

## PICHER LEAD, INDIAN LUCK !

It had happened again! This time another valuable mineral had been discovered in, which up until recently, had been Indian Territory. Back in 1830, promoting what then had been called “The Indian Removal Act,” the United States government had mandated the removal of all tribes to a segment of land which later became the state of Oklahoma. By the 1860’s sixty seven tribes had been relocated to the area with the treaty promise that “as long as the rivers flow and the grasses grow” this would be their land. But then, after the Civil War, railroad barons and land hungry whites had prevailed on the government to modify the treaty, supposedly as punishment for some tribes who sided with the South. As a result, train tracks had been constructed north and south across the territory and large land areas had been opened for white settlers, free for the taking. But, as if these treaty violations or “modifications” were unacceptable to Mother Nature, during May of 1896, she had blessed the Indian occupants with the discovery of oil on Osage land when the Nellie Johnston #1 blew near Bartlesville. Since the Federal Government had signed an agreement with tribes in 1891 that still vested them with mineral rights to their lands, this unforeseen bonanza had created wealth beyond imagination, at first for the Osage and other tribes later.

But now it had happened again, this Indian luck! In 1913 with lead and zinc being mined in Missouri and Kansas, ore had been discovered on Harry Crayfish’s claim in Ottawa territory. From projections, this could be the most productive in the whole tri-state region and a bonanza to the Quapah Tribe. The Daily Oklahoman called it “Fifty Square Miles of Gold.” Speculation ran rampant and almost overnight a town site developed around the new workings.

Named Picher, in honor of O.S. Picher, founder of the newly formed Picher Lead Company, the town was soon to grow dramatically. To compound the good fortune from this mineral discovery, World War I had begun in Europe in 1914 which, by 1917 would envelope the United States, and create a huge market for munitions. Eventually, over fifty percent of the lead and zinc metal used during the war and 9/10ths used by the United States were produced within three miles of Picher. Mining was so extensive that engineers predicted that, in time, one would be able to enter mine tunnels at Picher and emerge thirty miles northeast in Waco, Missouri.

The town, finally incorporated in 1918, grew rapidly. Nineteen twenty census figures noted the population as 9,726 and by 1926 Picher had become a city of 14,252. Unlike most developing communities, Picher was essentially managed by the Company. Community differences that couldn’t be settled amicably were brought to a company representative whose judgment was final. The Company also recognized the usual problems that evolved from drinking, so a “bone dry” law was introduced and gambling was also banned.

Working in the mines was dangerous and cave-ins were frequent. Another concern was “miner’s con” which scientists likened to tuberculosis. But because of the pay, as high as eight dollars a day, there was never a shortage of laborers. At the height of employment, over 14,400 miners worked mines in the region and another 4000 worked in services.

**But, in this instance, “Indian Luck” eventually run out. Over the years the market for ore declined and by 1947 mining ceased. In 1960 Picher’s population had dropped to 2,553 and many of its inhabitants had become employed in other nearby industries. In addition to the population decline, sink holes and cave-ins became more frequent, the result of the catacomb of tunnels that had been dug under the area. Even more ominously, traces of lead appeared in city water samples downstream from the mining area. The region became known as “Tar Creek” because of the small stream running through the area that eventually emptied into the Neosho River. Tar Creek was considered the most toxic of fourteen environmentally troubled sites in Oklahoma. A major concern regarding this mineral infestation was the effect of lead, cadmium and zinc consumption on children. Scientists determined that issues regarding premature birth as well as its effect on kidneys and the immune, blood and nervous systems, even learning disabilities, created a dangerous situation.**

**The “rest of the story” regarding Picher as well as Cardin and other nearby communities, is well known to residents of northeastern Oklahoma. The wheels of government, grinding slowly for years, finally reduced Picher and the surrounding lead mining area to a memory. Now, only enormous piles of chat and sporadic sinkholes serve as reminders of a better day, a time when “Indian Luck,” at least for awhile, had once again trumped the white man’s greed.**











