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A poisoned town slowly fades away



BY JUSTIN JUOZAPAVICIUS/ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PICHER, OKLA. — Waiting in their cars or on broken sidewalks, the blue-jeaned crowd has turned out for a parade. But they could pass for mourners at a funeral.

They line up along the main drag in front of empty cafes and shops and rusted mining equipment fenced off with barbed wire.

Passing time, some press hands and foreheads against windows of stores that went out of business so many years ago that it's hard to remember what they sold.

Two graybeards stand near a telephone pole, watching for any sign of action in front of Susie's Thrift and Gift.

"I hate this," the older one laments. "I hate to see Picher go."

"Yeah," the other mumbles, looking down at his shoelaces.

"All those memories."

"Been mined out pretty bad, though."

Promises undone

When the lead and zinc mines around here closed, many people told themselves and promised their children that Picher could go on and even be the same. There would always be church, high school football and the Dairy Queen.

But that was nearly 40 years ago, and all the praying and wishful thinking can't undo what has happened here.

People are leaving, escaping the reality of life in one of the worst environmental nightmares in the country. A voluntary federal buyout is hastening the exodus.

This is a town's last stand.

"Ol' Picher is just like the rest of us; she's 90 years old and on her last legs," says Orval "Hoppy" Ray, who worked the mines in the 1940s and runs a drafty pool hall in town.

Ray reveals the stubbornness that comes with 82 years of living: He and dozens of other holdouts will not leave, even when there is no city water or police department. No matter how much he is offered for his property, his place will remain open until he dies.

“I don’t think the lights will ever go out,” Ray says, but there’s something in his voice that leaves room for doubt.

His birthplace is the center of the Tar Creek Superfund site, a 40-square-mile area that takes in parts of Missouri and Kansas.

For decades, before Picher became a town, miners carved miles of tunnels under its land, and the bounty of lead ore they recovered made bullets for both world wars. Neighboring communities also were undercut.



During its boom, Picher’s population peaked at 20,000. Saloons and movie parlors lined the streets.

It was a rough-and-tumble way of life: fistfights just for the heck of it, plenty of bravado and wasted paychecks and the understanding that if you were old enough to work a shift in a mine, you were old enough to down a shot of whiskey.

Picher’s mines closed around 1970; the wounds they inflicted on the people and land never healed.

Today, Tar Creek runs orange with acidic water that flooded the mines. Cave-ins and sinkholes threaten; a mine collapse in 1967 took nine homes.

Bleak, gray mountains of lead-contaminated chat, or mine tailings, loom around town. Some rise 100 feet and resemble sand dunes. For years, before most knew better, the gravel-coated piles doubled as sledding hills for children, a lover’s lane for teenagers and a makeshift proving grounds for dirt bikes and the high school’s track team.

It will take at least 15 more years to haul away the stuff -- for use in highway construction projects -- but that’s not soon enough. The polluted dust that blows through every nook of this place has already affected a generation.

In the 1990s, a study found elevated blood lead levels in Tar Creek-area children, and teachers began noticing years ago that students were learning more slowly and couldn't focus as well as they should have.

"Don't Put Lead in Your Head," says a sign still hanging next to City Hall, showing a drawing of a smiling child.

Adults suffered too. Natives such as John Sparkman began having high blood pressure in their 20s. He lost his sister to Lou Gehrig's disease when she was 41, and would lay odds that pollution caused it.

"I would've liked to have seen the town located somewhere else, but no one wanted to see it happen," says Sparkman, who works for the town housing authority. "It should've ended in the 1960s."



The federal government has stepped in with a plan to relocate residents -- a buyout program that could cost \$60 million.

As of April, nearly 800 applications had been turned in by home and business owners, according to the Lead-Impacted Communities Relocation Assistance Trust.

More than 300 offers have been made so far and of them, 272 accepted. Only a handful of offers were rejected.

The payouts won't make anyone rich -- a 1,200-square-foot home fetches about \$60,000 -- but most residents believe this is the only ticket out of the depressed area.

The town has been whittled down to about 800 people. Most businesses are long gone. The truck stop on the edge of town closed when unleaded gas was going for \$2.79 a gallon. The school system -- down to 99 students -- has already axed extracurricular activities such as band, art and sports.

But there are the holdouts, maybe as many as 30 families, who plan to stay put.

“They thought they were going to live here for the rest of their lives,” said Larry Roberts, a former state lawmaker and operations manager of the relocation trust.

Why would people remain at a major Superfund site?

Candie Crites tries to explain, even as the ground under her feet rumbles almost every day. A mine shaft lies just on the south side of her driveway, 15 feet from her shotgun house in Cardin, a spit away from Picher. When the tremors come, they sound like a dynamite blast and shake windows.

But she can't leave the land she has lived on for decades, where the flowers her parents planted bloom and the best memories with her late husband were made.

“It hurts to see what's going on; it's literally like tearing away pages of your life or layers of your skin,” Crites says, crying.

Hoppy Ray's son, Steven, also is staying. Stubborn like his old man, the 61-year-old rattles off reasons why he thinks this place can be something again.

What about the city water being turned off? “It will turn into a rural water system.”

Or living in a deserted city? “No more lonely than if you lived out in the country.”

The lead pollution, then? “I've got four college degrees, and I grew up playing in the chat piles and swimming in the mill ponds. If I'm lead-damaged, by God, what would I have been, another Albert Einstein?”

If 67-year-old Roberta Richards had her way, she'd probably stay too, but she is afraid to make a go of it in a town without law and order. She hopes to get \$70,000 for her house, and is looking at a new place about 25 miles away. The hardest thing for her will be getting used to life without her daughter and grandchildren as neighbors.

Some who left as the mines were closing are still sentimental about the place.

Steve Darnell remembers playing football on a field coated with lead dust and in a town big enough to have two hospitals, three movie theaters and a bowling alley.

He sympathizes with the holdouts, but doesn't pretend to know what's in store for them if they stay.

"You can only go so far," said Darnell, 55, who lives in Missouri now. "It's not that much different than a gold-bust town."

Last birthday?

Sirens cut the silence. Police and fire vehicles have lined up and it's about to begin now: the parade marking Picher's 90th -- and maybe last -- birthday. About 300 people have turned out to pay last respects.

"We cry every day," resident Louise Blalock says as she waits in her minivan for the procession to start. "It's like a death, really."

"For what it is, I'm losing my heritage," says Steven Meador, who moved out of Picher in 1986 and now lives in a small town nearby.

"I feel like it's the end. That's why I'm here. This is it for me," says Norma Jean Skinner, who made the pilgrimage from California to say a proper goodbye.

Cars, pickups and motorcycles roll by. Locals on floats toss suckers and Tootsie Rolls into the street, but many of the candies aren't scooped up because there are so few children left.

The parade ends at the Paul Thomas Funeral Home.

After the parade, folks gather at the elementary school cafeteria for a reception.

Honky-tonk music sets the mood, and couples get up from bowls of beans and corn bread for one final twirl around the floor.

Paul Thomas, the town's silver-haired undertaker, sits in the back, dressed in a dark suit. Thomas, 84, has buried much of this town and can remember the days when Picher's streets were crowded.

"It's just fading away," Thomas said, looking straight ahead. "It just keeps getting smaller and smaller."

The people shouted, line-danced and swapped stories into the afternoon about first kisses, favorite teachers and long-gone eateries.

For a few more hours, they were the kings and queens of Picher, and no one could tell them this wouldn't last forever.



