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Open Mines: Deadly Consequences

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Problems of the open mines in the Tri-State area had been a hot topic for many years in the early 1900s. The problems that the surrounding communities faced were deadly. Many people, unknowingly, stepped into open mine shafts and were seriously injured or even killed. Properly closing mines after they had been stripped of all their valuable ore was not a priority of the mining companies; seeing how there was no enforcement of the laws when it came to closing down mines and covering up open mine shafts, many companies just left the open shafts uncovered. It was widely known that there were open mines around the communities but not all the open mines were accounted for which would lead to these tragedies. Some companies tried to put a barbed wire fence around many but weather and other factors knocked down many of these fences. The Tri-State area has been one of the world's largest and most productive suppliers of lead and zinc. This was caused by the rich deposits that were found in the plains of the area. Many problems were created thanks to this discovery in the region. There were problems with general health as well as worker and public safety. Since so many mines were created so rapidly it is no fluke that many of these mines would have disappeared just as fast as they appeared. This would have not been a problem except for the numerous mines that were left open in the area. Open mines in this area were a problem that many people faced in some of the most tragic ways. There was a lack of safety education in the area surrounding the mining district which needs to be addressed.

"From the beginning, the workers seemed to be in an eternal hurry."¹ Many towns in the Tri-State area were ones that were built overnight due to spontaneous strikes into the rich deposits of lead and zinc. These boom towns were not built under the best conditions. Many of these houses were no more than a shack where the miner would sleep until he had to work the

¹ Gibson, A.M, "A Social History of the Tri-State District" The Chronicles of Oklahoma, 37, no. 2 (1959): 185.

next day. These houses were a breeding ground for disease and this caused many miners families to become very sick due to living so close to the mining site. The increase of silicosis in the area was drastic and would cause many men, women and children to be directly affected and attention on this area would be brought to the national level. This was only because of the lack of transportation in the early years. People from all over would come to mine this area, even if they had little to no mining experience. There were a group of people that the miners would call the "Ozark Hills Hungry Hillbillies" which were a group of people that would come to mine the area. These "Hungry Hillbillies" were an example of just what kind of people would come down to make a living at the mines. The Hungry Hillbillies were people who had no mining experience and would come to mine the rich deposits and work for little to nothing in the harsh conditions of the mines. There were many incidents of people falling and being injured during shifts due to lack of safety education and experience of mining operations.

Picher, OK has been under the careful eye of many medical professionals through its years of mining in the Tri-State area. The involvement of silicosis among not only the mine workers but also that of the people inhabiting the area was an epidemic. Many people call silicosis an industrial disease seeing as many believed that only the miners would suffer from silicosis. "The Tri-State struggle was more than an important labor dispute. It led to the acknowledgement of chronic industrial disease as a major problem for the American work force."² There were many mining companies that took to heart the problem that many of the miners faced when it came to their health. Miners' con, silicosis, is a lung disease that comes about when someone breathes in flint dust in the mines. This would cut up the lungs and inevitably leave those affected by silicosis to be predisposed to tuberculosis. To help combat the

² Markowitz, Gerald and Rosner, David, "The Street of Walking Death: Silicosis, Health and Labor in the Tri-State Region, 1900-1950" The Journal of American History, 77, no. 2(Sep 1990): 526.

silicosis problem mining companies in the Tri-State area would build dog houses for their workers. Dog houses were bath houses that were created by the mining companies for the miners to wash off and get clean clothes after a hard day of work. Even though the companies made these dog houses for their workers, many of these wash houses were unused by the workers. Many workers would not use these bath houses mainly because they saw no need to wash off. Even though it had been stated by the medical professionals at the mining sites that this would help reduce their exposure to silicosis they still did not wash. Many workers were too tired to want to wash off they just believed that they would get dirty again the next day so why wash off. Sadly, because they would not wash off they would bring silicosis into the homes they were living in and if they had a family living with them they would spread the disease to their families. This was major problem with the mining communities but many people were willing to put a price on their health if they could cash in on the rich deposits in the area.

