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The Forgotten Middle Class of Picher Oklahoma 1928 - 1931

V. Genile Dennison
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In 1928, the United States had a thriving middle class. Picher, Oklahoma was no exception to that normal state of affairs. In every year, in every city there are diverse incomes and activities. In this era of social history, many historians concentrate on the poorest residents of a given city. This can give a casual history buff the impression that everyone in the city was desperately poor and struggling for survival. That limited presentation negates the impact that the people of middle income had on society. The local Picher news paper, *The King Jack* was like many local papers of its era. Much of the news printed in the paper included items of local interest. It was not unusual to see as front page news a question and answer column about proper etiquette in different social situations. There were multiple mentions of dinner parties complete with guest lists and menus. The meetings of the American Legion Auxiliary, along with local church notes were also front page news. Some of the activities had live music, with the KGGF Orchestra playing at an American Legion and First Methodist Church combined activity

Bridge parties made the news because Picher had a great deal of people very serious about their card playing. Middle class people had leisure time to play cards, and income to spend on prizes. One such party was front page news. Mr. and Mrs. A. M. Armstrong held a bridge luncheon. At this social gathering Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong gave out beautiful prizes, including a set of sterling silver salt and pepper shakers for first and a sterling silver ashtray for runner up. Like most of the parties mentioned about the local notables, a guest list and menu was published.¹

The *King Jack*, also reported on various city functions and local items of interest to its middle class population. The city council meeting minutes were front page news. Also on the front page was a very brief and solemn piece about a young girl, Nora Laudrom whose burial

¹ *The King Jack*, March 1, 1928.

date was listed as the next day, mixed in quietly without a headline among other death notices. Such a notice would provide an opportunity for the club women of Picher to provide service to her grieving parents. Often the *King Jack* listed people who were attending functions in other towns. A rather long list of attendees attended a party in Carthage, where live music was provided for dancing pleasures.²

Some of the notices published in the *King Jack* were for everyone's information; some notices were obviously for the middle class. When the Picher Public Library received new books, the *King Jack* duly recorded and reported on each and every title. If a minor was injured it was front page news, leaning to the supposition that the mine accidents that were to become reported as commonplace in later years were still a rarity in 1928.³ The article that would have caught the eye of a middle class matron was an opportunity for her daughter to shine. The Zinco Queen Contest was big news. Zinc may have been 'king' but there were many beauty pageants and queen contests held by the different merchants of Picher. The Zinco contest was a contest that the local mines all participated in.

Picher's middle and upper-class citizens were purchasing cars...in large numbers. The Picher Chevy dealer set a regional sales record in 1928. Given the often mentioned amount of poverty in Picher, it seemed that not only was the dealership surviving in a tough economic climate, it was thriving. There was also an Essex dealership in Picher, which specialized in luxury models. Both these dealerships locally owned and operated by members of Picher's middle class.⁴

² *The King Jack*, March 8, 1928.

³ Arrell Gibson, "Tri-State District Social Conditions," in *Wilderness Bonanza; The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972) 179-95.

⁴ *The King Jack*, March 15, 1928.

Card parties played a big part of the Picher social scene, and well attended by Picher's middle class. At the American Legion Auxiliary's bridge party all the prizes were extravagance goods and provided by the local businesses in Picher. Special mention of the refreshments served, mentioning that brick ice-cream⁵ was served with cake and coffee. Just like the goods given as prizes, the brick ice-cream was an indulgence and not affordable to those of modest means.⁶

The less fortunate residents of Picher were feeling the depression, which was affecting poor people before the crash of 1929. The members of the local Kiwanis Club decided to 'adopt' undernourished children. The Kiwanis Club functioned as a service provider for the poor and as business exchange for its members. Kiwanis Clubs usually had professional and business owners filling the membership roster.⁷

The *King Jack* often printed little items about people who were out of town or who had out of town visitors. It was not looked as a 'Please Rob Me' sign to let your neighbors know you were going out of town for a few days, weeks, or even a couple of months. These little tidbits of information allowed a busy middle class woman to keep up with others of her same social set.

