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Recommended Citation

Callaway, Amanda, "Educational Impacts in Picher, Oklahoma and the Surrounding Tri-State District" (2011). *Theory and Practice: HIST430*. 19.
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EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS IN PICHER, OKLAHOMA AND THE SURROUNDING
TRI-STATE DISTRICT

Amanda Callaway
History of Theory and Practice 430
December 10, 2011

The thirties was a rough decade for our nation's history. It was a time of "Great Depression" when the stock market crashed in 1929. The crash led to major inflation and scarcity of jobs all over the United States. Picher, Oklahoma was in need of operational mines during this time. The people there would do whatever it would take to keep their jobs. This became so extreme that people in the community began not taking care of their homes, keeping good hygiene, and using proper safety precautions. The town seemed to lack education to the outside world. Many today are trying to uncover what kind of education was being taught in the community on health, hygiene, and leadership skills. In order to understand how any community accepts an educational program a case study like this is necessary.

Picher, Oklahoma was a part of the Tri-State Lead and Zinc District that expanded through Jasper and Newton Counties in southwestern Missouri, Cherokee County in Southeastern Kansas, and Ottawa County in Northeastern Oklahoma.¹ This land was involved in extreme mining including the community of Picher, Oklahoma located in Ottawa County. From around 1880 to 1950 the Tri-State District was the leading lead and zinc producer in the world. In particular during the mid to late 1930s the mining was especially booming as the country prepared for the world war that emerged among nations. Out of the three states Oklahoma was the richest in obtaining deposits. Their mines could produce from ten to thirty percent of the mineral for each ton of material brought to the surface.² So, the communities of the district could definitely see the need for the mines not only for production but jobs as well.

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

²*Ibid.*

During this time period a major contributor to the education of Picher was the American Red Cross organization. The American Red Cross was organized in 1881 under the Treaty of Geneva. This organization is completely kept running by membership and donations. A quote from Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, explains why the Red Cross is so important to our nation and how people need to step up with them through the rough times. He stated,

The American Red Cross emblem symbolizes good will and neighborliness and brother hood throughout our land. Its purposes spring from the deep seated desires of the people them-selves, desires for restored orderly living and well-being wherever disaster and calamity strike. The program is of service in disaster relief, in health work, in behalf of disabled ex-service men, in leasing our children to good citizenship through the junior organization. The return of prosperity brings - with it an added responsibility on the part of all of us toward our neighbor in distress. We must give in proportion as we have received.³

Picher was a part of the Ottawa County chapter of Red Cross. The Red Cross did numerous relief work and activities to help better the communities of Ottawa County. The Public Information Service for the American Red Cross would send out letters to chapters on ways to publicize the efforts of the chapter's projects and goals. Some of these were newspaper pictures that would show general Red Cross services and localized stories of chapter's activities.⁴ They would have pictures with a caption below them that explained what it portrayed. For example there were ones like, "Guard against Accidents in the Home." It explained that the Red Cross's Home and Farm Accident Prevention program was warning against accidents in the home and that 34,000 lives were annually taken due to home accidents. The Red Cross enrolled school girls in a Home Hygiene and Care of the Sick courses. They learned from the Red Cross nurses about

³ The American Red Cross, The Plan Book: Annual Roll Call, Washington D.C., 1935-36, Picher Collection Box 38, Pittsburg State University Axe Library, Pittsburg, KS.

⁴ Public Information Service American Red Cross to Chapter Publicity Chairmen, Red Cross Services in News Pictures, September 1, 1936, Picher Collection Box 38, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

the vital importance of their families' health.⁵ Picher's newspaper, *The Picher Tri-State Tribune*, had information that pertained to the Red Cross efforts. They discussed in an article called, Report of the Chairmen, how the funds were used for emergency needs only that couldn't be met by another agency in the county.⁶ This was due to the lack of money donated to the Red Cross as well as the fact that it was during the Great Depression and money was scarce.

