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### Going to Town: Family Recreation in Picher Oklahoma

Cassie Drake

*Pittsburg State University*

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GOING TO TOWN:  
FAMILY RECREATION IN PICHER OKLAHOMA

Cassie Drake  
History Theory and Practice  
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In the days of mining money was scarce. Along with lack of disposable income also came a lack of free time. Miners worked long and tiresome days with little rest and little family time. The wives of miners also spent long days keeping house and raising children and much like their husbands, had a tiresome job. However, when the income became available they would do something fun with their families, or even take a trip to a nearby town. Picher had a wide variety of things to do and see, almost something for all ages. Spending time off at home wasn't always a bad thing and was called a "stay-cation" Sometimes even a trip to another town such as Miami Oklahoma or Joplin Missouri would be within a family's budget. Going to Miami or Joplin would provide a wide array of activities for the family and a new change of pace.

Mining companies even saw recreation as an important part of life and would sponsor some sports teams to help the miners take a break from the mines. Sometime supply companies would sponsor games as well.<sup>1</sup> Just like the families single miners and miners without families needed breaks from the mine. In Picher they would find some activities that would meet their needs as well. This paper is about what the miner and their families did for fun during their free time, because knowing more about the miner's recreational life and how they interacted with their families is important to knowing how the miners balanced both a recreational and family life with a busy mining life.

Mining was a dangerous profession. Miners would never know when would be the last time they left for work and did not come back. Accidents were common and injury or death was a typical result. At times mines would cave or blow up. It was not uncommon that the miners would suffer injuries from working in the mine. As a miner, you were basically always in danger of a mine falling in or boulders falling from the roof and hitting you on the head. In one

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<sup>1</sup> Larry G. Johnson, *Tar Creek* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing, 2009) 201-05

account, a man working at the White Oak Mine outside Joplin was trapped in a cave in. He was there for fifty hours before any rescuers were able to reach and at that point they were only able to send him things like milk, a watch, light, and a newspaper to help comfort him.<sup>2</sup> However, being trapped in the mine was sometimes temporary. Miners would also catch diseases such as silicosis, known as miner's con, or even tuberculosis which could very well be life threatening.<sup>3</sup> Clinics would sometimes be around to treat disease, but in most cases the damage would have already been done. Miners also did not want to go to the doctor in fear that they might be told that they could no longer work. No man wanted to be denied the ability to provide for his family. Based on these risks and health hazards it is safe to say that taking a break from the mines was very important. The sickness and disease that miners would face cut down the years that they have left, making spending time with their families even more important.

Some of the recreation that the miners would part take in was put on by the mines and other related corporations. During the early parts of the 1900s corporations would frequently support a sponsor sports teams. Companies like Phillips Petroleum Company would sponsor these teams and they would become what would be known as novice sports teams. The teams consisted of their own employees. Phillips sponsored a basketball team that lasted from 1920 to 1968 only to end after competition with professional teams became too much for the team to handle. At the end of their run they had acquired 11 Amateur Athletic Union championships and also won two Olympic Trial tournaments. The players were not just the kind that would be seen messing around in the driveway. There were thirty-nine players named AAU All-Americans.

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<sup>2</sup> Arrell M. Gibson, *Wilderness Bonanza: the Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 180.

<sup>3</sup> Arrell M. Gibson, *Wilderness Bonanza: the Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 182.