Lead and zinc are critical materials used in a number of products ranging from steel and brass alloy to batteries and gasoline. The first time that the lead and zinc ores of the Tri-State were discovered are not exactly known. It is documented that the early inhabitants, trappers and traders, would discover the lead and used it as shot.³ Even though every district in the Tri-State area claimed that they had the richest deposits of ore in the world it was proven that Oklahoma was the out right leader. It was not uncommon for every ton of dirt lifted from Ottawa County that there was ten to thirty percent of material.⁴ As many new mines that popped up in the early 1900s it is no wonder that there are so many open mines and so many different laws on what to do about them in each state. There is a difference though when it comes to the mining laws of Kansas versus the mining laws of Oklahoma. In Kansas, there is a distinct mention of what to do

³ Gibson, A.M, "Early Mining Camps in Northeastern Oklahoma." The Chronicles of Oklahoma. 34 no. 2 (1956): 196

⁴ *Ibid.*

for the open mine, shaft, hole, or trench problems that faced the state in the 1930's. Oklahoma, on the other hand, had no mention of any kind to the problems that faced open mines and shafts in the state. The fact that there are no such regulations on open mines/shafts in Oklahoma is a dreary reminder of how the safety of public was put on the back burner for the most part. Kansas mining laws of 1935 clearly have regulations regarding the proper course of action when discovering an open mine.⁵ If one were to come across an open mine in Kansas and a complaint drawn up; there will be a notice sent out to the landowner from where the shaft is located. The landowner will have twenty days to securely enclose the shaft.⁶ If the mine shaft is not covered in those twenty days it will be in the hands of the local government to either enforce the landowner to cover it up or the government itself will cover it up at the cost of the local general funds.

There was a lack of preparation made in the part of teaching people what to do in certain circumstances around the Tri-State area. In 1936 there was a campaign throughout the Tri-State area in the interest on accident prevention. There was little education on the "in home" and "on the farm" accident prevention that talked about what to do about falling into a mine shaft. During this campaign every school boy and girl was asked to help enlisting at least one of their parents in inspecting their home and surrounding area for potential threats to safety. If anyone were to want any literature regarding safety and accident prevention they only had to ask their local Red Cross chapter in the county. Even though there were multiple books and pamphlets that were written about safety; many of them did not have anything to do with open mines and shafts. The fact that there were so many mines that popped up in such a short amount of time

⁵ George E. Blakeley, Kansas Mining Laws: As Indexed by the Revisor of States In The General Statutes of 1935, 6-7, Picher Collection, Box 131, Pittsburg State University Special Collections, Pittsburg, KS.

⁶ *Ibid.*

and that many of them would close just as fast as they had appeared would have many believe that something would be done to protect or enlighten our families of the problems of open mine shafts.

With the amount of mines that were built up around the Tri-State district it is a wonder why someone has yet to drive a car into on. "It has been documented that right off of Highway 66 near the Kansas line is an open old abandoned mine shaft, without a fence or derrick above it to warn unsuspecting tourists, children or unwary hunters of its presence."⁷ This is just one case of an open mine right next to a highway that many people could have fallen into while walking down the road. Multiple occurrences of people falling into these mine shafts have been recorded in the 1930's. People who had fallen into these holes vary in age from three years old all the way up to people in their early sixties. This goes to show that there is not only a problem with the younger generation falling but also in the older generation. A concerned citizen in the tri-state area wrote to the *Joplin Globe* with concerns about the dangerous open shafts that are scattered all throughout the tri-state area. He believes that at this time when so many people are out of a job thanks to the Great Depression an organized effort to barricade as many open mine shafts and drill holes with barbed-wire would not be such a difficult task.⁸ This job would have helped insure some source of income for the men of the tri-state as well as a sense of safety for them and the community. Regrettably, no such job was created and many people fell into these to death traps. The lack of care about the problem of these open mines would lead many to believe that they had no care about what happened to people when it came to problems involving old mines and drill holes.

⁷ "To Correct A Hazard" Sept. 23, 1954, Picher Collection, Box 164, Pittsburg State University Special Collections, Pittsburg, KS.

