

The Melancholy Ghost Town of

PICHER

Ottawa County, [OKLAHOMA](#)

By

[Gary B. Speck](#)

MINING IS NOT A

clean business. It is well known for its environmental and physical hazards, both during and after the physical mining process. Toxic chemicals are used to process the material being mined, and even the minerals being wrested from the earth may be toxic. Even so, it is a necessary business to maintain our economy. Today, current and future safety is a prime goal of the industry.

Southwest of Joplin Missouri, and tucked into the far northeastern corner of Oklahoma, the far southeastern corner of Kansas and the far southwestern corner of Missouri is a century-plus, old lead-zinc mining region filled with numerous ghosts of the past. During [Ghost Town U A's](#) summer 2012 tour we made this region one of our MUST-SEE stops. As a result of researching for my book, [GHOST TOWNS - YESTERDAY & TODAY](#), the desire to visit this region before it disappeared completely brought us into a sad, but extremely historic mining region that was once the lead and zinc mining capital of the United States. Where lead and zinc mining once reigned, now only the dead and dying remain. As time rolls forward, these once-vibrant mining towns and cities are being reclaimed slowly by nature and quickly by man. As many of the towns here are completely gone now, or are being closed, IF

you desire to visit, I highly recommend that you do it NOW. This is not one of those "one of these days" visits because of the rapidly changing landscape necessitated by the massive environmental cleanup efforts currently underway. The other thing to remember is that the ground itself is very unstable and areas of sinkholes are known to exist. Exercise extreme caution here. Do not enter unstable buildings, mines or areas that are posted.



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In my forty six years of ghost towning, I've missed numerous opportunities similar to this, only to regret them later. The one that stands out the most is a journey we made

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back in 1990. We were on our way to Leadville, in the heart of the Colorado Rockies. As we came around a bend on the narrow mountain highway, we spotted a town perched picturesquely on a high cliff across a narrow valley from our road turnout. The mining town looked lived in, except we didn't see any people or vehicles. Even the windows were all intact, the buildings looking as if the residents had just stepped away. The road to it was not gated, but thinking it was still occupied, we passed on by. It turned out to be a completely abandoned, mid-century lead-zinc mining town named Gilman, a town whose story is chillingly similar to this Tri-State Mining area. It too is a Superfund Site and is being reclaimed, therefore no longer accessible. A missed opportunity I still regret nearly 25 years later.

SO. What was here? What's here now?



In the Oklahoma portion of the district, the lead-zinc mines started cranking out their metallic treasure around 1914. The mining towns grew quickly, and by 1920 Picher was the 13th largest city in Oklahoma. The boom continued through the 1920s, but by the end of the decade production slowed somewhat. It continued slowly declining until 1967, when mining ceased completely. Some of the towns in the Oklahoma portion of the district include: Cardin, Douthat, Hockerville, Picher and Zincville.

The population trends of the towns tell a dramatic story.

- **CARDIN**
1930 - 437
1980 - 172
1990 - 165
2000 - 150
2010 - 3 (Census in April)
November 2010 - 0

- **PICHER**
1920 - 9676
1926 - 14,252 (peak)
1930 - 7773
1950 - 3951
1970 - 2363
1980 - 2180
1990 - 1714
2000 - 1640
2010 - 20

- **TREECE (Kansas)**
1930 - 749
1950 - 378
1970 - 225
1980 - 194
1990 - 172
2000 - 149
2010 - 138
2012 - 0 (disincorporated)



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WHAT HAPPENED?

What became known as the Tri-State Mining District began in the 1850s, when the rich lead-zinc deposits were first worked in the Joplin area. The boom slowly moved southwest into Kansas, and after Oklahoma became a state in 1907, into that state. A massive upsurge in mining in the first decade of Oklahoma's statehood created numerous small mining camps and several mining towns and cities in the tri-state area.



Looking across the tortured landscape today it is almost inconceivable that these places existed.

Yet they did.

Picher and the other towns' demises and ultimate fates followed a similar arc. The biggest problem here was the fact that the towns listed above sat right in the heart of the most intense mining area, an area that sprawled about five miles wide (east-west) by six miles long (north-south) and trended slightly from the southwest to the northeast. Picher was the largest city, and sat smack in the heart of the mines, which were located on the generally flat, notoriously windy, northeastern Oklahoma prairie. The landscape here is dominated by huge piles of white mine tailings known as chat, which consists of some 75 million tons of ground-up waste dolomite, limestone and other siliceous rocks that once

hosted the lead and zinc. These chat piles are also filled with a fine residue of lead, zinc and other heavy/toxic metals.

