 Poor Man's Fortune

Roll, Jarod

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

Roll, Jarod.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/74161

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2564308
CHAPTER 6
RED-BLOODED, RUGGED
INDIVIDUALS

While the first year of the Great War revived the fortunes of Joplin miners, American belligerence in 1916 and after gave them new confidence in old ideas about the chances of white working-class men to claim the nation’s prosperity. In 1915 they had organized, first in the American Metal Miners Union and then in the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) and American Federation of Labor (AFL), as a last resort to demand better pay and preferential hiring from recalcitrant employers as wartime demand pushed zinc and lead prices to record highs. Just as a movement started to build, however, the Wilson administration’s war stance created dynamic new conditions that challenged organized labor and once again encouraged white working-class entrepreneurialism. In 1916, despite an official policy of neutrality, the U.S. government increased military spending, which in turn sent zinc and lead prices even higher. Joplin miners realized the gains through informal sliding-scale contract provisions as a surging industrial economy tightened regional labor markets. With the Wilson administration moving toward war, its simultaneous calls for patriotic loyalty spurred a newly aggressive nationalist sentiment among native-born whites who ramped up their intimidation and persecution of foreigners and suspected radicals, particularly the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and associated groups, such as the WFM. To Joplin miners, the political economy of American belligerence from 1916 to 1918 delivered in full what unions had only promised and seemed to show that hard-working white men like them could still prosper and do so on their own.

Nowhere did Joplin miners see the lucrative benefits of war more than in Ottawa County, Oklahoma. Beginning in 1915, as ore prices soared, mining companies accelerated the development of metal discoveries thirty miles west of Joplin—the district’s first major expansion since the 1880s. By the following summer, a series of rough boom camps extended north along Tar Creek from Commerce to just across the Kansas state line: places called Cardin, Treece, Douthat, Hockerville, and, soon the largest of all, Picher. Observers predicted that the new field would “prove the richest in the world.” At
a time when coal and metal mines elsewhere were fully mechanizing, these firms continued to rely on shoveleres, the largest and most important group of miners. Pay was high. “The most lucrative of our laborious professions is that of plying the shovel,” a company official declared. “Many of our shoveleres make as much as $6 and $7 a day.” Just as important, companies in Ottawa County hired only native-born white men; the new field was “purely American in its men and methods.”

The timing of the Oklahoma discoveries was indeed fortuitous. The wartime boom exhausted the old sheet ground mines around Webb City and Carterville. As companies shifted production to Oklahoma, the heart of what now became known as the Tri-State district, miners followed the work. By 1920, nearly 16,000 people, most of them miners and their families, lived in Picher, Cardin, Treece, and Commerce—10,000 of them in Picher alone. None of those places had existed ten years earlier. Most came from the old Missouri boomtowns; Joplin, Webb City, Carterville, and Neck City lost almost 9,000 residents combined in the 1910s. Their labor drove zinc ore production in the new field: from 55,285 tons in 1916 and 557,066 tons in 1920 to an all-time high of 749,254 tons in 1925. Meanwhile, production in Missouri plummeted from a high of 322,123 tons in 1916 to 49,786 tons in 1920 and 28,865 tons in 1925. The collapse was almost total in the sheet ground mines: from 113,835 tons in 1916 to 157 tons in 1925.

For Tri-State miners, the transformations of the war years reaffirmed their faith that capitalism and nationalism would reward working-class white men. They believed, not incorrectly, that their brute strength and reckless pursuit of individual incentives powered the district’s rebirth in Oklahoma, which profited companies and supplied the American and Allied war efforts. After flirting with union solidarity and security in 1915, Tri-State miners, led by the shoveleres, once again indulged ideas about work that linked remuneration with masculine power and risk. They claimed special status as loyal, native-born white men who courted danger on the job, a status further valorized by frenzied wartime campaigns for loyal, 100 percent Americanism, the suppression of anticapitalist radicals, and immigration restriction. Despite the conservative appeals of the American Metal Miners Union and the AFL, the latter an enthusiastic war supporter, Tri-State miners turned against unionism once again. By the early 1920s, they expected that hard work, defense of race and nation, and fidelity to the sliding scale would assure them, individually, a fair share of the district’s rising profits.

Like many other American workers in the war’s aftermath, Tri-State miners and their families also sought improved living conditions. Life in the
Oklahoma boom camps was rough, as social disruption, unsanitary housing, hazardous working conditions, and inadequate medical care kept disease and death close. They expected better. Tri-State mining families wanted, in short, the ideal American standard of living presented in postwar consumer culture: homes with modern conveniences, good health, access to public schools, and the money and time to enjoy leisure activities. Tri-State families claimed that ideal in racial and national terms, as white Americans. Yet these deepened commitments—to white nationalism, dangerous masculinity, and working-class entrepreneurialism—would restrict and bedevil their attempts to find solutions and give new license for mining companies to subdue and control them with unprecedented powers born of wartime government support.

The Oklahoma boom was different from any the district had experienced before. In the past, mining firms had followed the discoveries of individual or small-scale prospectors who opened new fields. Now, large companies controlled the exploratory process by methodically drilling test holes on large tracts of leased land. Much of that land belonged to members of the tiny Quapaw Nation, whose property transactions were subject to oversight by the U.S. secretary of the Interior, a power imbalance that favored big mining companies with political pull. These companies exploited new discoveries with sprawling operations that required thousands of miners working for daily wages or piece rates. Although the new field resembled mining districts elsewhere, its settlements looked a lot like the area’s old boom camps. Companies invested nothing in housing, schools, or basic services. Wages, however, were high. As the old field around Joplin collapsed, miners abandoned recent commitments to safety, stability, and well-being to take lucrative work in a place that promised none of those things. As they did so, the war logic that made their labor so valuable also encouraged ideas of white nationalism and rough masculinity that reassured many men and women that a prosperous future awaited them in the new Oklahoma field.

