes were “poverty, poor living conditions, and unhygienic personal practices.” This not only put miners at risk of the disease, but their families as well.<sup>12</sup>

Also at this time was an outbreak of a disease called Pellagra, known as the “hard times disease.”<sup>13</sup> This disease was in many mining communities and was caused by a deficiency of Vitamin B<sub>3</sub>, an ingredient in milk and many vegetables. The Red Cross sent out a committee solely dedicated to the prevention of Pellagra in 1933. The main contributing factors to Pellagra, according to the Red Cross, were bad dietary habits, social customs that promoted the faulty diets, and economic situations. This campaign did not just consist of sending out pamphlets or literature, but it also involved sending people to educate communities about Pellagra. The sole purpose of this committee, according to a Red Cross pamphlet, was to “remove or offset the economic and social barriers” throughout communities affected and not affected by Pellagra, to prevent the spreading and the forming of the deficiency.

This Red Cross committee developed many changes in the prevention of Pellagra including instruction in nutrition, holding conferences, home groups, and handing out literature, getting children in schools involved, the introduction of a school lunch, and publicity campaigns. The instruction in nutrition involved promoting cooking, canning, and low-cost Pellagra containing foods, while also getting Pellagra-preventing foods on local grocery store and commissary shelves. Nutrition instruction also included the promotion of gardening, raising chickens, cows, and goats, and the diversification of crops. The implementation of this step mostly depended on the goodwill of landowners and tenants. Instruction in school involved helping children learn better dietary habits so they could help their families prevent Pellagra.

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<sup>12</sup> Markowitz and Rosner, “The Street of Walking Death,” 527.

<sup>13</sup> “A Chapter Program for the Control of Pellagra,” Box 38, Picher Collection, PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

This was done by implementing a nourishing meal that showed the children what the components of wholesome meals. The publicity campaign consisted of written appeals to be read at community and church meetings as well as speaking programs and newspaper articles.<sup>14</sup>

The Red Cross not only had committees for preventing diseases such as Pellagra, but also to prevent home accidents, to provide live saving and disaster classes, and to train Junior Red Cross members for future campaigns. Accidents in the home were common in the early 1900s and prevention of these occurrences spread throughout the Red Cross after the floods hit in 1936. Wood burning stoves, kerosene lamps, and narrow stairways provided the perfect conditions for these accidents in all wooden houses. The Red Cross committee responsible for the prevention of these accidents provided much literature on the matter, as well as accident prevention classes and town meetings. The classes and literature reminded women not to carry too many cleaning objects such as brooms and mops at one time or they might fall and break something. It also reminded families about the dangers of house fires and warned them to be very careful when going to bed or leaving the house, making sure all candles, lamps, and stoves were put out and not left unattended.<sup>15</sup>

The Red Cross also offered many life saving courses to community members in promoting the helping of flood victims. There were courses on swimming safety, helping drowning victims, and helping the injured before medical personnel could arrive on the scene.<sup>16</sup> The swimming safety classes were often held at National Aquatic Schools on the coastal regions of the United States. Courses such as basic and advanced swimming, basic and advanced small

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> "Red Cross Services in News Pictures," 1936, Box 38, Picher Collection, PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

craft operating, basic and advanced life saving, and basic and advanced first aid. These courses provided hands on training in the water, which gave the volunteers more realistic experiences in life saving.<sup>17</sup>

For those who could not attend the Aquatic Schools, the Red Cross offered smaller courses in Ottawa County and the Picher area. Courses in helping drowning victims proved to be helpful to those preparing to volunteer to help flood victims at the actual site of the floods as well as to inform those volunteering in Picher and other areas of Ottawa County. The course provided information on how to save a drowning victim while making sure the life saver did not drown. Life preservers and anything that could be offered to help the victim ashore was considered the safest way to help drowning victims, but if the victim was too far out in the water, these courses provided training in advanced swimming. This was to prevent the volunteer from losing his life while trying to save a victim.<sup>18</sup>

First aid courses were very important in helping flood victims as well. These courses were provided “to increase the student’s value to himself, his family, his employer, and his community.”<sup>19</sup> These courses were set up in 1931 at the main branch of the Red Cross in Washington DC. Once the floods spread across the United States, the courses were issued to every other branch of Red Cross. First aid was taught as an effort to keep a victim alive before a medical professional could arrive on the scene. These volunteers were instructed in the prevention of smaller injuries and infections, as well as the prevention of death in major injuries by stopping bleeding and making sure the victim was constantly breathing. The volunteers were

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<sup>17</sup> “National Aquatic Schools,” 1936, Box 38, Picher Collection, PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

<sup>18</sup> “Red Cross Services in News Pictures,” 1936.