There were some small clues that the budget for the middle-class citizen was beginning to tighten by the spring of 1928. Mrs. Armstrong held another bridge party in April, however instead of sterling silver prizes, as in the party held earlier in the year, there were honorable mentions of the winner and runner up. The winning of extravagant prizes seemed to be ending at

⁵ The square type purchased in the store, vs. the more common home-made ice cream.

⁶ *The King Jack*, March 15, 1928.

⁷ *Ibid*, March 22, 1928.

the small parties.⁸ The club budgets were also getting tighter. Instead of dinner or luncheons, breakfast parties began to be popular, and published just like the more extravagant affairs complete with guest lists. Covered dish affairs, what we would now call a pot-luck dinner, became popular with all the participants bringing a coordinated dish.⁹

By the spring of 1928 the depression was becoming a reality for the small businesses owned by Picher's middle class residents. The grocery stores had allowed credit sales, but one by one they became cash and carry stores. The stores even changed their names. Durnil Grocery became Durnil Cash Grocery.¹⁰ By July the Basket Store, the last grocery store to offer credit purchases became cash only. The store had been in Picher for eight years, but had to make the change from a credit to a cash only basis. By 1931 the Basket Store was no longer in business.¹¹ The local merchants also banded together to host "Picher's Sales Day[s]." All of the local owned businesses participated in the event. This sale was repeated during regular intervals after the launch in May of 1928.¹²

Even during this time of increasing financial hardships, Picherites were still interested in taking care of those who were unable to care for themselves. The *King Jack* reported that the American Legion Auxiliary sold more poppies in 1928 than any other year in their history. The Boy Scouts of Cardin and Picher assisted the Auxiliary ladies. Even with money getting tight and the economy sluggish, Picher's middle class recognized that the weakest members of their

⁸ *Ibid*, April 5, 1928.

⁹ *Ibid*, April 2, 1928.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, May 28, 1928.

¹¹ "Basket Store to Cash System," *King Jack*, July 12, 1928.

¹² *The King Jack*, May 31, 1928.

society, the disabled veterans, needed help. Picher was a community of good neighbors and they purchased poppies out of their shrinking disposable income. The American Legion Auxiliary also pledged to adopt “the welfare of one of the children [from] the Home of Ex-Service men at Ponca City.” The theory was that the auxiliary would furnish the child, who lived in Picher, with clothing, school supplies, and any other necessities that the child’s father who was a patient at the Muskogee Veterans Hospital, could not meet.¹³

Some of the experts were purporting that the economic slowdown was ending in 1928, offering a ray of hope for the local middle class merchants. *The King Jack* quoted a *Miami News Record* story that the European stock market had improved, but not as well as the American stock market had.¹⁴ Emanuel Strauss, who was the manager of the Fleischaker Department Store, gave his opinion that the economy was at the lowest point it could go and that the local economy would soon rebound. He felt that the decline of the production of lead and zinc from the mines would lead to an increase of demand from industries in the East. Strauss mentioned the major floods of the south and west and the shutting down of Ford Motor Company because of these natural disasters, which had decreased demand for the mineral products of the Tri-State District, so production was in excess of demand and the prices naturally dropped. He observed that most of the industries impacted by natural disasters were resuming production and would again be in demand of the lead and zinc from Picher mines. Strauss stated: “This brighter outlook is reflected in a healthier demand for merchandise in our own little city.”¹⁵ Strauss’

¹³ *Ibid*, July 12, 1928.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, May 28, 1928.

¹⁵“Strauss Talks on Picher’s Outlook: Expresses Belief That the District Has Reached Its Lowest in Present Depression and is on Upgrade,” *King Jack*, May 17, 1928

words offered hope, a speck of light, before the crash of 1929. Like many other of Picher's leading citizens, Strauss was hopeful for a bright and prosperous future for Picher.

There were still celebrations in 1928, even with the economic decline, planned and organized by Picher's middle class citizens. Picher's 13th Anniversary celebrated with a parade, a "Ten Mile Marathon" and a street dance that lasted until midnight. First Prize for a parade float awarded to the Women's Christian Temperance Union. There was a terrapin race, old fiddlers contest, drilling contest, hog calling contest and a Charleston [dance] contest. This entertainment, provided and organized by leading citizens, was for all Picher residents to enjoy.