Dust from these chat piles billow into the air, coating everything in the area. When these towns were populated, kids rode bicycles up and down the chat piles, slid down the dusty slopes on all sorts of flat objects and swam in the lead-contaminated water of creeks, ponds and flooded mine pits. The aquifer was also heavily contaminated. A 1982 study of Picher's drinking water showed lead and cadmium levels exceeded National standards by a factor of five. The Army Corps of Engineers also studied the old mines and determined that 86% of the buildings in Picher were in danger of collapse due to undermining from the mines.



Because of the toxicity levels, danger of land subsidence and other environmental dangers, Picher and 40 square miles of mining district surrounding it were declared a toxic waste site in 1983. The Tar Creek Superfund site was created to help mitigate those critical environmental issues and authorize a multiple million dollar Federal buyout. In 1996, a detailed medical study revealed that over one third of the children in Picher had severe lead poisoning. A fire was finally lit under the plodding powers that be and the shutdown gained impetus.

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By the mid-2000s, the federal government began buying out and relocating of thousands of affected individuals. As they left, buildings were abandoned and eventually torn down. As if to add insult to injury, in 2008, Mother Nature gave the remaining residents a powerful kick on the backside. On May 10, a half-mile wide, EF-4 tornado ripped through the heart of Picher, killing eight people and injuring over 150 people, also damaging or destroying over 150 buildings. Because of the city's Superfund status, there would be no funds for rebuilding and the remaining residents could either accept the buyout offers or lose out completely. There would be no rebuilding. In early 2009, Picher officially disincorporated, and in May, the last school closed sealing the former city's status as a modern-era ghost town.



So what remains in Picher?

Where a large central business district in a mid-sized city once bustled, today all is quiet. Only echoes of footsteps from curious visitors, and the banging of loose wood and flapping window shutters on abandoned homes break the oppressing silence. Weed-choked foundations

and slabs have replaced neat rows of buildings. Sign posts point to empty or rubble-strewn lots. What few buildings that remain are empty. The once-bustling downtown is a memory.

The people ARE gone.



When we rolled into town on a warm, breezy, summer day the heavy weariness enveloping this former city could be felt heavily in the air. On the south side of "downtown," a pair of ancient, broken-backed homes brimmed full with the flotsam of a former life. In what was once downtown Picher, three of the four small, empty storefronts stood silently, glassless window sockets staring out onto weed-choked slabs and cracked concrete sidewalks of a post-apocalyptic downtown.



One of the stores still had a "SORRY...CLOSED" sign behind the still-intact glass of the front door, while the vacant units on either side sat gutted and naked to the world. Across the street, a small pole sign advertising a warm "WELCOME" to the "First Baptist Church - 2 Blocks." It flapped and creaked on rusting hangers, the arrow pointing towards a rubble-strewn lot where the church met its maker in early 2011.

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Still standing proud and looking like any other water tower in any thriving town in the Heartland, Picher's tower still touted its bright red

PICHER GORILLAS SINCE 1918

slogan at the top. It stood guard over a residential tract filled with single story homes and duplexes, sitting

windowless, doorless and soulless. A few other unidentified structures lie scattered across the townsite, one of which is said to house a still-operating store, but it was closed at the time of our visit.



Just north of that building and sitting smack-on the state line on either side of Highway 69, a tiny cluster of gloomy, lifeless buildings housing long-forgotten, abandoned businesses were an antithesis to the joyous yellow sunflowers and a



cheery "WELCOME TO OKLAHOMA" and "WELCOME TO KANSAS" plastered across the state line signs.



At the north end of town, and just south of the state line, sometime in the recent past, the former mining company offices had been renovated to house the PICHER MINING MUSEUM. Like the rest of this dead town, the tall weeds and "CLOSED" sign told the tale.



As I stood in the weeds taking pictures, a couple of ancient, battered, pickups cruised by, the sad-faced occupants sharing the half-hearted wave of world weary folks on the downside of a tough life.

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This was not a happy visit. The story of the old town weighed heavily on our minds and seeing those truck occupants brought it all home. 85 years ago, thousands of people lived, worked and played here. Dreams were chased, and futures seemed rosy. Today, only the sound of crunchy footsteps on crumbling concrete, wind rattling the dry bones of an abandoned house and the rustling of paper blowing down the empty streets of a mining district that has produced billions of dollars worth of minerals remain. Life wasn't just interrupted: it was flat-out stopped dead in its tracks.



This visit was stone-cold sobering. Each member of our party, including the grandkids, felt the depressing aura exuding from the very soil here. All of us are glad we did take the time to experience these melancholy ghost towns.



