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Going Above and Beyond in a Time of Need

Vicki Engledow

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Since Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross in 1881, families and communities have come to expect that in times of need, the Red Cross will be there for them. But in Picher Oklahoma in the 1930s, the Red Cross extended its generosity past the point it needed to be. There comes a point in time when a community needs to take responsibility of its citizens instead of relying on the handouts of others. Today there are millions of people that take advantage of government systems; this was no different during the hardships of the Great Depression in the 1930s. With the town of Picher, not only did the individuals of the community use the Red Cross as their own personal savior, but the other town organizations that were started to help the citizens of Picher also relied on the help of the Red Cross to pick up their slack. In doing so, the Red Cross funds became extremely depleted and caused a strain in the community because the Red Cross was seen as a mere charity and used for continued relief instead of their main objective of rehabilitation of families in temporary distress.

Picher Oklahoma was a small mining community that grew overnight in the early 1900s. Picher was part of the Tri-State Mining District, which was opened in 1891. The Tri-State District was the world's leading producer of lead and zinc from 1880 till 1950. This was a very poor community that was started by miners building shacks and living in tents to be closer to the mine. As the Ore started to dissipate, so did the miners leaving behind families who could not afford to relocate and had to often rely on help from outside sources in a time of need.

The American Red Cross was founded by Clara Barton on May 21, 1881 in Washington D.C., with the intention of helping in overseas and domestic disaster relief efforts, and aiding the United States military during the Spanish American War. Before the First World War, the Red Cross had started its own first aid, water safety and public health nursing programs. After the war, it focused on services to veterans and enhanced programs in safety training, accident

prevention, home care for the sick, and nutrition education. The Red Cross also provided relief for victims of major disasters such as the Mississippi River floods in 1927 and severe drought and the Depression during the 1930s.¹ In Ottawa County, between February and June 1931, the National Red Cross distributed \$16,100 in drought relief to farmers.

The Red Cross was funded from donations from businesses and individuals along with membership dues of \$1.00 to join the local Red Cross Chapter. But during a time of unemployment and drought, the town of Picher was hard pressed for donations and relied heavily on the contributions of the Red Cross, but it was discovered that some of the assistance would not have been needed had it not been for the Picher Chamber of Commerce.

When an organization relies solely on donations to survive, it can almost feel like a kick in the teeth when the mayor of the town urges community members to donate their money elsewhere. In the January 28, 1932 issue of *The Picher King Jack* newspaper, the mayor of Picher, who also happened to be the executive chairman of the Picher Emergency Relief Association, placed a plea to area residents not to donate to other charities, rather anyone that wanted to donate money should only give it to the Emergency Relief Association. He stated that "With a single organization like the Picher Emergency Relief Association carrying on all the relief work in this district we need the full support of every individual and company able to contribute."² This would have been a great idea, had the Emergency Relief Association actually been doing all of the relief work. According to Red Cross records, by the end of April of 1932, there were 168 open cases of residents in Ottawa County who needed assistance. The cost to care for these 168 families was estimated at \$3.97 a day or \$667 a month.³ During the same

¹Red Cross History, <http://www.redcross.org> (Accessed on November 18, 2011)

²"Mizer Urges All Contributions be made to Ass'n" *The Picher King Jack*, January 28, 1932.

³Ottawa County Red Cross Pamphlet, April 1932. Box 38. Kan Collec H293 1976 1-17 "Picher Collection".

month that these 168 families were getting assistance from the Red Cross, the Picher Emergency Relief Association announced that they were closing the Picher Relief Kitchen. The Relief Kitchen provided a place for the unemployed to go for food and fuel. The mayor claimed that “the curtailing of funds for maintenance of the kitchen coupled with the fact that industrial conditions appear more encouraging now than a few months ago” were the reasons they chose to close the relief kitchen.⁴ In another newspaper article a couple months later, it was suggested that mine owners, contributors, and city officials thought that relief kitchens would attract people who might otherwise find work elsewhere, and that the publicity of the kitchens would be harmful to the community from the outsiders viewpoint. According to officials of the Picher Emergency Relief Association, “The continuance of relief kitchens in Picher year after year would stunt the development of the community and provide an insurmountable obstacle to progress.”⁵ So instead of caring about the needs of the community, the community chose to care more about its image. Meanwhile, the Ottawa County Chapter of the Red Cross distributed 64,176 sacks of flour, valued at \$27,000, between March 1932 and April 1933, along with \$5,000 worth of food and medicine. In early October of 1932, the Picher Chamber of Commerce met to discuss the welfare problems of Picher. The chairman of the Red Cross announced that 9,994 bags of flour had been distributed in Picher since they had started the distribution a mere seven months earlier.⁶

The Red Cross knew that things in Picher were not getting any better, and that it needed help keeping up with the demands of the community. By the end of October, 1932, the chairman of the Red Cross realized that the chamber of commerce and the Picher Relief Association were

⁴“Relief STA Closes on Saturday” The Picher King Jack, April 28, 1932.