The Red Cross could only give out relief during emergencies because accidents and small needs used the majority of Red Cross money. Over half a million who suffered in the tornado of 1935 that hit Picher along with other tornadoes and floods around the United States received aid from the Red Cross.⁷ They also spent money on clothing and food for the people. Farmers and community members received seed to rebuild their crops and help start gardens for food. In Report of Chairmen, the article continues to say that it is obvious limited funds are at the mercy of the officers of the chapter. They don't want people to attempt to supply food, clothing, and other relief with the number of unemployed people in the county that might come to the Red Cross for help.⁸ They need to save the money for major relief at this point until money is regained. However, quoted in the article,

Major relief problems must be referred to the county commissioner as is indicated by the appropriations of funds the chapter will try to make its small resources go far in accident prevention and life saving needs of homes, in providing certain

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "Report of the Chairmen," *The Picher Tri-State Tribune* 13, no.4, (Thursday, January 2, 1936): 1, Pittsburg State University Axe Library, Pittsburg, KS.

⁷ The American Red Cross, The Plan Book: Annual Roll Call, Washington D.C., 1935-36, Picher Collection Box 38, Pittsburg State University Axe Library, Pittsburg, KS.

⁸ "Report of the Chairmen," *The Picher Tri-State Tribune* 13, no.4, (Thursday, January 2, 1936): 1, Pittsburg State University Axe Library, Pittsburg, KS.

expenses in under-privileged children and others who require medical services, consider Red Cross membership expects it to handle.⁹

The Red Cross saw the need for first aid and life saving education in Ottawa County. It got to a point that in 1936 their First Aid and Life Saving Committee launched a campaign throughout the county. They wanted every school boy and girl to enlist their parents to cooperate in making inspections of their homes. This was to help them discover the hazards and be able to correct the unsafe conditions of the home. In 1935 a total of 34,500 lives were lost in and around the homes in the United States and nearly 5 million were injured.¹⁰ The Red Cross used the students in schools as a way to educate their parents on health and safety. They also had the students ask their parents to donate a dollar to the Red Cross to help keep the organization with means to do relief work. Again in 1935, the Red Cross extended the accident prevention service to our homes and farms. This began a nation-wide home accident prevention service. The service then distributed approximately 27 million home inspection forms through the schools. Around 2,500 local Red Cross chapters nominated accident prevention chairmen and committees.¹¹ Many other local organization and departments participated in the home inspection campaigns. The Red Cross really wanted to support the education of health and hygiene by giving home keepers check-lists that helped get rid of some hazards in their homes.¹² Red Cross is making

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "Accident Prevention," *The Picher Tri-State Tribune* 13, no.4 (Thursday, January 2, 1936): 1, Pittsburg State University Axe Library, Pittsburg, KS.

¹¹ The American National Red Cross Washington D.C. Group Discussion Material on Accident Prevention: In the Home and On the Farm, Washington D.C. Copyright 1936, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Kansas Collection H293 1978 9-14 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

¹² *Ibid.*

job opportunities available for teachers that want to help organize and teach first aid and life saving courses.

In particular a woman by the name of Ruth Hulsman, R.N. Ottawa County chapter Red Cross received a letter about a job opportunity for her to teach. The letter was from A.W. Cantwell, Director of First Aid and Life Saving in the midwestern area. He told her that they would be thrilled to issue her authorization as an American Red Cross Junior First Aid instructor. She was then able to conduct instruction and examinations.¹³ However, the branch office wanted the local chapters to take control of the situations without always having received help.