<sup>19</sup> “American National Red Cross: First Aid and Life Saving Service,” Washington, DC, 1931, Box 38, Picher Collection, PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

told to make the victims as comfortable as possible before a doctor or nurse was able to help. These courses also taught human anatomy and transportation of injured persons, as well as minor emergency care for all victims. These courses provided a way for many housewives and young women to be involved as volunteers while their husbands and fathers made a living in the mines. They gave their time and effort in volunteering to help victims that came to them for aid.<sup>20</sup>

Another way for young women to help was by volunteering for the Junior Red Cross. This allowed young adults to spread the word in their schools and communities about life saving classes and other programs needing volunteers. They were mainly responsible for sorting through and stacking donated books, handing out literature in their schools, and helping the different committees that were short-handed at that time. These young adults made a big difference by volunteering their time to the Red Cross.<sup>21</sup>

The Midwestern branch of the Red Cross accepted volunteers for every one of these programs, and upon completion, the student would get a certificate in first aid. Once the certificate was given, the volunteer could offer help to flood victims fleeing to Ottawa County to get away from the flooding. There was a huge need for volunteers certified in first aid; there were not near enough doctors or nurses to take care of victims rolling into Midwestern counties. These courses allowed the people of Ottawa County who could not afford to donate money to help flood victims by giving their time. The Red Cross was always relieved to have volunteers, and had an annual roll call for each county. After the floods in 1936, members went up drastically with people trying to find any way possible to help the victims of the flooding.

The Red Cross in Ottawa County not only donated time, but also valuable items. Until 1933 there were no Federal Relief agencies in the United States. This left all the donating up to

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> "Red Cross Services in News Pictures," 1936.

the Red Cross. Donated items such as flour, blankets, food, medications, seeds, and gardening kits were donated to farmers whose crops were destroyed by drought in 1931 and to the victims of the 1935 tornado.<sup>22</sup> Once the floods in 1936 happened, the Federal Relief agencies took more burdens off of the Red Cross. They also funded many Red Cross projects and distributions for the victims of the 1936 floods. After receiving this funding, the Red Cross in the Midwest was able to distribute more food, medications, blankets, and seeds, as well as furniture, small houses, and money to the flood victims. Many volunteers even gave their time and vehicles to transport goods from Picher to other towns in Ottawa County.

Many victims came to the Picher area for aid from the Red Cross. Hospitals, homes, and empty buildings were all used to house flood victims needing aid. The Red Cross, Picher Chapter, donated many resources to these victims including 4 room houses, medical care, committees responsible for knitting and mending clothing, and transportation to make sure these goods got to the victims safely.<sup>23</sup> The people of Picher and Ottawa County also donated many items as well as their time to help the victims of the floods. M. D. Harbaugh, Ottawa County Chairman for the Red Cross wrote many letters to his different chapters, reminding them of the goodwill that was bestowed upon them in 1931 during the drought and massive crop loss, as well as in 1935 when a tornado wiped out many resources.<sup>24</sup> The United States helped Picher during those times with tremendous donations to the Red Cross branch in St. Louis. The nation came together just to help this little town in the Midwest, so Picher brought all the resources they had

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<sup>22</sup> "Ottawa County Red Cross: Report of Chapter Activities," 1931-1934, Box 38, Picher Collection, PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> M. D. Harbaugh, Letters to Picher, Cardin, Fairland, Miami, Tri-State Metal Mine and Smelter Worker's Union, Webber Mine, and Bird Dog Mine, 1936, Box 38, Picher Collection, PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

available, including their valuable time, to help the many flood victims in other parts of the country.<sup>25</sup>