⁵“Picher not to have Relief Kitchens” The Picher King Jack, June 9, 1932.

⁶“Commerce Chamber Members discuss Welfare Problems” The Tri-State Tribune, October 6, 1932.

not doing as much as they should, so he called a meeting with the two organizations. Mr. Harbaugh, chairman of the Ottawa County Chapter of the Red Cross, pointed out in this meeting that the Welfare Department of the Ore Producer's Association had been raising funds to furnish food supplies such as baking powder, lard, salt, and soda to supplement the flour that the Red Cross had already been distributing. During the meeting, Mr. Harbaugh went on to state that he "does not feel that this organization can take care of the entire needs of the community, by any means, and that he is anxious to see the Picher Relief Association undertake the responsibility of a share of this work."⁷ The fact that Mr. Harbaugh had to ask for help from the organization that was designed specifically to help the community is very ironic.

After pleading for help from the Relief Association, the chairman of the Red Cross went on to think that they would step up their responsibilities to the community. Mr. Harbaugh even sent a letter to Shirley Ferguson of the St. Louis Headquarters of the Red Cross. In his letter, he communicated that because of developments with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, in the future all government supplies such as food and clothing will be handled through their organization. By not having to deal with these relief issues, the Red Cross is able to return to its primary objectives, which according to Harbaugh, "are ample in themselves."⁸ But unfortunately by December of 1933, he was already asking for help again only this time instead of food supply, the subject was the Picher sewing room.

One of the important resources available to the community was the sewing rooms.

Sewing rooms were established to aid communities with a way to make their own clothing and blankets. The Red Cross made generous donations to these sewing rooms supplying them with

⁷Memo of Meeting of Rep. Of Picher Chamber of Commerce and the Picher Relief Association, October 28, 1932. Box 38. Red Cross Correspondence 1935 Folder. "Picher Collection".

⁸M.D. Harbaugh to Shirley Ferguson, September 28, 1932. Box 38. Red Cross Correspondence 1935 Folder. "Picher Collection".

cotton, yarn, and other materials needed to help the sewing rooms continue to operate. After the Picher Relief Association took over the distribution of food and supplies in 1932, the responsibility of the sewing rooms were to be their problem as well and no longer a burden to the Red Cross. But just as the Relief Association became reluctant to adhere to their responsibilities with the food supply distribution, they also drug their feet on tending to the sewing room as well. In December of 1933, Mr. Harbaugh wrote a letter to Mrs. Pearl Glass of the Federal Relief Office letting her know that because of their inadequacy to take care of the sewing room, the responsibility had once again been put on the Red Cross. For the month of December, not only did the Red Cross provide the sewing room with over \$100 in materials, but also had to pay December's rent on their building. He went on to plead with her that it would be impossible for the Red Cross to continue making these contributions and that the county commissioners should assume some of this responsibility, such as either paying the rent on the building or better yet, furnishing the building for free.⁹ So once again, just when the members of the Red Cross think that they will be able to go back to their normal responsibilities, they find themselves coming to the rescue of the County Commissioners and Picher Relief Association.

By the end of 1934, even the district offices of the Red Cross in St. Louis, Missouri had noticed that the city of Picher and the Relief Association were taking advantage of the generosity of the local chapter of the Red Cross. On October 20, the Disaster Relief Supervisor from the St. Louis office spoke to the Ottawa Chapter Board of Directors regarding the general activities of the Red Cross. Mr. Evans stated that "it needs to be prepared to care for the marginal families and those in temporary distress. Its particular objective is rehabilitation of families in distress,

⁹M.D. Harbaugh to Pearl Glass, Federal Reserve Office, December 19, 1933. Box 38, Red Cross Correspondence 1935 Folder. "Picher Collection".

rather than mere charity and continued relief.” He then went on to say that “local communities will have to assume again the responsibility for their relief problems through private voluntary effort.” And that “only the abnormal or overload should be handled by the federal agencies.” Mr. Evans stressed that “the desirability of the Red Cross carrying on its activities through normal channels. When supplies are to be purchased, they should be purchased through local sources thereby giving the benefit of the business to local enterprise.” And in regards to disaster relief, he stressed “the importance of the local Chapter of the Red Cross being in a position to act immediately. It should be remembered always that the Red Cross as an organization will back up the local Chapter in doing what needs to be done.” According to Evans, Red Cross relief is designed to be “a neighborly relief such as would normally be extended from one neighbor to another.”¹⁰