Although small companies had mined in Indian Territory since the 1890s, the Miami Royalty Company developed the first significant deposits of zinc ore north of Miami, Oklahoma, in 1908. Its operations were modern but small compared to those of companies in Webb City and Joplin. By 1912, however, Miami Royalty’s expanding operations attracted the interests of Picher Lead and Zinc Company engineers, who convinced their boss, Oliver S. Picher, to lease mineral rights nearby. Picher, the son and nephew of the firm’s founders, had set an ambitious course since assuming

Red-Blooded, Rugged Individuals / 167
a senior leadership position in 1906. With an $800,000 investment from the Cincinnati-based Eagle White Lead Company, he purchased a lead smelter in Galena and diversified the firm’s range of products. Picher’s decision to produce more zinc had the company looking for untapped ore deposits. In 1912, Picher Lead leased extensive mineral rights on 2,700 acres north of Miami; Miami Royalty also acquired new holdings and renamed itself the Commerce Mining and Royalty Company. Members of the Quapaw Nation owned much of this land in sizeable allotments that had only recently been made available for mining. In 1897, the U.S. Congress gave the Quapaw, of whom only 234 members remained, the right to lease their allotted lands for mining purposes for ten years unless declared incompetent because of age or disability, in which case the secretary of the Interior would make agreements on their behalf. In 1907, the commissioner of Indian affairs issued new rules for declaring incompetence that gave the federal government increased power over leasing arrangements. When securing their first leases in 1912, Picher Lead and Commerce Mining made some agreements directly with Quapaw allottees and the rest with the Department of the Interior. Soon after, both firms deployed drill crews to explore the new holdings. In August 1914, drillers for Picher Lead hit a thick vein of ore 300 feet deep on Harry Crawfish’s allotment just east of Tar Creek about a mile south of the Kansas state line. Picher Lead sent nine additional drill crews to map the surrounding territory. Their drilling hit dozens of other ore deposits that assayed from 6 to 30 percent metal.3

Picher Lead exemplified the new scale of production in Ottawa County. The company kept the drill results secret until early 1915, just as the outbreak of war in Europe sent zinc prices soaring. Picher Lead decided to operate the mines directly, as the American Zinc, Lead, and Smelting Company had done in the sheet ground, and not sublease the work. “The findings at certain places have been so rich,” the Joplin Globe reported, “that the company decided it could not afford to turn the land over to someone else, but should mine for itself.” To oversee operations, Picher Lead hired A. E. Bendelari, an experienced engineer who understood the district’s history. Bendelari directed construction of the first shafts and mills in March 1915. Flush with confidence, the company increased its capital stock to $5 million, leased 3,000 more acres of Quapaw land, bought a zinc smelter in Illinois, and built a new zinc smelter in Henryetta, Oklahoma. By the spring of 1916, Picher Lead was running six mines and four mills, including the Netta, the district’s largest mill, which could process seventy-five tons of crude ore an hour. That summer the company merged with Eagle White to form the Eagle-Picher Lead Company, one of the largest zinc and lead firms in the world.4
Most miners in the Joplin field were initially slow to comprehend what was happening over the state line. With the American Metal Miners Union and the WFM gaining a foothold in 1915, many looked to a better future at the district’s historic center. In January 1916, the WFM claimed over 1,000 members in eleven locals. Working together in the new district council, these locals pressed demands for collective bargaining and improved health and safety regulations. After the most profitable year in district history, when companies sold over $19 million in ore and mineral, union miners called for a district-wide contract with a minimum wage and bonuses determined by a permanent “sliding scale that would give the miner a measure of prosperity.” For shovelers, the union now wanted a modified piece-rate system: a base wage of $2.75 per day plus seven cents per can, with a half-cent increase per can for every ten-dollar rise in the price of ore. The union also wanted more done to counter silicosis, another plausible demand given the high level of civic attention to the crisis. According to a U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) doctor, there was “now a well grounded conviction among miners and operators that rock dust is dangerous to life and health” and there was “the greatest enthusiasm” for prevention. “Join the union,” the district council urged in June 1916, “thereby helping to increase wages, improve the conditions, protect health and lengthen life.” This campaign reflected five years of tough organizing. At best, the WFM sought a moderation of the district’s mining culture by calling for a sliding scale with the security of a minimum base wage. That summer union miners could claim partial success on all of these issues, all while companies excluded foreigners and African Americans from work. Union miners thought more was possible. They asked nonunion men, “Will you join with us in making the Joplin district a fit place to live in and raise our families?”

By early 1916, however, these same miners faced an increasingly uncertain economic future. After thirty years of production, capped by a furious wartime surge, the sheet ground mines were thinning. American Zinc and other companies were mining dirt that yielded only 2 percent of its weight in concentrated ore for sale, half the yield of a decade earlier. With prices over $100 per ton, these firms could make money from such low-grade ore by processing ever-larger amounts. In 1916, for example, companies in the Missouri section of the field produced over 302,000 tons of concentrated zinc ore worth a record $24 million but only by extracting more than 13 million tons of crude ore, 40 percent more than the previous high in 1912. Once ore prices began falling in March 1916, most companies could not afford to mine and mill sheet ground ore. Smaller firms shut down, some for good. American Zinc cut wages several times, prompting union discussions of a strike,
but continued operating. No one had given up yet. American Zinc leaders even bet on a revival by buying the entire holdings of the Granby Mining and Smelting Company in June 1916.6