By the summer of 1928, the resources of the city and its citizens were tightening even more, however genteel graces were not ignored. The Chamber of Commerce continued to have entertainment during their monthly meetings. The paper persistently printed tidbits about local notables visiting and visited.¹⁶ Chautauqua performances and lectures outlined in the paper, including a speech on child rearing, a quartette that sang old songs, a concert featuring bells, a violinist and the Jugo-Slav Tamburica Orchestra. This was a city wide cultural event that took many months to plan. It was designed by middle and upper classes to provide for the continuing education via entertainment for all city residents. The performances were free to the general public, with the organizing clubs and associations bearing the cost of the speakers and performers.¹⁷

Some people invested in new businesses in 1928, hopeful that the promised better economy was just around the corner, and demonstrating that there was still disposable income for which to vie. Kerr Photography became a regular advertiser in the *King Jack*. A flower shop

¹⁶ *Ibid*, May 10, 1928.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, July 12, 1928.

opened next door to the Mystic Theater in May. This was a second flower shop for the city. Flowers are not high on the necessity for survival shopping list. In the same paper, buried in on the back pages in very small type were the legal notices. The Picher eatery called Winter Garden Café had filed for bankruptcy. The list of assets and debts were all that was left of a woman's dream of business ownership.¹⁸ In the fall of 1928, Dr. J. C. Kimbrough and Dr. G. O. Willis both veterinarians, took the gamble that Picher was ready for a small animal hospital. This infirmary had private kennels for each animal. There was an x-ray machine, very expensive and not vitally necessary for a small practice. An open house to introduce Picherites to the modern facilities that were available to their pets, and special mention of "A lady attendant will be in attendance at the hospital at all times." For a veterinary practice built only for pets, meant that there was considerable disposable income in 1928 in Picher. For farmers to spend money on vet services for care of their livestock is a practical necessity, but to specialize in pets, animals that do not 'earn their keep' was a luxury service. This superfluous veterinarian practice would allow the assumption that there was a large middle and upper class population in Picher at the time.¹⁹

Some of the organizations that specialized in the middle class found their membership increasing. The Picher Kiwanis Club changed its meeting place from the Hammond Hotel to the Private dining room of the Connell Hotel. The new space allowed for a larger attendance as the club had outgrown its previous meeting place, indicating a larger participating membership of local merchants. In the same edition, the city was feeling the effects of a slowing economy.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ "Small Animal Hospital for Picher: Dr. J. C. Kimbrough and Dr. G. O. Willis, Veterinaries, Have Established and Equipped a Modern and Up-To-Date Small Animal Hospital in Picher," *King Jack*, August 23, 1928.

²⁰ *Ibid*, August 23, 1928.

The Mayor, H. L. Henderson, felt that reducing costs and cutting back on expenditures would extinguish the city's indebtedness, leaving the books cleared by the next fiscal year.²¹

The King Jack responded to the slowing economy by having a huge circulation drive. A ten week campaign offered great prizes, including a new Essex Coach for first prize and a Chevy for second prize. A suit of bedroom furniture was the third prize in the contest. For the entire ten week period the circulation drive was front page news. The drive was not as successful as was projected, and the depression, which had yet to feel the influence of the 1929 crash, was blamed:

While the campaign has been slowed down, in some measure, due to economic conditions existing in Picher and surrounding community, it has resulted in the adding of many names to King Jack's [sic] circulation, which will enable the paper to serve the business interests of Picher, much more effectively than it has been able to do before.²²

Rhea Durnil, who was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Roy Durnil owners of the Durnil Cash Grocery store, won the Essex Coach. Rhea was only 13 years old.²³

Politics was a vital interest to the middle class of Picher. 1928 was an election year. The W. C. T. U. was active in Picher. Mrs. T. W. Adams quoted by the *King Jack* as saying "Christ elevated womanhood to vote, and as they are citizens of the United States it is their duty to vote. Women ought to help choose the officials who are to govern the affairs of their country, state and community, affairs which affect the laws, courts, schools and homes." WCTU was a primarily middle and upper class club and promoted what became 'traditional family values.' Adams urged all the women of the county to vote, it didn't matter whom they voted for as long as they

²¹ *Ibid*, "Mayor Henderson Urges Retrenchment".