Afraid that it might not be able to help those in distress during a disaster, the Red Cross continued to ask for assistance from the community and its leaders. And at 6:30 p.m. on February 24, 1935 that fear was realized when disaster struck in the form of a tornado. Ten houses were swept from their foundations and turned into kindling wood, chimneys were torn from some of the homes and windows were broken in others. The community of 2000 was lucky that the damage from the storm was not as bad as it could have been. Out of 286 people affected, two people lost their lives and fifteen were injured. Nine families had their homes completely destroyed, but almost every home suffered water damage to their clothes and belongings. The total cost of helping the sixty-two registered families with building and repairs, household goods, food, clothing and maintenance costs, and medical and nursing expenditures was close to \$1,600.

¹⁰Minutes of meeting of Board of Directors, Ottawa County Chapter Red Cross, October 20, 1934. Box 38, Red Cross Correspondence Folder. “Picher Collection”.

A total of \$960 was donated locally; unfortunately that was not enough, and therefore the local Red Cross Chapter had to accept a \$1,250 donation from the National Chapter of the Red Cross. The community pulled together in a time of need and donated supplies, household goods, clothing, mattresses, and other goods, taking some of the burden from the Red Cross.

Because of the expenditures that the Red Cross paid out, as opposed to the county commissioners or Relief Agency, the need to borrow funds from the National Chapter could have been avoided. The chapter started with \$1018.41 available funds, and after disbursing funds for things such as freight and cold storage on meat, lard and butter that was distributed by the Emergency Relief Association, purchasing supplies for the sewing rooms that were already supposed to be under the control of the County, among other things, left a balance in October of 1934 of \$65.23.¹¹

After the tornado, the Ottawa County Chapter of the Red Cross was left not only tired but broke. In May of 1935, M.D. Harbaugh, Chairman of the Chapter, issued a letter to the citizens of Ottawa County pleading for not only their help but their cooperation in not relying on the Red Cross for continued help. Mr. Harbaugh's letter started off by explaining how the Ottawa County Chapter of the Red Cross had been carrying on its work of furnishing "neighborly assistance in a time of need" to the maximum extent of its resources. The year before they were unable to raise the \$1,000 needed to fund the county. But out of the money raised, \$400 of it had to be sent to the National organization. The chapter did manage to raise \$865 for tornado relief following the storm, and the National organization supplied the rest of the funds to meet the \$1,600 needed for the disaster. Because of these expenditures, he went on to say that the

¹¹Ottawa County Report of Chapter Activities, September 1933- October 1934. Box 38, Kan Collec H293 1974 8-14 Folder. "Picher Collection".

treasury is presently exhausted, yet there are many calls that come in daily to the Red Cross officers or assistance of one sort or another. Primarily the organization is called upon to supply necessities in many cases of illness among destitute persons, and to meet emergency requirements which someone must take care of. The officers of the chapter were willing to attempt to do the work asked of them, but only if others could supply the funds to do so. The community was then asked to make contributions in order to permit the chapter to continue its work. According to the Red Cross, they have done all they could to meet this need. Mr. Harbaugh wanted to point out to the community that for the past two years there had been no Community Chest Fund available, yet there had been a need for it despite the work of the governmental relief agencies.¹²

Just like the State Relief Organizations and the Chamber of Commerce taking advantage of the Red Cross, many individuals in the community of Picher also tried to stick their hands in the pot. During the flour distribution in October 1932, a flour committee was formed to investigate the persons receiving the flour to make sure that it was only being given to individuals who were really in "destitute circumstances." They also compared the employment rosters of Eagle Picher and other companies in the field from time to time to make sure that when men became employed that their name came off of the flour list.

Because of people trying to take advantage of the Red Cross, the Red Cross looked like evil giants sitting high above the people on their thrones deciding who deserves to eat and who did not, when, in fact, this was farther from the truth. On December 25, 1935 the chairman of the Ottawa County Chapter of the Red Cross received a letter from an agricultural newspaper

¹²M.D. Harbaugh to Citizens of Ottawa County, May 15, 1935. Box 38, Kan Collec H293 1974 8-14 Folder. "Picher Collection".

called *The Farmer-Stockman* claiming that resident Fay Forbes had contacted them. In the letter, she claimed that she was a widow with two children and a sister living with her and worked briefly in July but was then dropped from the Red Cross's relief roster. She claimed to the newspaper that in fact they were starving and took the matter up with the Chairman but was turned away. Claims like these not only hurt the reputation of the local chapters of the Red Cross, but display the image of the organization as a whole. After receiving the letter, Chairman Harbaugh conducted an investigation and found that Ms. Forbes had not only written him, but many others. Harbaugh joked in his response that she had written to many people, probably including the President. He discovered in his investigation that at the time of Ms. Forbes letter she was working at the Fairland sewing room and had been for some time. Also, Mr. Harbaugh mentioned that it was probably a safe bet that she was also getting relief from the county commissioners.