Declining profitability in the sheet ground tested the WFM district council just as the national union itself succumbed to internecine fighting amid growing hostility to radicals and foreigners. The WFM was riven by sectarianism in 1916 as a radical IWW faction tried to wrest control from WFM president Charles Moyer and his more conservative allies. This fight reached Joplin in the spring as local union leaders acquiesced to recent wage cuts rather than strike again. In June, Frank Little and several other IWW, also known as Wobbly, organizers arrived in the district with hopes of capturing the WFM’s unlikely stronghold. At a meeting of Joplin 217, they took the floor to rail against the union’s impotent leadership, both nationally and locally. They demanded a strike. Most miners responded with hostility to the Wobbly appeal, in part due to the lessons of the 1915 strike but also out of revived animosity. The week before Little’s group arrived, the Missouri National Guard had launched a recruiting drive in Webb City and Carterville ahead of an expected deployment to the border with Mexico as Pancho Villa’s raids escalated hostilities. The military’s appeals to loyal American manhood fueled a violent reaction to the radical organizers. At a mine near Carterville, a confrontation between the Wobblies and a group of shovelers and machine men ended in “a free-for-all fight.” According to American Zinc managers, “the men who wanted to work cleaned up the ‘I. W. W.’s’ in grand shape.” The clash also pleased WFM organizer Marion Cope, who reported that the IWW men “were given a dose of their own medicine, ‘direct action,’ with the result that several of them returned with broken heads.” Little and his colleagues soon left the district. The miners accepted the wage cut. The whole scrape lasted less than two weeks, but it conjured up old demons that boded ill for the WFM, despite Cope’s gloating: yet again, Joplin miners fought with unionists to stop a strike.7

The WFM rapidly lost support in the Joplin district and elsewhere as the nation went to war. Less than a year old, the district council was hit from left and right, dogged by the union’s radical past yet unable to resist wage cuts in the sheet ground. Government jingoism exacerbated its agony. Jasper County’s first contingent of National Guard soldiers mustered for training in late June 1916, two weeks after the Wobblies left the area. Others continued to sign up for service amid flag-waving rallies. Although Moyer prevailed over IWW challengers at the WFM convention in July 1916, and the union signaled a new start by adopting a new name, the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (hereafter referred to as Mine
Mill), it was not enough. By January 1917, every local in the district council, save for Joplin 217, was defunct. Mine Mill could not shake its association with the IWW as the blunt logic of belligerence turned all dissenters into enemies. When President Wilson called for a declaration of war in April 1917, he pledged to counter disloyalty with “a firm hand of stern repression.” Soon after, he signed the Espionage Act, which gave the federal government broad power to punish anyone considered a threat to national security. That summer, IWW organizers led former Mine Mill locals in Arizona and Montana into costly strikes that ended with the deployment of U.S. soldiers and further union turmoil. Vigilantes did much of the work of repression. In Bisbee, Arizona, a posse expelled, or “deported,” as they called it, more than 1,000 miners into the desert. In Butte, Montana, a lynch mob tortured Frank Little and hanged him from a railroad trestle. In the eastern Missouri lead field, vigilantes beat, robbed, and forcibly expelled more than 1,000 foreign-born men, women, and children, many of whom had recently belonged to the WFM, in what they called a “hunky riot.” The following month, the nascent Bureau of Investigation used its powers under the Espionage Act to raid every IWW office nationwide. With little political room to operate and weaker than ever, Mine Mill languished. The Joplin local collapsed in early 1918, an organizer later explained, “owing to the traditions, superstitions and prejudices existing among the miners of this field.”

As the union floundered, the mines in the Joplin district finally stopped producing. Although ore prices rebounded to above eighty dollars per ton in early 1917, American Zinc could not make the sheet ground deposits pay. Its exploration of the Granby Mining holdings yielded nothing. The value of production in Jasper and Newton Counties plummeted from $21.6 million in 1917 to $6.9 million in 1918. It was a “disastrous” year for “nearly all the operators of zinc mines in southwestern Missouri,” including American Zinc, which began to liquidate its holdings.

Miners were streaming into Ottawa County from Kansas and Missouri by then. Some men went soon after hearing about the new discoveries, before the sheet ground companies began to falter. “A substantial boom is on,” the Missouri Trades Unionist reported in the summer of 1915, “and men are in great demand.” The paper reported that 2,300 miners were already there, mostly “former residents of Joplin, Webb City and Carterville.” Over the next five years, thousands more followed. By 1917, wageworkers could make “30% above normal” in Oklahoma. Shovelers could earn much more, up to eight dollars per day on prevailing piece rates. “The activity in the Oklahoma field is so great that miners are being drawn from the older camps,” a correspondent reported that March, “and there is a dearth of men, particu-
larly shovelers, in Joplin and Webb City.” Harry Hood’s father, for example, abruptly quit his job in Carterville in 1916, assured that he would find something better in Oklahoma. “There were jobs,” Hood recalled his father saying, “plenty of them.” Two years later, eighteen-year-old Joe Nolan left Webb City, where his shoveler father was dying of silicosis, to take a plum hoisterman job. Older men were also drawn to Oklahoma. By 1920, Scott McCollum, the former Leadville strikebreaker, now forty-eight years old, worked as a miner again in Picher. No longer an electrician, McCollum left Joplin after his oldest son, Otto, a twenty-five-year-old laborer in a lead smelter, died of pneumonia in 1918.10

Missouri miners did not take the WFM with them. The small Commerce local had collapsed without WFM support in 1916, just as the rush got under way. No one tried to transplant the other locals to the new field, where, without a union, miners could make over one dollar per day more than the union was trying to secure in Missouri. The WFM, later Mine Mill, made no noticeable effort to bridge the transition either. Instead, the union focused its meager resources on organizing zinc smelters in the surrounding coalfields. Starting in 1916, Emma Langdon joined Cope to lead drives that built new locals in places like Fort Smith, Bartlesville, and Henryetta, but the union registered no presence among Oklahoma’s zinc miners. If any diehard union sympathizers remained, they stayed quiet.11