²² "King Jack's [sic] Circulation Contest Closes: Saturday Night Brought to a Close The Picher King Jack's [sic] Ten Week Circulation Campaign In Which Valuable Prizes are Awarded – Rhea Durnil Winning First," *King Jack*, June 4 1928.

²³ *Ibid*

voted their own conscience. She warned women that they needed to take the responsibility of politics and voting. Adams belittled the position of the women who didn't take time to vote because it could cut into their leisure or pleasure time.²⁴

Looking ahead to 1930, a year after the crash, some of the changes in the life styles of Picherites are striking. The Picher Laundry and Cleaning Co. announced that the prices for dry cleaning were going down, "so any one can afford to keep 'spick and span.'" The price for a cleaned and pressed man's suit was lowered to fifty cents.²⁵

Picher had chain stores as well as the local merchants, and in 1930 there was considerable animosity due to the financial climate between the chain stores and the local merchants. J. C. Penny and Anthony's Shoe Stores were both doing business in Picher. There was a general feeling among the locally owned business that the chain stores were "foreign-owned" and were draining off what little profits that could support local businesses into other cities. The local business owners took out a full page advertisement to state their position. All the accomplishments that Picherites had made were listed: "streets, lined with substantial homes, The [sic] splendid houses of worship, the magnificent School [sic] system." The plea at the end of the page begged for the citizens to shop locally owned stores: "Destiny, will not permit foreign – owned chain stores To [sic] drain Picher....Trade with home-owned independent Stores [sic]."²⁶

A new grocery store, called Marr–Stores, which was almost certainly a chain store, advertised that people had been cheated by faulty weights on goods such as packaged oats. Marr

²⁴"Women of County Are Urged to Vote," *King Jack*, August 6, 1928.

²⁵ *The King Jack*, April 3, 1930.

²⁶ *Ibid*, March 6 1930.

– Stores promised to sell only “Maximum Quality, Maximum Weight” goods. In an effort to stay in business Beaty’s Cash Market joined forces with Herbert Ross’ dry goods store, sharing rent and store front space.²⁷ The effort to stay in business proved futile, because by 1931 the only grocery store that is advertising in the *King Jack* is Marr – Stores.

Unemployment was rampant in Picher by 1930. The Mayor organized a meeting of unemployed men and attempt to provide employment opportunities by eliminating the “buddy car abuses” that existed in the district. According to the report, the ground bosses were accused of discriminating against local miners because they made money by transporting in miners from Joplin and Webb City. Apparently the ground bosses were providing a shuttle service to the out-of-town workers and pocketing the transportation fees. A decision was made to discuss the issue with local mine owners about the situation. The middle management was blamed for the lack of employment options, not the clinic²⁸ or mine owners.²⁹

In 1931 there seemed to be new bridge players, Mrs. Armstrong and Mrs. Durnil were missing from the social register. However bridge parties were still being held and honors were given for high scores. There were some new clubs mentioned: En Avant Club, Sunshine Circle and the PTS joined the America Legion Auxiliary in prominence. In the later edition of the *King Jack* social news was contained in a column titled “Social Events of the Week; Clubs, Lodges,

²⁷ *Ibid*, August 27, 1930.

²⁸ Alan Derickson, “‘On the Dump Heap:’ Employee Medical Screening in the Tri-State Zinc-Lead Industry, 1924 – 1932,” *Business History Review* 62, no. 4 (Winter 1988) 656-77.

²⁹ “Unemployed Meet in Mass at Theatre; 300 Meet at Gayety Theatre and Organize – Mayor Presides,” *King Jack*, April 3, 1930.

and Social Activities of Picher and Surrounding Community.”³⁰ Social news was no longer of front page importance.