⁸ "Dangerous Open Shafts", *Joplin Globe*, April 1, 1932, Picher Collection, Box 163, Pittsburg State University Special Collections, Pittsburg, KS.

An article talks about how an official spokesman for the Tri-State Zinc and Lead Ore Producers Association had taken cognizance of the serious problem that has posed this district of the many open and abandoned mine shafts.⁹ In 1954, the current Oklahoma law provided no penalty to landowners, but did state that they were liable to damages that were encountered by any person or animal that were to fall into them and injured. The problem with falling into an open mine shaft is the shaft is usually full of water due to leaks through the ground into the mine. If someone were to fall into a mine that is full of water they may be trapped in one of the drifts that the miners cut into the rock following the ore they were after. If someone were to get caught in one of these drifts they could get stuck and drown.

John Perry Dunn was on his way home from school one day with his friend, Billy Howerton, when they decided to walk by an old abandoned mine. The two of them were walking along the top of the mine shaft when loose rocks gave way under John's feet causing him to slip into the water filled mine. Billy Howerton would then run all the way back to the school where he would tell the principal, Herbert Derfelt, that John had fallen into the mine shaft. There was an exhaustive search that took place for two straight days looking for John. John had fallen into the open mine on March 31, 1932, and was not found until the morning of April 3rd. There were many people that helped in the search for John's body, including Robert Odell of Kansas City, Kansas. Robert was a professional diver who was hired by the Dunn family. Odell would make several dives into the mine shaft but came up empty handed each time. Eventually, Odell would tell the family that it was too dangerous for him to continue searching with the chances of walls caving in behind him and trapping him underwater as well. Odell would tell workers that the currents running through the mine into the drifts were strong

⁹ "To Correct A Hazard" September 23, 1954, Picher Collection, Box 164, Pittsburg State University Special Collections, Pittsburg, KS.

and could have easily pulled John's body into one of them.¹⁰ It was not until the early hours of April 3rd, when the body of John was drug up from the depths of the mine shaft. The body was discovered by the boy's father.

Another story of a child falling into a mine shaft at about the same time as the John Perry Dunn case would be that of Gerald Collins. Collins, three years old, of Picher, OK, fell into a drill hole near the Mary Ann Mine of the Commerce Mining and Royalty Company March 31, 1932. These drill holes vary from depths of thirty to fifty feet. The drill hole that Gerald fell into was over thirty feet deep. In most cases drill holes cave in after a few days because the soil around them is loose and the holes are covered up and not a problem to the public. Unfortunately, in the case of Gerald Collins, this was not the case and the three year old slipped and fell into this deep shaft. Gerald was first discovered in the hole around 8:30 A.M. In the first attempt to rescue Gerald a rope was lowered to him and tied around his wrist. When rescuers attempted to pull Gerald out of the hole they were unsuccessful because he was wedged into the side of the hole and he was not coming loose. This would stop the attempt to pull him out by the rope as he would let out a cry every time they pulled on the rope. The rescuers then decided to dig a parallel hole next to the drill hole to rescue Gerald. The rescuers determined that Gerald had fallen a little over eighteen feet and past the hard black shale. Black shale is difficult to dig through since it is pure rock. Rescuers were able to dig very quickly through the clay until they hit the black shale. They had to use pavement diggers to break the black shale apart. Finally, the depth was reached that they believed Gerald was at and men worked with hand chisels to reach him. When they finally reached him they found that they made it to

¹⁰ "Galena Boy Drowns in Old Abandoned Mine Shaft. John Perry Dunn, 13 yrs. Old", April 1, 1932, Picher Collection, Box 163, Pittsburg State University Special Collections, Pittsburg, KS.

Gerald's thigh. Gerald was rescued from the hole safely by R. L. Douthitt.¹¹ Shortly after Gerald was pulled from the mine hole he was placed in an ambulance shortly after 8:45 P.M. the same day and taken to the Joplin hospital for further inspection of his well-being. He was released a day later after having his minor abrasions covered and no evidence of serious complications.