Many mining companies also relocated operations to Ottawa County. Eagle-Picher and Commerce Mining created favorable conditions for others to enter the new field. As early as 1917, dozens of firms leased land near proven discoveries as federal administration of Quapaw lands and improved infrastructure eased new development. In 1917, the St. Louis–San Francisco Railway, which ran the old Atlantic & Pacific mainline and was known as the Frisco, completed a spur line that connected Picher, Cardin, and Douthat to its existing network, which offered direct routes to Joplin, Galena, and other smelter towns in Kansas. In 1918, the Southwest Missouri Railroad extended the district’s interurban trolley line to Picher. By 1920, many small companies with fewer than fifty workers, such as Mike Evans’s Keltner Mining Company, operated in the Picher field. Large firms dominated employment and production, however. Federal Mining and Smelting Company, a subsidiary of the American Smelting and Refining Company, employed 150 men. Golden Rod Mining and Smelting Corporation employed 500 men in thirteen mines. Admiralty Zinc Company ran four mines that employed 250 workers. Commerce Mining employed 400 men in eight mines. Eagle-Picher was the biggest of all, with over 1,000 employees.12

Miners who came to Picher, Cardin, and Treece found work and high wages
but also crude, barely governed camps. Unlike in many other single-industry areas, these were not company towns with employer-provided services. Mining companies built offices, a church, and initially a few bunkhouses to accommodate the newcomers. For medical care, Eagle-Picher employed one doctor, Lee Connell, who oversaw the construction of a thirty-bed hospital in 1917. Otherwise, companies rented out unused plots of leased land for all private construction, business or residential. They retained the right to demolish any structures with thirty days’ notice if the rented land was needed for mining work. The companies built no housing themselves and provided no infrastructure such as water or sewer systems, which, according to one report, “produced a typical frontier mining camp.” People who moved to the field built houses on these plots, which were atop and around active mines. Most houses had no foundation and only a shallow drop toilet in the yard. People bought drinking water from delivery trucks that came once a week. They stored it outdoors in large barrels. In 1917, an Oklahoma City reporter found almost 8,000 people living in Picher in houses like these, “of the shack character.” The following year, an American Zinc official said Picher had “the worst living conditions I have ever seen.” These conditions persisted. “The town is unlike other towns,” a 1919 survey declared, “in that there are only the poor or tenement sections.” In 1920, another observer found homes “very much below standards found in similar mining communities.” People had no incentive to build for permanence. Eagle-Picher evicted tenants as its operations grew. “Of course I can only want a shack,” one miner explained in 1920. “If the mining company wants to put a shaft under my front door, or a tailing pile on the kitchen stoop, then I’ve got to move. Even if there were sewers and a water system I wouldn’t want to connect with them,” he concluded, because the company could evict him any time. “If I owned hell and Picher,” one resident joked in 1918, “I would rent out Picher.”

Some miners resisted permanent relocation. In 1923, about half of the men who worked in the Picher field returned on weekends to family homes in Webb City, Joplin, and Galena. After the extension of the interurban line, miners could make the trip in an hour and fifteen minutes for ninety cents each way. They lived in boardinghouses or rented a house with other miners during the week. These commuters wanted to hold on to the better living conditions they had in communities that offered amenities such as schools, churches, leisure activities, and municipal water and sewer connections as well as affordable, frequent trolley service to Joplin, still the fourth-largest city in Missouri, with over 29,000 residents. These communities were also awake to the silicosis crisis. Webb City opened a public hospital for lung disease patients in 1918, a direct result of union and middle-class campaigns.
earlier in the decade. By then, however, most of the mining jobs were in the Picher field.14

In Oklahoma, miners sought individual incentives on terms that ignored health and safety considerations. Eagle-Picher and other companies tied all wages, whether hourly or piece rate, to the market-based sliding scale. With ore prices at historic highs, the sliding scale encouraged heedless work practices. Eagle-Picher, Commerce Mining, and other Oklahoma companies operated with “no safety devices,” according to the state factory inspector in 1920, despite investing in state-of-the-art processing mills. Miners descended to the bottom of shafts, often 250 or 300 feet deep, in open, free-swinging tubs with no guards or catches. Only the Anna Beaver Mining Company used cages, not tubs, which a leading engineer sarcastically deemed “an innovation here.” Companies did not run water supplies to the machine drills or sink dedicated ventilation shafts, despite the Lanza and Higgins report about the dust danger. Machine men and others were allowed to work with shovelers below them, which made for constant danger from rock falls. No one seemed hurried to operate differently. They did not have to. Oklahoma state mine inspection law did not explicitly cover zinc and lead mines until 1929. The state’s three assistant inspectors focused their efforts on the coal district over 100 miles away until 1927, when the state appointed a fourth assistant inspector to cover the Picher field. Meanwhile, accident and death rates soared above the averages in all other American metal mines. Yet according to one resident, “with lush profits and top wages, no one was concerned with health measures, least of all the miners.”15

Courted with good wages, miners again indulged a reckless ethic that valorized male aggression as the means to high pay and social respect. The shovelers led the way. “Straining every muscle for hours under the earth, working in an atmosphere of rock dust thrown off by the drills,” according to a journalist visiting in 1916, they “worked in a veritable fury under the stimulus of extra pay.” Like many before them, these “raw boned natives” cast aside concern and caution, abandoning unions and reform, to pursue big pay “with nothing but a pair of arms and a shovel and a strong back.” Four years later, an observer noted, shovelers remained “the central cog and upon which the whole underground work rests.”16 Those who came from the Missouri field, particularly the experienced shovelers, needed no introduction to the district’s stories about the power of hard work. The new field also attracted young men who had never mined before. Many sons of miners took their first job in the Picher field. Others came from regional farms. Tony McTeer moved to Picher in 1919 at age twenty from near Sparta in Christian County, Missouri. He had struggled to make a living as a farmhand.
since being orphaned in 1913. The newcomers were all attracted by the immediate prospect of high pay. Men predominated in the camps, making up two-thirds of the population in the early 1920s. According to a local historian, miners “in those early years were little concerned about the future safeguards or future practices.”