The economy and its impact was the news of the day. Where the 1928 *King Jack* almost never published national news, in 1931 there was a more national perspective in Picher. The rail road companies were unable to compete with the privately owned car and improved roads. In order to encourage patronage, the Frisco Line asked permission of the federal regulators to lower fares. Long considered the back bone of America, the railroad companies were in trouble: “With the coming of the automobile, and the transcontinental highways, the rail roads [sic] faced a keen competitor which struck right at the heart of their passenger business.”³¹ Other news was of demoralizing local impact: “January 2 – Bank of Picher closes its doors – a very poor start for a new year.”³² The closing of the bank was a devastating blow to the residents of Picher. Many of the depositors never got their money back. The poorest members of society were not as affected as were the businesses and middle – class people who had substantial deposits in the bank.

In August of 1931 a rumor was started that the Picher schools would only have a five month term, rather than the normal nine month term. The *King Jack* ran a full page advertisement, at the paper’s own expense, decrying the rumor. The advertisement/article claimed that because of the rumor many people were planning to move into other towns in the mining district to avail themselves of a normal nine month school year for their children. The *King Jack* rather eloquently pleaded for the city’s life, explaining that the loss of renters and

³⁰ *Ibid*, January 22, 1931.

³¹ “Rail Roads [sic] Plan Reduction For Passenger Rates; Frisco Line Takes Lead in Asking Permission to Reduce Rates to [illegible] Cents a Mile,” *King Jack*, January 15, 1931.

³² *Ibid*, “A Brief Survey of the Events of 1930 Recorded by The King Jack [sic],” January 15, 1931.

support to the local businesses could have a devastating effect on the struggling economy of Picher, the town could be lost forever.³³

The evidence that a large middle class lived in Picher is overwhelming. The amount of social gatherings, clubs, and a huge amount of bridge parties gives ample evidence that Picher was a complete city. Like all cities there were the uneducated poor, but Picher was a city of contrasts. Along with the massive chat piles that changed the landscape forever, lived a strong civic minded group of people. The middle class may have shrunk somewhat with the Great Depression, but all the normal middle class activities were still in evidence. The economy took precedence over the social register as front page news. However the social register stayed very busy, with listings of many club meeting times, club minutes, and the always present bridge parties. Picher suffered, as did all American cities, during the Great Depression. The middle class suffered the most with the closing of the bank and loss of their deposits. Some of the middle class suddenly found themselves poor, limiting their ability to relieve the suffering of others who were underprivileged. Picher itself remained a strong community, through the Great Depression and beyond. The mines that were the life blood of Picher, proved to be the final death blow to the area. The lead and zinc that provided lively hood for an entire city, contaminated the ground and surrounding area ultimately became the end of Picher. Despite Picher's inglorious end, it is important to remember that Picher was a city, like most cities, and it thrived because of its middle class.

³³ *Ibid*, August 28, 1930.

Appendix I

When Picher's population numbered into thousands,
 When it had proved that it was not just a boom
 Mining town, when its citizens had money in
 Ample quantities to spend, after automobiles had
 Displaced the horse – drawn vehicles, after roads
 And highways had been built and paved by Okla-
 Homans [sic] – Then, foreign owned chain stores came
 To Picher.

The above pictures show you what local merchants
 And business men do for Picher. Their handi [sic]
 Work speaks for itself. Picherites have waited
 For more than a decade, hoping that chain stores
 Might some way validate their reason for being
 Here, other than to make their profits out of
 Picher and deposit them in distant cities.

We do not ask you to compare foreign – owned
 Chain store business houses with those of Picher
 Institutions, just take a look for yourself
 At the streets, lined with substantial homes,
 The splendid houses of worship, the magnificent
 School system and school buildings, the busy
 Industrial plants and the teeming through-
 Fares. These are all effects of the great
 Ambitions of local and independent merchants

. . . . and you. Not a single one of these things
 Were built by foreign – owned chain organizations.
 It was this same ambition – The Picher spirit
 That sent pioneers into the markets, with mortgages
 On their future, to buy transportation lines
 So necessary to the city's development. The
 Picher spirit that has overcome almost in-
 Surmountable difficulties, defeated opposition,
 Defied all local disasters, gave them confidence
 To face the future and filled their hearts with
 Greater Ambitions for Greater successes. It is
 This ambition, the controlling impulse of more
 Than 10,000 people, that looks the future in the
 Eye and says "Picher Will!" and because of this
 Dominating force, Picher people are confident
 That no outside interest will control Picher's
 Destiny, will not permit foreign – owned chain stores
 To drain Picher.

