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Depression And Decline In The Tri-States

Joey Zdeb

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Dr. Lawson

There were once unsettled and wild lands in the Indian territory of northwest Oklahoma, in the lowland valleys of southeastern Kansas, and even the vast hills of the southwestern Ozarks of Missouri. But this once clean and tranquil land is no more due to the mining and encampment of the Tri-State area of Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, there was a large movement of people into the Tri-States area. This was a result of newfound minerals able to be mined, and with that came jobs, land, and new opportunity for the people of the Eastern United States. The time of ore mining in the Tri-State region gave the area its highest point and prosperity in its history, but this fell in the midst of one of our country's darkest hours into poverty.

Just prior to the Civil War, mining of ore in the Tri-States began in southwestern Missouri in the 1870's, but were first exploited in earlier in 1848. Miners moved west into Cherokee County, Kansas in the 1870's and around twenty years later, mining was moved south into what was considered Oklahoma territory at the time.¹ The Tri-States area quickly became a world leader in lead and zinc mining, but was considered a fraction of what was to come later. From 1880 to 1930, the Tri-States produced fifty to eighty percent of the world's supply of mined lead and zinc ore.² But there was much more mining to be done by the end of the nineteenth century.

At the turn of the century, there was only a matter of a few thousand workers in the Tri-States. Each worker would work long hours in mines all over the area for a minimal wage. They worked in many different styles of mining as well. There were tunneled mines in the Ozarks, as well as underground and surface mining in southeastern Kansas and southwestern Missouri,

¹ "Early Mining Camps in Northeastern Oklahoma," Chronicles of Oklahoma, no. 2 (Norman: 1952): 193.

² William James Cassidy, The Tri-State Zinc-Lead Mining Region: Growth, Problems, and Prospects (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1955): 56.

and the deep mines in Oklahoma. Since the early days of the mining in Ottawa County in northwestern Oklahoma, through the prosperous 1920s, the depression in the 1930s and the recovery in the 1940s, there have been several mines recorded as deep as 455 ft.³

In the year 1899, the Tri-States produced a little over ten million dollars worth of mined ore.⁴ This combined mineral stockpile came from all three states, but the majority was from the new founded mines of Oklahoma. But as the region grew, more mines were founded and the new settlers of this area are looking at it as if it were gold. "Each District was rated as the richest in the world."³ News of this "goldmine" spread across the country as more and more workers flocked to larger towns in the region such as Joplin, the cattle town of Baxter Springs, and the new mining town of Picher, Oklahoma. Many people who were already heading west to mine in Colorado, Wyoming, or California instead found themselves making their way to the Tri-States Area.⁵

In the Tri-States area, there were two major systems of mining. The first was the Oklahoma-Kansas field that was eighteen square miles in extent that included Picher. The second was the Orongo-Webb City-Duenweg field that was about eleven square miles in extent, northwest of Joplin. The remainder of the ore mined from the Tri-States was scattered throughout the region in spots of a few square feet, several hundred yards, or even as much as just an acre of land. This remained true for over one hundred years.

³ Gibson, "Early Mining Camps," 193-94.

⁴ The Tri-State Survey Committee Inc., A Preliminary Report On Living, Walking, And Health Conditions In The Tri-State Area: (Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas), (New York City: 1939): 32.

⁵ Arrell Morgan Gibson, "A Social History of the Tri-State District," Chronicles of Oklahoma. (Norman: 1959): 182.

After the first decade in the twentieth century, the rate of ore being mined and money coming in nearly doubled. In 1912, over eighteen million dollars worth of ore was mined. But this would come to a halting stop. World War I broke out in 1914, and less ore was being purchased from the United States from the rest of the world. The eleven million dollar ore value was not the projected number the area had in mind. The following year made an outrageous jump to twenty-six million dollars made in 1914. Employment, mining, and living went on as well as the Great War ended, all led to the United States' small depression in 1921. Mining profits fell to a mere eleven thousand, roughly twenty-four million less than 1920.⁶ This was but a hiccup into what was to come.