As they had in the sheet ground, young miners reveled in the physicality of their work. Charles Chesnut got his first job as a “screen ape,” breaking boulders with a hammer in a mill. He went to bed exhausted at 4:30 P.M. after his first day but could soon “bust boulders all day and was in excellent shape.” Just as in Webb City and Joplin, the shovelers exceeded with entrepreneurial brawn. The local press celebrated their productivity. “It has been common knowledge,” the King Jack claimed, “that western miners are not efficient in the matter of shoveling compared to those of the Tri-State,” whose “tonnage is something enormous compared with that of other fields.” The shovelers awed Charles Morris Mills with their “characteristic energy” when he came to Picher in early 1920 to investigate conditions on behalf of the Interchurch World Movement, an ecumenical organization that briefly sought to solve industrial problems with Christian principles. When Mills asked for explanations, a mine boss told him, “Well, they’re naturally hard workers, being good Americans, and we pay ’em damn high wages.” Mills was scared of them. He considered the miners “uncompromising and almost unapproachable,” under the sway of what he called a “feverish unsteadiness” that was “distinctly hideous.”

Miners understood their claim on the incentives of the sliding scale as a function of white nationalist privilege, a benefit of Americanism. They defended it by insisting on the exclusion of foreign-born and African American workers, who they feared would work for less. We “want this to be a white man’s camp,” a miner called Mac bluntly told Mills. They succeeded. Picher “is an All-American camp, and no foreign labor is tolerated by the miners,” a visitor recorded in 1920. “Negroes are conspicuous by their absence, and are not wanted in any capacity,” another visitor noted. Workers actively policed the “unwritten law” that kept them out. Mac explained that during the 1919 Kansas coal strike “some dirty Austrians and hunkies tried to work here.” “Before you could say Jack Robinson,” he recalled, “there was a gang ridin’ ’em out in box cars right back to Kansas.” Their deep-rooted xenophobia and racism had grown stronger as exclusionary Americanism intensified in the years after the war, when leading politicians forcefully advocated immigration restrictions and white vigilantes unleashed staggering levels of violence against African Americans, especially in the 1921 massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Mining companies did not resist their demands for exclusion.
The masthead of the *King Jack*, a newspaper that relied on company favor, plainly announced who was welcome and who was not: “No foreigners; No niggers, but a class of citizens who respect the Flag of our country.” Of the 41,108 people who lived in Ottawa County in 1920, there were only 377 born outside of the United States and eighteen African Americans. Ten years later, only 252 foreign-born people and two African Americans remained. None of them lived in Picher.19

While not new, this emphasis on racial and national exclusion reinforced a resurgent antipathy to unions in the Picher field. The Wilson administration’s campaign against domestic radicals during the war and after, alongside the new threat of Bolshevism, gave these antagonisms new life. “We don’t want no Bolos or I. W. W.’s or labor grafters who steal the pot before the draw,” Mac told Mills. Some miners had joined the WFM in 1915 because it promised to protect white national dominance in the field. But now, Mac claimed, “we don’t have to have no union to keep out the greasers.” They could do it themselves with vigilante violence. Mining companies acceded to demands for racist exclusion, despite chronic labor shortages, as a means to forestall potential union appeals. The *King Jack* gave voice to this informal pact when it lambasted foreign coal miners for striking in 1919. “These ‘foreign borns’ prior to coming to the good old U.S. were willing to work long hours for a miserable pittance,” claimed Frank Hills, mining editor of the *King Jack*, “yet when they are cared for in this land of the free, their stomachs filled, their bodies clothed, a few dollars to jingle in their pockets, they become more autocratic than any despot.” When the IWW blocked a train of strikebreakers on their way to Pittsburg, Kansas, Hills called them “uncivilized bohunks” and a “bunch of heartless savages.” No one “had the right to say that no one should work in their place,” he added. “Unionism does not strike to get the work done and it never means better work, because better work demands greater devotion, loyalty.” In some accounts, the old alchemy of white nativity, antiunionism, and aspirational common interests crept into descriptions of the new field. According to a 1921 report deeply informed by local leaders, “many of the operators and practically all the superintendents were once just common miners, who raised themselves step by step, as an intelligent native American will do when given the opportunity, freed from the trammels of restrictive unionism and the poison of specious propaganda.” The idea remained powerful. Mention unions to a Picher miner, Mills said, and “he will immediately brand you as a ‘Red’ and mark you for deportation.”20

Despite living as tenants on leased land, miners increasingly looked to settle in Ottawa County. Picher’s residents incorporated the camp as a
town in 1918. They elected a mayor and board of trustees. The new govern-
ment raised money for schools, new sidewalks, and electricity service. As
more miners moved their families to Ottawa County, businesses expanded.
In 1920, Picher’s residents tried to buy some of the leased land the town
occupied so that banks would loan more money for further development.
To help, Congress had passed a law in late 1919 that allowed the secretary
of the Interior to unilaterally sell Quapaw allotments for townsites.
The mining companies objected. They argued that any transfer of property
would infringe on their leasehold rights and impede mining development.\textsuperscript{21}