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LOCATION

SITE NAME	ELEV.	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	TOWNSHIP/RANGE
Cardin (Ottawa Co., OK)	810'	36.9750332 36° 58' 30" N	-94.8510441 94° 51' 04" W	SE-Corner Sec 19, T29N, R23E, IM (Indian Base Line & Meridian)
Gilman (Eagle Co., CO)	8950'	39.5327639 39° 31' 58" N	-106.3939176 106° 23' 38" W	NCtr Sec 13, T6S, R81W, 6 th PM (Principal Meridian & 40° Base Line)
Joplin (NO GHOST) (Jasper/Newton Co., MO)	1001'	37.0776195 37° 04' 39" N	-94.5020578 94° 30' 07" W	NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of T27N, R33W, 5 th PM
Miami (NO GHOST) (Ottawa Co., OK)	797'	36.8745146 36° 52' 28" N	-94.8774554 94° 52' 39" W	Sec 24, 25, NE $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 36, T28N, R22E / W $\frac{1}{2}$ Sec 19, W $\frac{1}{2}$ Sec 30, NW $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 31, T28N, R22E, IM
Picher (Ottawa Co., OK)	817'	36.9834872 36° 59' 01" N	-94.8324558 94° 49' 57" W	SW $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 16, SE $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 17, NE $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 20, NW $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 21, T29N, R23E, IM
Treece (Cherokee Co., KS)	840'	36.9994049 36° 59' 58" N	-94.8437196 94° 50' 37" W	W $\frac{1}{2}$ Sec 13, T35S, R23E, 6PM

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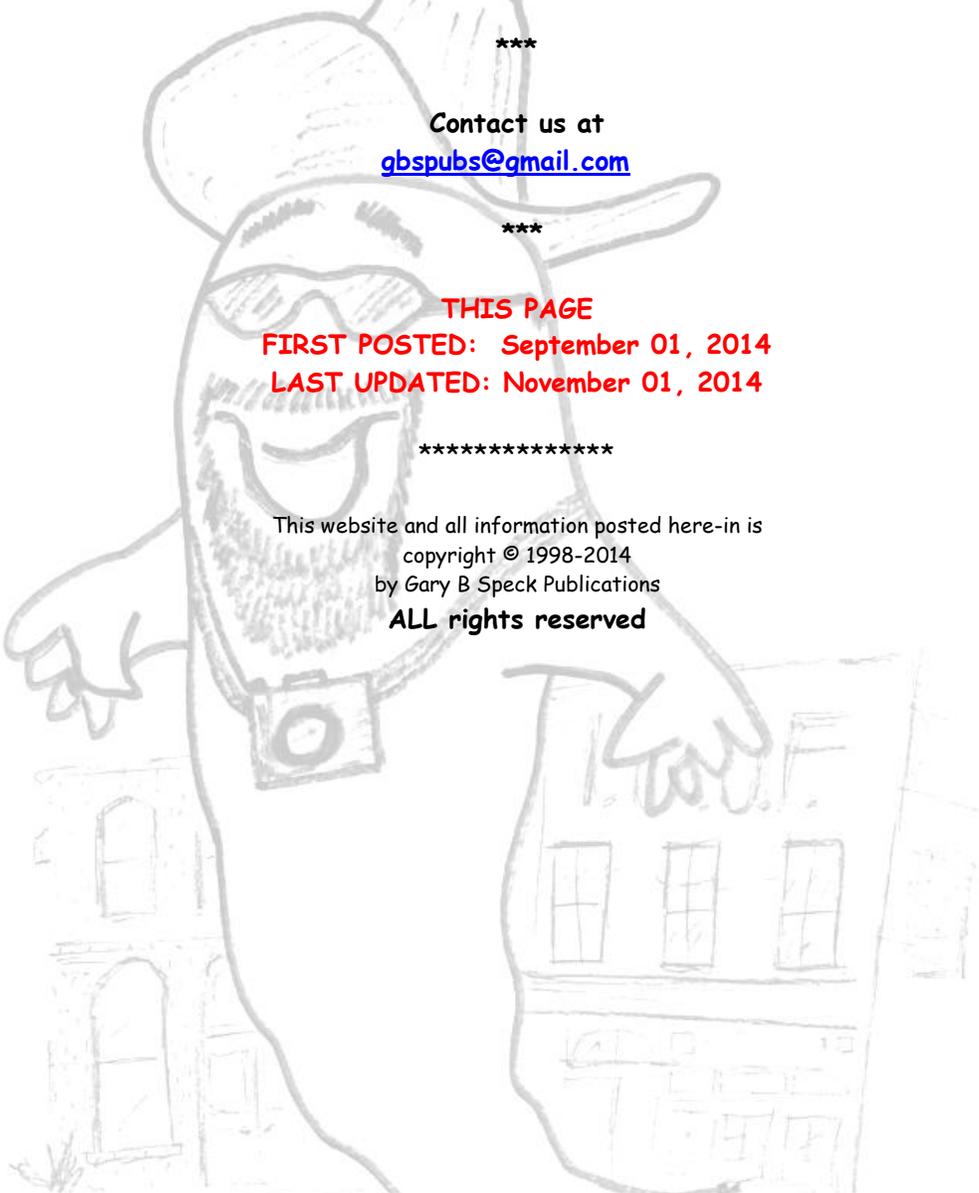
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