Playing on the team could also be a major career opportunity. Four company presidents at played for the team at one time.<sup>4</sup> The team was very good with a 1,543 - 271 record at the time it stopped playing.<sup>5</sup>

The corporations weren't the only ones that wanted to get in on the fun. Mining companies also put together baseball teams. Their teams involved many of the workers and were primarily used to build the workers' spirit. The Eagle-Picher mine for example sponsored an entire league. The league had twenty teams, one from each mine in the Picher area. Some companies would even build fields and grandstands. Competition got so fierce that mining companies would start to hire for "baseball miners." These men would be hired based more on how they fared on the baseball team rather than their skill as a miner. Barr Mine company was especially known for doing this and became really good. Company executives often made surprise inspections in order to fire any "baseball miner that was caught sleeping or not working in the mines. They did this for the other company teams in hopes that they might be able to beat them.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes there would even be a rising star come out of the mines. These baseball games help give an unknown miner a great start. He is now one of the most famous and recognized baseball players to have ever lived: Mickey Mantle.<sup>7</sup>

With the baseball game came something else for the crowd to enjoy. Before a game was played in Picher, the Kiwanis club would put on a First Aid Contest. This was where different mines and companies would put together a team and they would perform several medical tasks in

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<sup>4</sup> Larry G. Johnson, *Tar Creek* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing, 2009) 201.

<sup>5</sup> Larry G. Johnson, *Tar Creek* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing, 2009) 201.

<sup>6</sup> Larry G. Johnson, *Tar Creek* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing, 2009) 203.

<sup>7</sup> Larry G. Johnson, *Tar Creek* (Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing 2009) 205.

a certain time frame. Each team would have a captain and someone to be the victim and then four to five miners to help administer aid to the victim. The tasks ranged from minor scrapes to concussions and severe breaks. Each team had to take care of the injury correctly and under a specific amount of time. Teams that did the best job fixing up the “victim” and under the best time would win the contest. The teams that won would receive a monetary prize and a baseball game would follow. Not only were these games a great form of entertainment they also helped prepare the miners for injuries that they were likely to encounter on the job.<sup>8</sup>

During times when baseball was out of season, groups like the Lion's Club and Kiwanis Club would put on basketball tournaments. They would be district wide sometimes and include as many teams as wanted to participate. Tournaments would take place throughout the year and trophies were awarded to the winners. It is unclear at this time whether or not the mines had their own company teams like they did during the baseball season, but it was still an opportunity for the miners to have some fun together out of the mine.<sup>9</sup>

There were other sporting activities that the people of Picher would go to as well. Area high school would draw big crowds to their home football games. High school football games were also a good time for parents that were miner to see their children play and have fun. High schools took great pride in their sports and would often have nice facilities and bleachers for the fans to enjoy the game. These games really gave kids the chance to shine in front of their parents. While working hard hours it is safe to assume that miners did not always get to see their kids or families very often. Going to the local football games and later in the winter, basketball games gave the miners a chance to bond with friends while being able to see their children's hard

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<sup>8</sup> *First Aid Contest* Picher Kiwanis Club: Picher Oklahoma Pittsburg State University Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Tri – State Tribune January 31, 1946. vol 25 no. 5.

work pay off.<sup>10</sup>

There were other things to do outside of the sporting world in Picher as well. Picher was well advertised as having an array of things that could be quite alluring to a family looking to spend some time together. Picher had a bowling alley known as Whiteway Bowling Alley. Here it was regularly advertised that you could go there in the afternoon and bowl for fifteen cents a game. This didn't seem to be a promotion and was a year round rate, although it was advertised in most newspapers like it was a promotion.

If a family was a fan of the cinema they had several different options. Duffs' Drive In was a popular hangout for not just families but dating teens as well. Picher also had a plaza where you could take in the latest movie in more of a theatre setting. Movies would change every few weeks with the newest flick hitting the screen on a Friday night, much like they do today. The Plaza would also feature plays and different types of theatre. One show in particular was a show that was called The Sorority Dream Girls and was an all girl theatre show. The ad promoted Girls, Girls, Girls and was "not an amateur performance".<sup>11</sup> This would certainly lead one to think that this show was directed more towards the single fellows that were in the mining field. They would probably find this show a little more appropriate than a family with children.