As Picher’s residents pushed back, they voiced new opposition to com-
pany authority that used the camp’s valorization of dangerous work and as-
sertions of nativist privilege to claim decent living conditions. “What we are
striving for is to protect our selves, a great population who has to live here to
make up a city, inhabited by the very ones who work for the operators and go
into the ground and face death every day to take out the ore,” petitioners in-
formed the commissioner of Indian affairs. “The miners like all other people
like to live close to the work,” they concluded, “they also like the same rights
under which to live that other American citizens enjoy.” In 1921, they struck
a deal with the blessing of the secretary of the Interior, Albert Fall. The min-
ing companies allowed the sale of eighty acres for town development and
received in exchange a ten-year extension on all other leases, thousands of
acres in total. Companies retained the right to evict anyone from leased land.
With that compromise, Picher continued to grow, albeit in an uneven fash-
on that left the town perpetually disfigured: while a regular street grid took
shape in its eastern half, its western half gave way to growing chat piles that
pushed everything else aside.\textsuperscript{22}

Picher remained a rough town that catered to the unrestrained appetites
of young working-class men. Although Oklahoma was dry, local bootleg-
gers supplied several illicit bars, where miners drank alcohol with impunity.
Local police did not enforce prohibition law, state or national. Pool halls,
gambling houses, and brothels also violated state law to serve local work-
ers. None hid. All of the brothels in Picher were on the same street, known
locally as “chippy town.” “If a tent were stretched over the entire town of
Picher,” one resident recalled, “it would constitute a giant bawdy house, not
to mention other vices thrown in for good measure.”\textsuperscript{23}

Many women saw opportunities in the new camps and supplied the emo-
tional and physical labor that created and reproduced social bonds. Accord-
ing to a 1919 report, “the discovery and rapid development of the mining
field attracted a large number of women” to Ottawa County. As many as
2,000 of them were single, or “floating women.” They looked for work, ex-

\textit{Red-Blooded, Rugged Individuals} / 177
citement, and possibly a spouse. Women ran and labored in boardinghouses, and some worked as prostitutes. They cleaned, cooked, and washed clothes for money. Most of the camp’s adult women were married, however, especially by the 1920s. Wives and daughters of miners performed domestic labor: mending, cleaning, cooking, raising children, and perhaps keeping chickens for eggs and meat. Some also catered to boarders who rented out spare or partitioned rooms. The wives of miners took great pride in preparing lunch for their husbands. As Iva Simpson recalled, they packed the food in big tin dinner buckets, with coffee on the bottom, a center tray with two cups for “scrambled eggs, chicken and noodles, beans, soup, corn, or whatever she had on hand … with room to stuff a couple of biscuits between,” and a shallow tray on top that “held slabs of pie or cake, thick slices of homemade bread and butter and a spoon.” Many women sold lunches like these to single men. “The man whose wife packed a good bucket was the envy of the crew,” Simpson recalled. He would have “bachelors, tired of boarding fare, beating a path to his door to ask his wife to fix buckets. Many a housewife did a good business packing buckets.”

Many women relished the achievements of Picher, despite the struggle. “There was so much work” in the early days, Mrs. B., the wife of a Picher miner, recalled, “that people rushed in here and started to get at it before they even had a roof over ’em…. Everybody that come here then had to work hard but they didn’t complain none.” She delivered her husband’s lunch to the mine herself. “I’d put on my big rubber boots an’ with the bucket in one hand an’ the baby in the other, off I’d go.” She liked the sense of contributing to something dynamic. “Watchin’ the new mills go up an’ the new mines go down wuz as excitin’ as watchin’ kids grow,” Mrs. B. said, “an’ everything wuz like that—growin’ over night, an’ the people felt like they wuz part of it.”

As wartime nationalism emboldened working people’s claim on the district’s prosperity, the federal government helped mining companies consolidate control of the industry. Eager to smooth production, Pope Yeatman, chair of the nonferrous metals section of the War Industries Board, urged mining and smelting companies in early 1918 to form an industrial association. Such associations became increasingly common during the war, as the board effectively waived antitrust regulations to promote the rationalization of private businesses and discourage ruinous competition. Mining companies in the Tri-State district had barely cooperated with one another since the Missouri and Kansas Zinc Miners’ Association collapsed in 1906. American Zinc had dominated the district in the decade that followed. The opening of the Picher field, however, called for more industry organization. With Yeatman’s
blessing, mining and smelting firms from Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma formed the American Zinc Institute (AZI) in late 1918. Eagle-Picher, Commerce Mining, and American Zinc all took part, as did a number of smaller companies. For Tri-State firms, association promised not just a means to industry stability but also a way to impose order in the district.26

The AZI drew on company networks established in response to government-backed efforts in 1915 to address the district’s tuberculosis crisis. Initially neglected by Oklahoma operators, the Southwest Missouri Mine Safety and Sanitation Association relocated to Picher in 1918 under a new name, the Tri-State Mines Safety and Sanitation Association, and a new leader, Eagle-Picher’s A. E. Bendelari. In April 1919, the association reorganized as the Tri-State AZI chapter. Richard Jenkins, who had served as the association’s founding secretary, became the secretary-treasurer of its latest iteration. The chapter inherited its predecessor’s health initiatives, if not its priorities, including the new Webb City sanitarium. It also took control of the Picher hospital. In line with the new Republican administration that took power in 1921, however, the AZI chapter’s main business was business.27