During this whole rescue there were thousands of spectators around to see what was going on. It was estimated that there was 6,000 to 7,000 people at the Mary Anne Mine. This crowd made the rescue difficult for the boy as many of these spectators were not enthused about their distance from the hole Gerald was in. It is noted that a pair of gloves that laid near the drill hole in which Gerald was in and someone knocked them down onto Gerald's head as well as a considerable amount of dirt and sand which increased the difficulty of breathing. Several fist fights broke out during the rescue amongst the crowd and the company police trying to preside over the rescue. "One unidentified man attacked an aged policeman with a stick and knocked him down."¹² It is clear to see that the tensions between the mine companies and local citizens were on the rise after having so many accidents of children falling into open mine shafts/holes. C. W. Owings wrote about an air shaft on the outskirts of Picher, OK, that has boards around it to an estimated height of five feet and that a child could easily climb these boards and fall to his/her death in the mine. C. W. Owings states: I believe that this accident is the result of extreme carelessness on the part of the mining company and other companies may expect the

¹¹"Report on Rescue of a Child From a Drill Hole at Picher Oklahoma", Records of the Picher [sic], OK Clinic 1927-1932, Bureau of Mines, Health and Safety Branch, RG 70, Box 16, Folder 600 6/11, "Safety and First Aid", National Archives and Records Administration—Southwest Region, Fort Worth, TX.

¹²"Child Falls in Prospect Hole", Records of the Picher [sic], OK Clinic 1927-1932, Bureau of Mines, Health and Safety Branch, RG 70, Box 16, Folder 600 6/11, "Safety and First Aid", National Archives and Records Administration—Southwest Region, Fort Worth, TX.

same type of accident unless all drill holes are covered. Incidentally, after the child had been rescued, a man fell into another drill hole sufficiently deep, to break his leg.¹³

The problem of these open mines is that anyone can fall into them; ranging from a young child of about three all the way to an adult who just is not paying attention to where he/she is walking. Many mines had been left open for the main reason that they were in too much of a hurry to safely cover them up for there was another mine that needed mining. These mining communities would pop up in the middle of the night but would also be vacant in the same amount of time once all the ore had been mined out. This caused the problems of the open mines and the lack of laws that regulate what to do to these old abandoned mines. Many of these mines could not afford to close them up since they would run out of money trying to keep the mine open. There was no significant public outcry for open mines to be covered or filled in except for when someone falls into one. Still, the public would only ask for that mine to be covered and disregard all the mines surrounding the area. This ignorance is one of the main reasons so many people were injured or killed by mines in the Tri-State area. There is a story of an elderly woman who was walking around on her farm one day when she happened to step on the top of an old mine shaft entrance and fell through. She fell over twenty feet where she was discovered knocked unconscious. She was discovered by her son who would take her to the hospital where she would die a few days later due to head trauma caused by the fall. Cases like this were not all to uncommon in the early part of the Twentieth Century.

There may have been several mining camps that carefully closed up their mine and attempted to keep them from being considered dangerous many may have over time become dangerous. The mining companies are handicapped by the attitude of landowners from doing a proper job of making the shafts when they quit mining. Without the permission of the landowner

¹³*Ibid.*

to fill in the shaft the mine owner is liable for damages.¹⁴ There are many problems that the Tri-State area faced when it came to mines if it were to be from the mining companies to being the landowners with open and dangerous mines on their land resisting the aid of the companies. The fact of the matter is that the problem of open mine shafts was a problem in the early 1900s and would continue to be one all the way through the 1950s. The lack of mining laws that would aid in filling these mines were non-existent in cases which would leave no liability to the mine companies to lose money and time filling in the shafts. This would lead to people falling into the shafts and seriously injuring or killing themselves. The Tri-State people knew of the dangers that were around each corner, so to speak, when it the topic of open mine shafts came up. Sadly, this topic was always placed on the back burner until a significant even happened where someone were killed. There was a health problem that many people were aware of because that always seemed to receive the most national attention. Also, the crime rate was a problem in some areas but the fact that many of these places were more a "marshal law" type of community; the problems of the community would never really reach the national news unless there were killings. The fact that people falling into open mines that were left out in the middle of the Tri-State area was not the top priority of many people should have been a cause of concern for the people of the area.

¹⁴ "To Correct A Hazard"

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