Towards the end of the Depression, the community was far from complete recovery, but it had suffered enough during it to know what needed to be changed for future generations. Red Cross Chairman M.D. Harbaugh sent a memo to the County Commissioners of Ottawa County pleading for them to establish a community chest in the Miami area. He noted that it was unfortunate that not every worthy resident of their community was always able to cope with their economic and human problems alone. And despite all the public funds that were being spent for work and direct relief in Ottawa county, there were hundreds of families whose circumstances were not bad enough to fall within the red tape lines of the governmental programs, but yet who are in very serious need of some sympathetic agency to which they can turn to for occasional assistance. He pointed out that for several years there has not been any kind of community chest in the area and that the Red Cross had been the only volunteer organization that had made any

effort to supply this kind of assistance. And although the funds were inadequate to meet any but the most modest of requests, they never stopped taking calls for help. Many of the officers that helped gave a reasonable part of their own time and money to meet the demands, but he added that the existing situation requires that some other provision be made by the responsible people of this community to relieve them of the personal attention to this problem. Even though the Red Cross suffered with lack of funds, the chairman made a statement that 'It is impossible, in common decency, to turn a deaf ear to them by saying that "the government is supposed to attend to all this." The governmental agencies are not doing it.'"¹³

Even though the community of Picher dropped the ball on several occasions throughout the years, they did manage to have a few programs that were a positive influence on the community. One such program was the Better Housing Program. This program was started in the summer of 1935 to promote the building of new homes in the community. To get people interested in the program and show them what was possible, the Chamber of Commerce and the American Legion planned to re-model a home to show people what was possible to be done. Because of inactivity in the construction industry in the five years prior, the hope was that this program would promote new growth in the community and revitalize the existing community.

Another program that the Red Cross worked in connection with other federal agencies was the promotion of home gardening programs. The Red Cross used these programs as a source of relief and for health measures. These programs worked along with the Federal Government's program to take sub marginal or poor land out of cultivation and to provide for "stranded populations and other groups on subsistence homesteads, and to increase the number

13M.D. Harbaugh to Clarence Roberts, Editor, The Oklahoma Farmer-Stockman, December, 28 1935. Box 38, Red Cross Correspondence 1935 Folder. "Picher Collection".

of people who raise food for their own consumption.”¹⁴ In the spring of 1932, the national chapter of the Red Cross sent \$225.25 to purchase seed potatoes and onions, \$25 for turnips, and 750 packages of assorted garden seed to be distributed among the Picher community. In an article in *The Picher King Jack* on March 31, 1932, it was reported that five times the amount of gardens were planted that year as in the year before. The mayor of Picher was quoted in saying “Everywhere I go, I find people busily engaged in plowing or spading up gardens and some erecting new fences or repairing old.” It was mentioned that the mayor was a strong believer in the “salvation of the garden.”¹⁵ By 1934 the total had increased to over \$500 to purchase seeds to be distributed.

Today, in addition to domestic disaster relief, the American Red Cross offers compassionate service in five areas: community services that help the needy; support and comfort for military members and their families; the collection, processing and distribution of lifesaving blood and blood products; educational programs that promote health and safety; and international relief and development programs. As history has shown, the services of the American Red Cross have come a long way since the beginning in 1881. Looking at the Ottawa County Chapter of the Red Cross in Picher Oklahoma, they had to overcome great adversity in finding ways to care for an entire community in need. Had the Chamber of Commerce, County Commissioners, or the Picher Relief Association actually stepped up to their responsibilities and not relied on the Red Cross to not only contribute to the cause, but cover their half too, they might have had an easier time in the early 1930s taking care of the community of Picher. But government agencies were not the only factor to blame in the struggle; individuals taking

¹⁴Memo from M.D. Harbaugh, September 3, 1936. Box 38, Kan Collec H293 1978 9-14. “Picher Collection”.

¹⁵Garden and Food Conservation Brochure. Box 38, Kan Collec H293 1976 1-17. “Picher Collection”.

advantage of the system also had a major part to play. Not much has changed from 1932 to today on that issue. The only difference is that the organization has changed and people have become professionals at cheating the government so they do not have to work as hard as everyone else. Maybe eventually the leaders in charge of the government programs of today will take a look back at the programs of the Depression and realize that it is possible to change the system.

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