Many hardships happened on the United States in the early 1900s, all of which the American people gathered together to help those in need. The Red Cross did their duties by taking donations from people in the Midwest, while the small community of Picher did their best to donate and distribute as many volunteers and supplies as they possibly could. These two fronts put a major dent in helping the victims of the spring floods in 1936. Through all the hardships of Picher's past and even though the unemployment rate was rather high during this time, the community of Picher pulled their resources together and donated money from every corner of their town, from schools and businesses to mining companies and employee unions. All of these efforts helped the Red Cross compile a well generated foundation on which the victims of the floods could stand upon and find relief from their homelessness and lack of resources.

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<sup>25</sup> M. D. Harbaugh, Letter to Ottawa County Chairman, 1936, Box 38, Picher Collection, PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

## Appendix

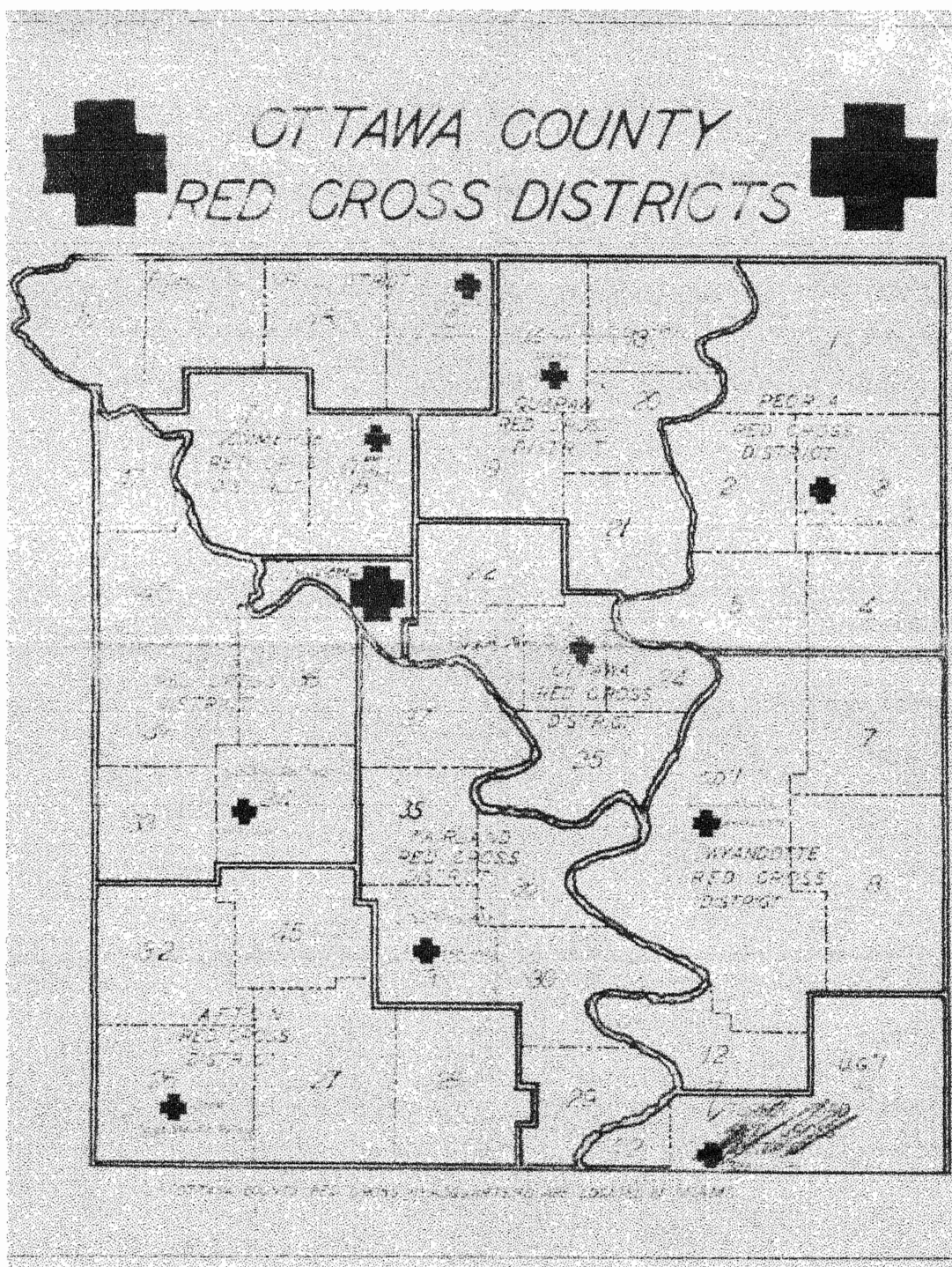
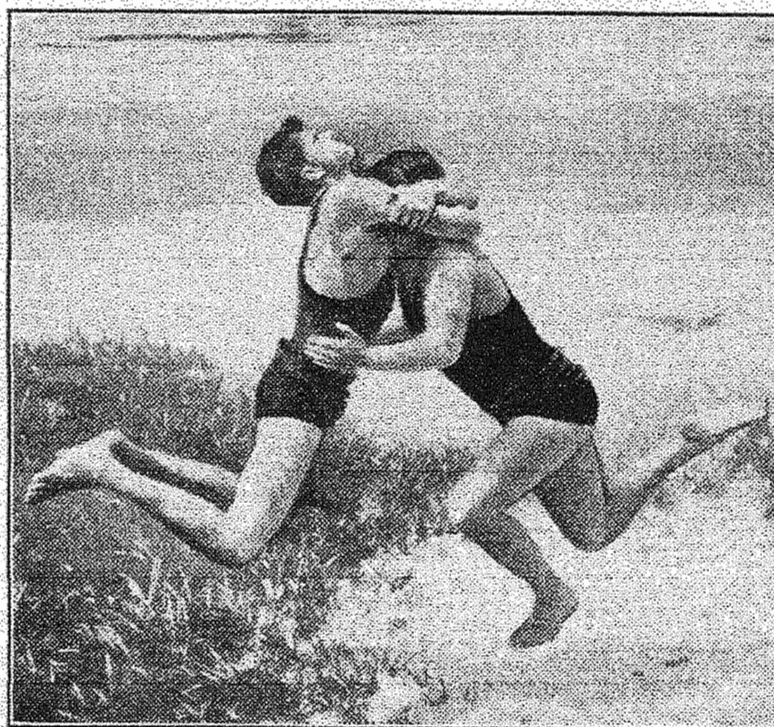