The midwestern branch office of Red Cross would send out public information for chapters First Aid and Life Saving programs. Some of the letters would say that the newspapers in the communities needed to be educating people on the arrival of the First Aid and Life Saving field representative that had come. The branch office wanted the chapter chairmen to be responsible for its community's knowledge of the organizations being produced. The chapter chairmen should not quote in newspapers the midwestern office because it is the local leadership that must make the programs successful.¹⁴ Basically they wanted the community's leadership and members to step up and realize that the duty was to them for the progress of Red Cross in the county. If chapters had not done their jobs as leaders, then the membership would go down along with the donations. The people could have started feeling that they weren't able to receive the

¹³ A.W. Cantwell, Director, First Aid and Life Saving Midwestern Area to Mrs. Ruth Hulsman, R.N. Ottawa County Chapter American Red Cross, November 5, 1936, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Kansas Collection H293 1978 9-14 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

¹⁴ Midwestern Branch Office American Red Cross St. Louis, MO, Public Information for Chapters First Aid and Life Saving Programs, Picher Collection Box 38, Kansas Collection H293 1978 9-14 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

knowledge they needed due to the lack of leadership. Along with this issue the chapters were suppose to report on how other Red Cross organizations, prominent individuals, schools, and public officials cooperated. This not only helped the leadership but the branch offices were able to see if the people comprehended the education given or just ignored it. Many letters explained the chapters want for more education.

During the 1920s an outbreak of accidents and illness swept through the mines and citizens. A letter written in 1924 expressed the concern over accidents. It stated that, accidents in this district were costing the operators about three quarters of a million dollars annually.¹⁵ The Red Cross chapter in cooperation with the mines inaugurated a campaign like in the 1930s. Its goal was to help build education to become healthier people and to maintain more sanitary working conditions. Management of the campaign felt that if they used a tool such as the Red Cross first aid car it would be a major asset in helping the miners with the issues at hand. This began a controversy among the local chapter and higher management of the Red Cross.

A letter was sent back to Mr. Clyde Morse, President of Chamber of Commerce in Miami, Oklahoma from the Division Manager, W.M.M. Baxter, over the first aid car. The letter had said that the first aid car does not operate as a "free lance." It had an itinerary that was made months in advance, so it couldn't just pick up and leave. At that time the car was operating with the Rock Island tour to then go to the east to a railroad.¹⁶ This meant that the activities of the car were under the jurisdiction of the railroad company that it was working with at the time. It would

¹⁵ President to W.M.M. Baxter, Jr., Manager, July 18, 1924, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Kansas Collection H293 1969 1-19 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

¹⁶ W.M.M. Baxter, Jr., Manager to Mr. Clyde Morse, President, Chamber of Commerce, Miami, Oklahoma, July 23, 1924, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Kansas Collection H293 1969 1-19 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

cost a lot of money to move the car which the management did not have to spend in moving the car. However, they planned to send a surgeon that had worked in the car to visit during the specified time of September and October.¹⁷ The next day a letter came from the W.M. Baxter, Division Manager to a Mr. Julian D. Conover secretary of the Tri-State Lead Ore Producers Association.

This letter explained that even though the car itself could not have been sent to the miners, they were still willing to help and be a part of the campaign to better the education of preventing accidents among the miners.¹⁸ More and more leaders among the community involved with the Red Cross saw that the issues with health and accident prevention would only get worse if the education wasn't there. In more letters ways to bring the education to a community as a whole were described.

On August 26, 1924, a letter was sent to a Miss Shirley Ferguson of Chapter Service in Saint Louis, MO that discussed how to achieve results. The anonymous person felt that in order for the campaign in the Tri-State District to achieve the greatest results, women and children needed to be reached most with accident prevention and health measures. Even though they thought the car would be the best way to bring attention to the problems to women and children through schools, mother clubs, and homes, they still wanted to look to the Red Cross for help.¹⁹

The letter is evidence that the leaders of the community's organizations definitely relied on and trusted the Red Cross for education. However, in the letter from the midwestern branch

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ W.M.M. Baxter, Jr., Manager to Mr. Julian D. Conover, Secretary Tri State Lead Ore Producers Association, July 24, 1924, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Kansas Collection H293 1969 1-19 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

¹⁹ American Red Cross, Saint Louis, MO to Miss Shirley Ferguson, Chapter Service, August 26, 1924, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Kansas Collection H293 1969 1-19 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

office proved to the Red Cross chapters that help can only go so far. The lack of finances during the Great Depression and all the help during natural disasters and other issues made the amount of relief help from the Red Cross smaller. Their letter in a sense said, there comes a point when the community and its leaders need to take responsibility for the issues in their towns.²⁰ Either people weren't using what they had learned or weren't learning enough. But according to the midwestern branch office, they were doing plenty to help the chapters.