The roaring twenties was not only a special time in New York City, but also in Northeastern Oklahoma and the streets of Joplin. In a matter of four years, ore mined in the Tri-States multiplied six-fold. From 1925 to 1929, the Tri-State Committee recorded a minimum of sixty million dollars each year in mined ore. This time in the Tri-States was its most glorious time in economic terms. The Tri-States areas' biggest competition was the New England mining in Pennsylvania and West Virginia as well as organizations in Flint, Michigan and also Wyoming.⁶ The Tri-States also battled California and the Sacramento gold mining camps.⁷ At the height of Northwestern Oklahoma's ore production, eighty percent of the United States' zinc supply came from Ottawa County. According to Thomas L. Wells, the Tri-States produced anywhere from twenty to thirty percent of the world's zinc amount in the late twenties.⁸

With thousands of men and their families looking for work in the twenties, there was a

⁶ The Tri-State Survey Committee, A Preliminary Report, 32-33.

⁷ Gibson, "A Social History," 183.

⁸ Cassidy, The Tri-State Zinc-Lead Mining Region, 56.

bold place in the west to go, the Tri-States. Like before, more and more people are flocking to Joplin and the surrounding towns. Joplin grew to forty thousand plus people in the late twenties, which is the size it is today. All of this growth has shown an example of the Tri-State area that once employed roughly 1,714 miners in the southwestern Ozarks to over twenty-nine thousand employed miners all over the area with an additional ten thousand people who had mining related jobs.⁹

The feature place of this era of mining in the Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri area was the small town of Picher, Oklahoma. Picher was a town in northwest Oklahoma in Ottawa County that sat on the beehive of lead and zinc minable ore. The town and area had little prior history to the mining. Buildings, roads, and people swiftly made their way on the land, and the town of Picher grew quickly as a mining town. There were roughly seven to eight thousand people in 1929 that populated the town. Most of the town consisted of newly settled men who had come to mine. But other men also had jobs in Picher with businesses, services, schools, and other services to maintain the town.⁹

After the ore that was mined all day, the next most important substance of everyday life was alcohol. A long day of work in a dirty mine for a man is tough and he required a beer after his day. There is also little to do out in this area of the country other than to work, help with the family, educate the children, and go to church. There was known to be at least one tavern or bar in every section of a town in the twenties. But on another note, there were mostly beer parlors because it was illegal to sell liquor in Oklahoma. Many people in Picher sufficed with illegal “high balls” in soda mugs, which were sold at Picher general stores and beer parlors.¹⁰

⁹ Cassidy, The Tri-State Zinc-Lead Mining Region, 120.

¹⁰ The Tri-State Survey Committee, A Preliminary Report, 30-31.

Other than residential life, the town of Picher could be considered average at best. The town consisted of a church, a school, drug stores, beer parlors, taverns, general stores, mining facilities, and many other miscellaneous stores and services.¹¹ Chat piles were all over Picher as well, making it appear to be an undesirable place to live.¹² The high school in 1929 had an enrollment size about the same as any other town of seven or eight thousand people. The town also took a lot of pride in its local high school football team. The high school had a good field for the time they were living and even had flood lights, which was a rare thing in the late nineteen twenties. There were also many other small groups and clubs for people, but mostly made by the parents for children.¹³

Ethnic diversity in the Tri-States was very limited. The population of Picher, Oklahoma was over seven thousand with over ninety percent being white-Caucasian. Most of the people among the town were of English, Scottish, and Irish decent. Outside of the mining and the white-Caucasian people, there was a considerable amount of Native Americans in the Oklahoma and southern Kansas reservations.

Other towns boomed along with Picher as mentioned before. This included Joplin, Carthage, Webb City, Baxter Springs, Galena, Miami, but mostly Picher. Another fact among the workers that moved to these towns were wages. The majority of people that moved to the Tri-States to mine were mostly poor, looking for jobs. The beginning wage in the early 1920s was around five to seven dollars a week. As time went on and as Picher became tied more and more

¹¹ Alan Derickson, "'On The Dump Heap': Employee Medical Screening in the Tri-State Zinc-Lead Industry, 1924-1932," The Business History Review, no. 4 (1988): 657.

¹² Outsiders considered chat piles as waste. However, chat piles were local monuments to the miners 'hard work' and symbols of achievement. They were not looked at by locals as eyesores.