Figure 1.1

Ottawa County Red Cross District, Ottawa County, Oklahoma



No. 364

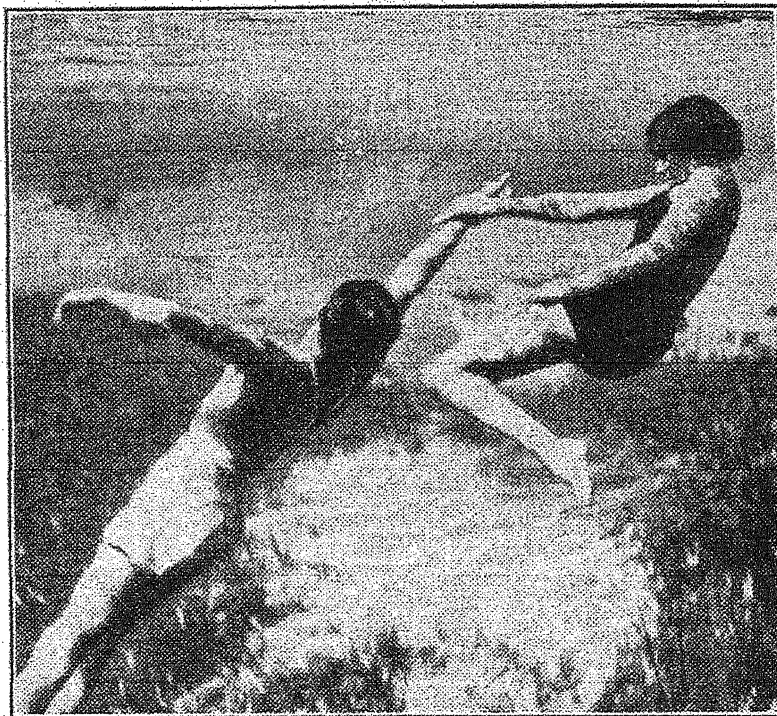


LIFE SAVER ESCAPES FROM DEATH GRAPPLE—Under-water demonstration by Red Cross Life Savers of first movement in escape from the strangle-hold of a drowning person. Life Saver (at right) pushes drowning person away, preparatory to slipping downward from under his hold. The Red Cross teaches Life Saving to thousands annually.

Figure 1.2  
Red Cross Services in News Pictures, 1936



No. 365



HOW EASY RESCUE MAY BE BY THE TRAINED LIFE SAVER—  
The Red Cross girl life saver grasps the hand of the drowning person,  
remaining well away from him, and swings him to the surface, where she  
can seize him in any one of the safe Red Cross carries, until she brings  
him to shore. Famous under-water demonstration by Red Cross Life  
Savers.

Figure 1.3  
Red Cross Services in News Pictures, 1936

No. 368



HOW THOUSANDS WERE RESCUED IN SPRING FLOODS—With the cooperation of the Coast Guard and many private agencies, the Red Cross rescue crews took the aged, ill, infirm from their homes when flood waters rose in Pennsylvania cities. Hundreds of refugee centers and canteens were waiting to shelter them, with Red Cross medical aid at hand.

Figure 1.4  
Red Cross Services in News Pictures, 1936

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M. D. Harbaugh. Letter to Ottawa County Chairman, 1936. Box 38. Picher Collection. PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

“National Aquatic Schools,” 1936. Box 38. Picher Collection. PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

M. D. Harbaugh. Letters to Picher, Cardin, Fairland, Miami, Tri-State Metal Mine and Smelter Worker’s union, Webber Mine, and Bird Dog Mine, 1936. Box 38. Picher Collection. PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

“Ottawa County Red Cross: Report of Chapter Activities,” 1931-1934. Box 38. Picher Collection. PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

“A Chapter Program for the Control of Pellagra.” Box 38. Picher Collection. PSU Archive, Pittsburg, KS.

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### Secondary Sources

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 (1962): 656-677.

This source includes historical context of my timeline. The text is set several years before my topic, but provides a relevant history of what was going on at the time with mines in the Tri-State District, with some information about Ottawa County. It will be useful when writing about silicosis and tuberculosis, along with the poor conditions of sanitation and housing.

Gibson, A. M. *Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

This gives me an early history of how people were helping each other in dealing with debilitating diseases like miner’s con and tuberculosis. The timeline is earlier than mine, but gives great foundation to my topic.

Gibson, A. M. “Early Mining Camps in Northeastern Oklahoma.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 34, no. 2 (1956): 193-202.

This article was written on the early mining camps around Picher. It gave great examples of typical mines at that time. It listed Picher as a popular place for miners, so that will give me some context to the area. It will be helpful in providing a solid understanding about the importance of mining in the Picher area.

———. Gibson, A. M. "A Social History of the Tri-State District," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 37, no. 2 (1959): 182-195.

This article gave me a new look into what life was like outside of mines. Miners and their families could spend quality time together while making a living. Many miners would play baseball on their days off and farm, garden, or fish. They were able to use gardening, farming, and fishing as a sort of stress-relieving way to make ends meet while having somewhat of a good time. It was refreshing to hear of some good times in the midst of harsh conditions.

Markowitz, Gerald and David Rosner. "The Street of Walking Death: Silicosis, Health, and Labor in the Tri-State Region, 1900-1950," *The Journal of American History*, 77, no. 2 (1990): 525-552.

This article was written about the poor conditions of health, homes, working conditions, and so on regarding miners in the Tri-State District. The article gives me some insight into the lives of miners at this time. The time of the article is set is before my timeline, but it gives a generous historical background of the area.