F.A. Winfrey, acting manager of the midwestern branch of Red Cross said to Mr. John Newton, Chairman of the Commerce Mining & Royalty Co. in Miami Oklahoma that many organizations were shown to Red Cross chapters. Majority helped prevent sickness and health issues. One example is a pamphlet that was about a program for the control of Pellagra or the, "hard times disease."²¹ Even though the information was getting out to the chapters the leaders of the chapters at times slacked off their duties.

There is evidence that the local chapters are at some points not willing to go and gain more education themselves to help better their organization. On March 30, 1934 a letter was sent to the Ottawa County chapter chairmen, M.D. Harbaugh from Ralph O. Von Thurn, Field Representative for the Red Cross. The letter contained information over the Annual Convention. Many new problems were to be addressed at the convention along with new ways to handle them. The leaders of the convention had only a limited number of special invitations extended to chapters to be in attendance. One of those happened to be the Ottawa County chapter. The

²⁰ Midwestern Branch Office American Red Cross St. Louis, MO, Public Information for Chapters First Aid and Life Saving Programs, Picher Collection Box 38, Kansas Collection H293 1978 9-14 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

²¹ M.D. Harbaugh, County Chairman to Employees of the Supply Department of Commerce Mining Royalty Company, March 30, 1936, Cardin, Oklahoma, Picher Collection Box 38, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

Convention leaders hoped that the experiences that Ottawa County had gone through would be available to others. Their goal for the Ottawa chapter was for M.D. Harbaugh to listen to the information at the convention so the chapter would be able to interpret the objectives of the Government and the American National Red Cross to their community.²² However the trip would have been costly for Ottawa's chapter funds. Throughout a series of letters the midwestern branch of Red Cross in Saint Louis, MO really wanted the Ottawa chapter in attendance to the convention. But, M.D. Harbaugh found excuses to be absent from the convention. His excuse was that he would not go east for a while. Issues pertaining to the zinc code and others made it "impossible," for him to attend.²³ Part of the conventions goal as well was to help build the education among the youth.

One major program used by the Red Cross to increase the education among children and their families is the American Junior Red Cross. The Junior Red Cross is a joint enterprise of the Red Cross and the school, its success relies on the both on the school authorities and Red Cross chapter as well.²⁴ This organization is not only in the United States but goes worldwide.

The organization was a major impact among the children throughout the towns of Ottawa County. It got children to think of others no matter what their own circumstances were. The Red Cross boys and girls had collected a library for a mountain school. This was just one of the

²² Ralph O. Von Thurn, Field Representative to M.D. Harbaugh, March 30, 1934, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Kansas Collection H293 1969 1-19 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

²³ M.D. Harbaugh to Mr. Ralph Von Thurn, April 9, 1934, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Kansas Collection H293 1969 1-19 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

²⁴ Chapter Organization for the Development of the American Junior Red Cross pamphlet, Picher Collection Box 38, Kansas Collection 1976 1-17 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

many types of services the kids learned to be better community members.²⁵ It was important that the Junior Red Cross organization of the chapter territory had a good knowledge of how to spread the services offered. Children are looked at as the future leaders of society. The Junior Red Cross stood ready to support the county-wide benefit of the public. If a school had an organization they were supposed to be in tune with the first aid and live saving issues at hand.²⁶ The public approval of Red Cross programs should have been strong enough that people would begin to use the education on an everyday basis. It should have gone far enough where the community would have wanted to contribute adequate funds during the Roll calls to continue the program. This implied in certain stages of chapter development a carefully worked out public information program with a year's schedule of effort, backed by a Public Information Committee composed of chapter people and outside experts.²⁷ There are many activities that were suggested the Junior Red Cross be involved in.