There were also a variety of clubs to be a part of in Picher. Most people would be involved in some sort of club. Although stereotyped as being solely a women's thing, clubs were also offered and attended to men. Clubs were also co-ed and served to both men and women that were interested. Some of the clubs are still very much around today such as the American Legion, Lion's Club, and Kiwanis Club. There were various clubs that were just around during

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Moody, Yester-Year in The Picher Mining Field, *Tri-State Tribune*, January 11, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> "Girls! Girls! Girls!" *Tri - State Tribune* February 9, 1933.

the war time like the Rose and Gold Club and the American War Dad Association. Clubs like the Parents as Teachers Association and bridge clubs have just recently faded out and are not so popular anymore were available. Many clubs that were available for women like the Business and Professional Women's club and the Women's Society of Christian Women have died out since women's rights have become more prevalent in society. Clubs would have meetings weekly, biweekly, or monthly and occasionally put on events for the community. One event that would take place was put on by the American Legion Auxiliary. They would host a Valentine's Day dance that was open to the public.<sup>12</sup> Not only were these clubs a good way to be involved and socialize but the events that they put on were also a fun way for the miners to do something exciting and inexpensive with their families.

Sometimes kids would luck out and get to go on trips without their parents. The local schools would sometime take field trips to various places. On one account the students of Picher went to the AL. G. Kelly Miller Circus as a field trip. The circus was in Miami, Oklahoma. By going to the circus the students got the experience of going to somewhere with their class and make memories with them on top of all the fun of the circus. Even if it was a school sponsored event, this was a great opportunity for them to get away from the chores and obligations that they might have at home.<sup>13</sup>

When the miners and their families wanted a change of place and a different variety of things to do they would go out of town. Sometimes they would travel to Miami Oklahoma and other times they would go to Joplin Missouri. There might have been other places nearby that they went to but most of the research points to either one of these places. Lots of different items

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<sup>12</sup> *Tri-State Tribune* January 31, 1946 Vol. 25 no. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*



went into planning these trips like gas, expenses and an idea of what to do when they got there. One thing that would not come to mind first is when they left. The miners and their families would try to leave and get wherever they were going before four in the afternoon. They were looking to avoid the “buddy car rush.” Buddy cars were what today we would call car pooling. Many of the miners would ride together to save on fuel and money. Not only was it a rush hour like situation but the “buddy cars” wouldn't observe the speed limit so traffic would be strenuous and dangerous and was to best be avoided by traveling families.<sup>14</sup>

There were many activities for miners and their families to experience in other towns. Miami Oklahoma had a lot to offer the traveling miner's family. There were many things to do for all ages and all interests. Married couples with or without kids and even singles could find something entertaining to do. Miami had something for just about anyone wanting to have a good time.

The families that were the sporty type could enjoy several different things. Miami had the Rockdale Country Club that was home to “one of the sportiest golf courses in Oklahoma, with splendidly kept grass greens.”<sup>15</sup> There was also a tennis court in Miami that had four playing courts for those that were interested. Rockdale was the perfect place to hit a round of golf. Not only could they play golf and tennis but this country club also served as a place to hold dinners and dances.

The Grand Lake was a big hit and had many activities for the family. It was a very big recreational spot with much to do for the outdoorsy family. While there you could go fishing,

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<sup>14</sup> Ben Moody “Yester-year in the Picher Mining Field – Buddy Cars, Street Cars, A Cafe in the Old Picher Mining Field” *The Tri-State Tribune* February 15, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> *Industrial Prospectus Miami Oklahoma* Prepared for Color Research INC. Hotel Miami, Miami Oklahoma. Prepared by The Miami Chamber of Commerce Miami, Oklahoma September 1, 1950.

hunting, boating, swimming, picnicking, and many other recreational things. The Ozarks was much like the Grand Lake but at the Ozarks you could also play tennis, baseball, golf, or go horseback riding.<sup>16</sup> The most advertised thing to do at the Ozarks was just to rest. One can very easily assume that was a big hit when miners finally got to go away. Miami was also a member of the Kansas-Oklahoma-Missouri baseball league and had regularly scheduled games during the season. They also had a grandstand with a seating capacity of 3,200. Here relaxing miners could see saddle horse shoes, horse races, rodeos, baseball, and football games. Miners also had a choice of six different outdoors "courts" they could take in on a trip.<sup>17</sup>