It is time for you to start thinking about out city
 And your future. Trade with home – owned independent

Stores.³⁴
Signed Home-Owned Independent Merchants

³⁴ *King Jack*, March 6, 1930. The full page advertisement to encourage trading with local Picher businesses, a picture of Picher spanned the entire page, showing a landscape dominated by chat piles and a huge mill. The notice was printed in three columns with the first letter of each line capitalized like a poem. It is obvious that the local merchants were suffering from the competition of the chain stores. In 1928 the manager of the J C Penny store was a prominent member in the social register, and when he moved to a different store, his replacement was officially welcomed by the Chamber of Commerce.

Appendix II

Chart of comparison items from grocery advertisements

Durnil Cash Grocery	Harp's Cash Store	The Basket Store
Spuds, 15 lb. Peck -- 20c	15 lb. Peck Potatoes, No. 1 -- 18c	Potatoes 15 lb. Peck, fancy eating -- 19c
10 lb. Sugar -- 63c	16 lb. Sugar, C & H Cane -- \$1	10 lbs pure cane sugar -- 65c
24 lb hard wheat flour -- 95c	24 lb flour, Kansas pride Hard Wheat, Guaranteed -- 95c	24 lb flour, hard wheat -- 85c ³⁵

³⁵*King Jack*, August 9, 1928. Notice that The Basket Store has not yet been renamed The Basket Cash Store, that merchant was still offering credit purchases for groceries.

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Davidson, L. S. *South of Joplin; Story of a Tri-State Diggin's*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1939.

Davidson's work gives a rather one sided and prejudiced view of Picher. She concentrates on the poorest of the residents and liberally embellished the nature of the local American Indian Tribes. The book reads more like fiction than a monograph, and other writers have cited it as being a novel.

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 (Winter 1988): 656 – 77.

Derickson's article focuses on the practice of medical screenings to prohibit miners with advancing silicosis to work in the mines. His work is unabashedly brutal against the Picher Clinic and Dr. Meriwether. The fact that for the men, who were in the mid to late stage of the disease, to return to the mines would mean a shortened life span was largely ignored.

Draper, Mable Hobson. *Though Long the Trail*. New York: Rienhart & Co., 1946.

A nonfiction work that chronicles one family's move into the Tri-State Region and a merchant's perspective on the mining boom.

Gibson, Arrell M. "Early Mining Camps in Northeastern Oklahoma." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 34, No. 2 (1956): 193 – 202.

An article based on Dr. Gibson's PH. D. thesis titled "History of the Lead and Zinc Industry of the Tri-State District." This paper concentrated on the chronology of the mining camps in Ottawa County, Oklahoma.

-----, "A Social History of the Tri-State District." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 37, No. 2 (1959): 182 – 95.

This article gave a picture of the extracurricular activities of the miners, the lack of infrastructure and quality housing. This article claimed that Picher lacked a strong municipal structure so the city was controlled by a feudal system put in place by Eagle Picher. Gibson also claimed that all homes were hovels.

-----, "Tri-State District Social Conditions." In *Wilderness Bonanza; The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

This chapter provides details of silicosis and tuberculosis as well as the hazardous conditions created by falling rock ceilings, and other hard rock mining dangers.

Markowitz, Gerald, and David Rosner. "The Streets of Walking Death: Silicosis, Health, and Labor in the Tri-State region, 1900 – 1950." *Journal of American History* 77, No. 2 (September 1990): 525 – 52.

Markowitz and Rosner's study of silicosis, tuberculosis as well as the lack of coverage from the occupational diseases legislation of the era and the steps the Department of Labor took to address the issues.