¹³ The Tri-State Survey Committee, A Preliminary Report, 26-31.

into prosperity, it was raised to twenty five, and then fifty dollars was soon to come. This hardly changed the fact that most people were still poor and lived in houses made of the cheapest material in the area.¹⁴

Thousands mining families were in a rush to get to the Tri-State area and settle in for work. Many houses were made of dirt, wood, and the bare minimum quality of anything made to build a home. In fact, before and after the Great Depression, there was little to no electricity among most residential homes in and around Picher. The town of Picher was also not connected with city water. Water was brought by barrels until the late nineteen thirties. There were very few residents that lived miles east of Picher that got any kind of plumbing. This made water and sanitation a big issue in Picher. Most ponds, lakes, creeks, or strip pits were infected and unsafe for drinking because of the mining and mineral content.¹⁵ The location of these homes was also a problem. Most citizens of the Picher area did not live in the city limits. Thousands of families lived on the countryside and commuted. Many workers even lived as far as Joplin and took a trolley to get from home to work.¹⁶

As the Tri-States and Picher were holding up and as the mining industry thrived, a series of events led to the tumble of the life and employment of the Tri-States Area. In the early 1920s, disease and health hazards became known to the people of the Tri-States. The American government as well as many other health surveyors came into the area, particularly Picher and its surrounding area. Around twenty thousand of the mining corps were looked at. By 1930, out of

¹⁴ The Tri-State Survey Committee, A Preliminary Report, 21-26.

¹⁵ Arrell Morgan Gibson, Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972): 179.

¹⁶ Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, "The Street of Walking Dead: Silicosis, Health, and Labor in the Tri-State Region," The Journal of American History 77, no. 2 (1990): 526.

twenty-nine thousand workers in the Tri-States, nearly nine thousand workers were diagnosed with some form of silicosis.¹⁷ Silicosis is a lung disease that is attained by inhaling silica particles.

According to the Tri-State Ore Producers Association, a “lightly field count” of silica dust equaled out to five million particles per cubic foot. A “heavy field count” of silica dust amounted to nearly ten million particles of silica dust per cubic foot.¹⁸ Other than the air the people of Picher are breathing, there are other ways the citizens of Ottawa County were being infected. The miners were obviously the most infected group in the area, but the workers were not just affecting themselves when they would work in the dirty mines. When a miner would exit a mine and go home or into town, thousands and even millions of particles would infect the streets. Small dust storms or wind gusts would stir the Picher mining air all around the region. In wet weather, people must avoid the puddles that would turn into small ponds and lakes due to the change in terrain from the mining, which caused the low drainage. In dry weather, massive silica dust clouds would form all around Picher.¹⁹

As if Picher did not have it bad enough, in 1929, the Great Depression hit America. That year, the Tri-States, but more specifically Picher was in its economic peak. The area employed over thirty thousand related to the mining. Mining built up this area, and it would also be the downfall to the people of the area. The Tri-States were also mining over sixty million dollars in its final glory year in 1929. But Picher was hit the hardest, with its best and worst year in history being the same one. First, silicosis and tuberculosis became a known factor and many thousands

¹⁷ Markowitz and Rosner, “The Street of Walking Dead,” 529.

¹⁸ Industrial Hygiene Digest, (Pittsburgh: 1937).

¹⁹ The Tri-State Survey Committee, A Preliminary Report, 18.

of workers were lost for it. Secondly, the depression came and depleted over twenty-five thousand jobs in the Tri-States. In 1930, mining income in Oklahoma plunged over forty million dollars down to only seventeen million. This went down to only six million dollars in 1931 and a mere four million in 1932.²⁰ The employment number went even further down, going from over thirty thousand to the same number of miners that began in 1870 in Missouri, roughly 1,700.²¹

Picher, Oklahoma has suffered a severe economic loss. Many people who could afford to move away have fled the Tri-States to try and look for a job elsewhere. But most people were not fortunate enough to do so, and remained in their slum homes.²² But Picher still held up for a matter of years before it turned into a ghost town after 1929. The town had a “Clean Up week” and “Private Dumps” to help keep the town somewhat suitable for living. There was poor sanitation in the Picher, which was why the town fell into decay in the first place. Picher also had a printed newspaper. The quality of it was sub-par and it was poorly printed. However, many people relied on it. Organizations in the town continued through the hard times, but school picnics and Sunday church socials were the most popular.²⁰

There was a housing survey taken in 1935 in the Tri-States area. This information covered Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma but primarily has reference to Picher. The survey recorded two major mining towns in Missouri, three towns in Kansas, and eight in Oklahoma. Out of these towns and their local area, 4,867 homes were observed. From the 4,867 homes that were observed, 3,541 homes were classified to be unfit for living. This was a horrible ratio of over seventy percent of the homes not being proper enough to live in. The Tri-State Survey Committee also reported that 1,754 homes had holes in the walls or roof. Going even further into

²⁰ The Tri-State Survey Committee, A Preliminary Report, 30-33.