If the vacationing family didn't want to camp or spend a large amount of time outside they still had plenty of options. Miami had three hotels: Hotel Miami, Hotel Main, and Hotel Plaza. Hotel Miami was the biggest, most luxurious, and by far the most popular. Along with nice places to stay also came some fun opportunities. Miami had two bowling alleys; one was larger with eight lanes and another smaller alley with four lanes. There was also a wide variety of theatres to choose from. The Coleman theatre was known in the area as being the finest theatre in Oklahoma. Going to a movie at this movie theatre would be considered a real treat. There were two other inside theatres to choose from if one would like; Glory B and the Ottawa. If miners wanted to take their family to a movie outside they could go to the Tri-State Drive In instead of the other three theatres. Miami also offered nineteen different restaurants and cafes. These had a variety of foods and were sure to provide something for even the picky eater. On Sundays families had a large amount of churches to pick from, as Miami was home to fifteen different places of worship.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

Miami offered a wide variety of things for the whole family and some things even if you wanted to get rid of the kiddos for the afternoon. Miami had a very nice municipal swimming pool that held up to 1,200 people and at its deepest was nine feet deep. This could give some couples much needed alone time to catch up and keep their marriages lively. Not only would it benefit the couples, but it was also good to let the kids be kids from time to time and let them rendezvous in the pool or at one of the parks without care or a chore to do. It is hard to remember sometimes that mining was both tough for the actual miners and their families as well. Miami gave the minors a plethora of activities to choose from and had just about anything for any type of family. It would be hard to go to Miami and not have something to spend time doing. There was plenty available to make a good trip worthwhile.

However, sometimes a trip down the road to Miami just didn't cut it. Many miners had migrated to the area when mining became a hot job. Sometimes they would move half way across the country. That being said, they had families in all sorts of different places and would not only have them as visitors but also visit them as well.

The local newspaper ran a column that would tell the readers at informing the town of who went where and who was visiting so nobody would miss out on seeing an out of town guest. Keeping on who was where and who was in town seemed to be of some importance. These columns would take up a good majority of a page or even more within a paper.

While many trips out of town were for business some were also for pleasure. Families would go to places like Kansas City or Durant Oklahoma to visit families. These trips did not seem to be really considered as a vacation but more like a visit. Other trips would be for longer periods of time. Families would stay for several days up to several weeks. Trips to faraway places like California would be even longer and sometimes just the wife or child would go on

this kind of trip. Most of the time they would drive to wherever they were staying, as commercial flying was not popular until later. In one account Mrs. Lelia Aton went on a motor trip with her brother and sister all the way around New Orleans and clear out to Florida. This kind of trip took them two months.<sup>18</sup>

Getting away from the mines was a very important to the miners and their families. Mining was very dangerous and they could not know for sure if they were going to be able to return home from a busy workday without being injured or even worse. Being able to travel to different towns or states was a big deal to these miners and being able to spend time with their families was equally important. There were so many opportunities for them in town like movies and clubs. They could also take trips to other towns and take in movies, shopping, or camping. Some would even go as far to see other families and friends in other states or far away cities. Children were also given the opportunity to get away through the school system and see other places and make memories with their friends. If they got lucky kids would also be given some free time to go swimming or hang out in the cities that their parents would travel to giving the parents time to catch up. Mining was hard work, and being able to recreate and make memories with their families was a very important part of the miner's life. It was hard telling when they would be able to take a break sometimes and so each time they would have to get away was vital to making memories and having quality family times with the ones that meant the most.

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<sup>18</sup> *Tri-State Tribune* January 31, 1946 vol 25 no 5.

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