These activities ranged from in the school, home, national, and international levels. Some of the recommended school activities the children could do were just basic maintenance to help take care of the school. Kids should want to see a better school by making, wall decorations, planting flowers and trees, and other general duties around the school grounds.²⁸ They also were asked to be leaders and show other students the idea of respecting the school they have been so

²⁵ Public Information Service American Red Cross to Chapter Publicity Chairmen, Red Cross Services in News Pictures, September 1, 1936, Picher Collection Box 38, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Midwestern Branch Office American Red Cross St. Louis, MO, Public Information for Chapters First Aid and Life Saving Programs, Picher Collection Box 38, Kansas Collection H293 1978 9-14 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

²⁸ American Junior Red Cross Suggested Activities, Picher Collection Box 38, Red Cross Correspondence 1935 Folder, Pittsburg State University Axe Library Archives, Pittsburg, KS.

blessed to have. Health was also a main project for students to build awareness through the school. Many were asked to make health songs, games, posters, booklets, and tooth brush-holders.²⁹ The students of the Junior Red Cross really needed to be examples for the other kids. They should befriend the shy and backward children as well as write letters to their friends who were unable to come back to school. The main point for the Junior Red Cross students without a doubt was to show kindness to the other children. These lessons on building character and good life skills should have then carried over to their homes.

The pamphlet said that the kids should do the simple errands around their homes voluntarily. They had been advised to make lots of first aid booklets and kits along with other household items. These items would then hopefully have kept their home more clean and prevented some sickness. It was recommended that the kids plan balanced menus to take home so that their families can see what a nutritious meal consisted of.³⁰ Throughout the list of activities it's understood that the children of the communities became a major part of getting the education across to their families as well as communities. It was the hope of Red Cross that when the chapters struggled they would step up their efforts for themselves and the sake of the community. Picher and the other surrounding communities of the Tri-State district had their Junior Red Cross programs help out greatly during the holidays and at the hospitals.

The issues in Picher and Tri-State District had been majorly due to the lack of comprehending the education. The Red Cross did numerous efforts to build knowledge of health and hygiene among the citizens. However, the organization itself had its downfalls. The leaders weren't taking responsibility for their leadership roles and there were many major roadblocks

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

hindering chances to regain their community. During the late 1920s and through the 1930s the country struggled getting through the Great Depression as well as having to deal with many weather issues. Picher, Oklahoma and the Tri-State District definitely wanted to become a better community; it was just during a time with inadequate resources.

Nevertheless there can't be too many excuses because with great educators the knowledge would have been there. The field of teaching is so important in gaining the best education as quoted in the *Tri-State Tribune* in 1936,

The teaching industry is first that should be expanded in connection with any state, city, or town planning program. The main distinction between barbarism and civilization is this: Civilized people, by means of education pass along the torch of experience so that each generation can begin development where the preceding generation left off. If our children are to advance in material and spiritual wealth, they must stand on our shoulders. Only Education can put them there.³¹

Organizations such as the Red Cross, tried to achieve a higher standard of educating as noted in many letters, brochures, and books. But, it took the community as a whole to step up and utilize the knowledge they had gained. Resources were scarce and people would do anything to ensure their jobs. Picher felt it was more important to keep their families means of income over their own wellbeing. If someone was caught in a medical facility, the chances of having a job on Monday were slim. To ensure job security during this time period people of this area overlooked the education that was available.

³¹ "Prosperity Now," *The Picher Tri-State Tribune* 13, no.45 (Thursday, January 9, 1936): 2, Pittsburg State University Axe Library, Pittsburg, KS.

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