²¹ Derickson, “On The Dump Heap,” 529.

²² Gibson, “A Social History,” 183.

depth, another terrible fact would be that only forty three homes were deemed good homes to live in that had sound construction and some utilities.

The survey also suggests that the large amount of unsuitable homes was not due to the depression or even because of the filth of the lands, but because of its mining and chat piles. The survey concluded that in the area was rushed into and homes were constructed too quickly and too poorly.²³ The incoming settlers of this area had little time to make a home that was decent enough for their standards. These were called scrap houses for the quality of the homesteads. A scrap house is pretty self-explanatory because these houses were made of paper, box scraps, wood, dirt, and rock and stone. It was a house that used the cheapest essentials for shelter and mostly never had any kind of utility lines running in them. That includes no water and no electricity.

What made things very unsanitary in Picher were the outdoor toilets. These outdoor toilets were not only among the residential parts, but also all around the town. Scrap houses were also so small that there were limited places to sleep for a family. It was common in the early 1900s for most families to sleep in a single bed together. This fact comes from the idea that the Picher area averaged five people per household. This led to overcrowding of homes and in the town itself. An infected, mining father can spread disease to his home easily by coughing, sleeping in the same bed, or even just being in the same one room house.²⁴ Silicosis was not contagious from person to person, but Tuberculosis was. The silica dust that came from a miner could spread Silicosis all over the town or even at home by silica dust settling onto other

²³ The Tri-State Survey Committee, A Preliminary Report, 20.

²⁴ Markowitz and Rosner, "The Street of Walking Dead," 530.

surfaces. The survey was very biased but it paints a good picture to what everyday living conditions were like.

As poverty, the depression, and the dust bowl were on going, there was a small growth in the mining business again. In the late nineteen thirties, jobs found their way into the mining business once more. It was a sudden light that shined on the people of poverty in northwestern Oklahoma. In 1937, nearly twenty-three million dollars was made in ore produced. This escalation rose at a constant rate until 1960, but took a small roller coaster ride there. In between the late 1930s and 1960 there were declining years, but none like the downfall of 1929 for Picher, Oklahoma. Although this was a great economic recovery in the Tri-States, in 1937 only thirty-eight percent of the United States' lead and zinc supply came from the Tri-States, a small amount to what it was in the 1920s. The following year in 1938, the world lead production amounted to 1,829,741 tons. The United States made only 381,849 tons of the total. Only a small one-sixth would come from the Tri-States area, amounting to 52,117 tons.²⁵ But by 1941, the Tri-States improved to producing forty percent of the country's ore output mined, but it would later realize it would be the best it could do. When the Second World War broke out, nearly two thirds of the employed miners were laid off or were drafted.²⁶

After the fall of the Tri-State mining industry in 1929 and 1930 from the diseases of the mining and the depression, other parts of the country did not suffer as much as Ottawa County, Oklahoma or Jasper County, Missouri. A couple other mining industries that overtook the Tri-States in production were in Gary, Indiana and Flint, Michigan. New England mines would come to produce more ore than the Tri-States would in the future as well.

²⁵ The Tri-State Survey Committee, A Preliminary Report, 10.

²⁶ Cassidy, The Tri-State Zinc-Lead Mining Region, 124.

The story of the Tri-States mining industry is a classic example of a rise and fall situation. Many people flocked to an area in hope for a new life but would later be destroyed by the diseases that came from the mining and jobs people initially moved for. The Picher area was never paved with gold, but it gave people something to stand for even if the citizens of the town lived in scrap houses. The story of the Tri-States and Picher, Oklahoma in the early twentieth century is the rise into prosperity and the fall into poverty.

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