Mining companies used the AZI to navigate the severe national economic crisis that hit in 1920. As war industries contracted, the price of zinc ore fell from over fifty-three dollars per ton in January to thirty-six dollars per ton in December and continued to fall through the summer of 1921 to around twenty-one dollars per ton, the lowest price since 1897. AZI chapter members negotiated district-wide shutdowns in June and again in October 1920; all cut wages. The district produced only 313,569 tons of zinc ore in 1921, down from over 569,000 tons in 1920. While the collapse strained family economies and local charities to the breaking point, the AZI chapter stepped in to provide respite through a central relief committee. The committee raised over $5,000 for this “welfare work.” The committee bought credit at local grocery stores and issued it as vouchers to unemployed miners who agreed to repair county roads in exchange. Only miners with dependents were eligible, and they could redeem the vouchers only for food. Officials claimed that miners agreed with these measures. Not everyone did. Some men left the district. Meanwhile, AZI representatives in Washington used the example of unemployed Picher miners to lobby for higher zinc tariffs. The Fordney-McCumber Tariff, signed in 1922, more than doubled rates on imported zinc.28

There were still limits to AZI unity and authority. As the economy recovered, AZI firms colluded to try to prevent wages from returning to pre-recession highs. They rehired miners in 1922 at relatively modest rates: three
dollars per day and eight cents per can. As prices continued to climb, miners demanded raises in accordance with the now customary sliding scale. When companies resisted, a few dozen miners launched a wildcat strike at two small mines. Both companies, Chanute Spelter and Kanok Metal, quickly conceded raises of twenty-five cents per day and the miners went back to work. Unwilling to incite further strikes, most other companies gave similar small raises. Miners had defended the sliding-scale principle as production rebounded in 1922 to 524,265 tons of zinc ore worth over $31.3 million, a sharp rise from the previous year’s sales of $11.2 million.29

The AZI chapter’s concern with labor costs refocused attention on the physical health of miners and their families. Conditions in Ottawa County remained grim. “Many communicable diseases were epidemic, especially smallpox,” the county health superintendent reported in 1921, due to “filth and over-crowding.” According to his survey, “venereal disease was very prevalent” and “the tuberculosis rate was many times the state average, due largely to the silicosis which is so prevalent in all zinc and lead mines.” Charles Morris Mills reported similar findings. His 1921 account described tens of thousands of “Americans, working amid highly dangerous surroundings, living in filth and disease, purely individualistic and lacking the commonest incentives for decency.” He blamed the operators, whose failure to provide for the public welfare had let ideas of “individualism and freedom” run rampant among the workers, who in turn “developed an utter irresponsibility in regard to living and housing conditions.” Even if mining companies had no social conscience, he admonished, they should at least recognize the business costs of a perpetually sick and injured workforce. “The problem here is to Americanize Americans,” Mills quipped. Richard Jenkins agreed. In 1921 he advised the AZI chapter to expand its “welfare work” to include permanent community medical services at the Picher hospital. Like A. J. Lanza and Edwin Higgins, who had conducted a field study on miner’s consumption in Missouri, Jenkins believed that companies had to act because the miners would never better themselves. “They apparently give no thought as to the future,” Jenkins mused. He assured his AZI colleagues that a “humanitarian” welfare program also made good business sense because it would result in “shortening the time of our sick and injured in getting back on the job and, in a general way, also in increased efficiency.” The AZI chapter gave Jenkins money to open a free clinic and nurse service.30

Jenkins’s initiative drew on the support of federal government agencies that were also concerned with the district’s health crisis. In the summer of 1918, a U.S. Army doctor investigated the alarming rates of venereal disease found in soldiers from the Tri-State. That fall, government officials from
all three states worked with the PHS to establish a federal sanitation district in the area. Jenkins, who chaired the Jasper County PHS committee, was involved. The PHS began administering these districts in 1916 to create sustainable county-level health services in rural areas with vital war industries. The PHS created the Tri-State Sanitary District in January 1919 and sent Royd Sayers, an army doctor, to make an initial survey. In July, the PHS stationed Thomas Parran, a commissioned assistant surgeon, in Joplin to begin the work. Under Parran’s leadership, the project gave immunizations, ran prenatal clinics, treated venereal infections, and built over 3,500 sanitary privies across the three counties. The project also employed a full-time health officer in Ottawa County. Parran hoped that the officer, “in addition to dealing with general health problems, would carry out some intensive work with miners on silicosis.” Although Parran was reassigned elsewhere in 1921, the PHS continued to fund the county health units. The Ottawa County service, however, could not handle the scale of the growing silicosis problem.

In 1922 the AZI chapter asked the U.S. Bureau of Mines to commission a study to further explore the causes of the disease in the Picher field. Sayers, now the bureau’s chief surgeon, consented. According to Parran, who briefed Sayers on the situation, the mine operators believed “that the deaths were occurring largely among miners who previously had worked in the old (Webb City) field” and were not due to their operating practices. His surveys, however, showed that more than half of those afflicted had only ever worked in the Picher field. Sayers dispatched a team of mining engineers and doctors, led by Daniel Harrington and Richard Ageton, to Picher in February 1923. Eagle-Picher provided them two rooms in its headquarters for the work and lodging at the company’s staff boardinghouse. During eight months of research, Harrington and Ageton visited forty-six mines in Ottawa County and examined 309 miners.

Their study concluded that miners were developing new cases of silicosis at the same rate that Lanza and Higgins had observed in Webb City in 1915. One-third of the miners they examined had silicosis, and another third showed early-stage symptoms. The investigators blamed both the companies and the miners. They found miners drilling, blasting, and shoveling in totally dry conditions with no water provided to mitigate dust and no ventilation systems in place to clear the air. What surprised Harrington and Ageton was that miners did not demand safety measures. “Many seem willing to take precautions when their attention is called to them, many do not know how to protect themselves and again a large number, even a large percentage, seem indifferent, even fatalistic, and will take precautions only if compelled to do so,” they reported.
Why did so many miners resist measures to improve air quality? They had known that dust caused deadly lung disease since the 1900s. What miners rejected was the means of dust abatement, particularly the water soaking of underground workings. When miners voiced objections, they explained that wet drilling and wet ore piles made the work slower and more difficult. Shovelers disliked wet ore because it clumped together and was heavier, which reduced the number of cans they could load. They also claimed that wet workings gave them other diseases, such as pneumonia or rheumatism, an inflammatory disease that stiffened joints and weakened muscles. Harrington and Ageton reported that miners expressed a preference “to die of miners consumption from the dry drills rather than of rheumatism.” Tri-State miners understood the risk of silicosis but resisted precautions, especially those pushed by government doctors and mining companies, that threatened the relationship between their self-conception as physically strong, unrestrained men and their earning power.34

The federal team recommended that mining companies take “drastic” steps to address the crisis. These should include “the establishment of up-to-date equipment and practices underground” as well as a thorough education campaign. Once companies took these steps, the team declared, it was crucial that “the proper supervision and discipline be maintained to make the original effort effective.” The ultimate success of such a campaign against silicosis, in other words, depended on company willingness to compel obedience from miners and others who resisted. The investigators advised mining companies to coordinate the campaign through the AZI chapter.35

The team also noted very high injury rates. Harrington and Ageton again asserted that ultimate responsibility for safe working conditions rested with the companies. “There is not any coordinated and controlled safety work in the district,” Ageton reported to George Rice, the chief engineer of the Bureau of Mines, “nor do any of the companies pay a great deal of attention to accident prevention and care of injuries other than the trimming of the roofs in the stope and making the hookers wear trench helmets.” Their report recommended a series of safety measures.36

Linking safety and health, they suggested that miners with lung diseases, especially those in demanding jobs like shoveling, were more likely to get hurt on the job. The team urged companies to require miners to have a physical examination every six months, a recommendation based on studies of medical screening in South African gold mines. Men with damaged lungs should be encouraged to leave the mines. “Such an examination would also be of advantage to the employee,” Ageton concluded in a separate report, “as it would show them their physical defects and most certainly men do not
want to work at an occupation for which they are physically unfitted and thereby shorten their life.”

The federal investigators showed companies that greater control of workers in the mines would reduce operating costs, most directly in terms of insurance expenses. Concerns over the cost of liability insurance had never been far from company efforts to increase mine safety, especially in Missouri where workers could sue. Oklahoma passed a workmen’s compensation law in 1915, however, that created a binding system of compensation for accidents that followed a set schedule of monetary awards decided upon and administered by a state industrial commission. Meant to eliminate costly adversarial court cases, the law required companies in hazardous industries to purchase commercial compensation insurance or show the financial wherewithal to insure themselves. Many smaller companies bought compensation policies; larger companies, such as Eagle-Picher, self-insured. As mining accidents increased along with production, however, insurance premiums increased—by 50 percent between 1921 and 1923. Many insurance companies stopped issuing new policies in 1923. Metropolitan Life Insurance Company raised premiums by another 10 percent and established its own private “mine inspection service and medical supervision” office to monitor working conditions. The federal team believed that its medical exams would help companies screen out men who represented higher insurance liability risks, such as those with silicosis and old injuries, especially to body parts that merited high compensation payments, such as arms, hands, legs, feet, and eyes. In turn, insurance companies would lower premiums.

Mining companies strengthened their cooperation in response to the recommendations. In late 1923, the field’s smaller companies established their own association, the Tri-State Zinc and Lead Ore Producers Association (OPA), based in Picher. The OPA acted quickly to address the “very large burden upon the district of compensation charges.” It hired Ageton to run a campaign to reduce accidents and improve the health of mining families. Beginning in early 1924, he created and circulated a statistical register of all accidents. He also promoted the use of mining helmets as well as enhanced ventilation and wet drilling to reduce dust and “the silicosis-tuberculosis evil.” Although Eagle-Picher, Commerce Mining, and other big companies did not join the OPA, these firms cooperated with and funded Ageton’s campaign through the AZI chapter. To convince miners to cooperate, Ageton advised company officials to speak of the safety program in terms of only humanitarianism, not labor costs. “We should do all that is possible to make the men in the mines and their families feel that this is their accident prevention campaign,” Ageton said, “and that it will be to their physical and fi-

Red-Blooded, Rugged Individuals / 183
nancial advantage to cooperate in every way.” That summer, the AZI chapter and the OPA asked the Bureau of Mines to send Frederick Flinn, an industrial toxicologist from the 1923 study, to continue silicosis research in the district. Working in AZI facilities, Flinn opened a small clinic for examining miners for lung injuries in late 1924.39

Better organized and backed by federal agencies, Tri-State mining companies flourished once more as the economy roared to life. In 1923, district firms produced over 688,000 tons of zinc ore and 111,000 tons of lead mineral worth more than $38.4 million combined, the richest year in Tri-State history. They did even better in 1924: 740,569 tons of zinc ore and 118,770 tons of lead mineral, worth more than $43.3 million combined, all district records. Eagle-Picher reported a profit that year of more than $3 million. These gains relied on the hard labor of the district’s 8,000 miners, about 3,000 of whom were shovelers. In 1924, the richest year in district history, these men moved over 12.4 million tons of crude ore by hand with the undimmed expectation that they might reap some of the rewards. They certainly bore the costs. Ageton’s first accident survey revealed that shovelers received over 51 percent of all injuries in the mines. Earlier research already confirmed that they, along with machine men, suffered the highest rates of silicosis. Any widespread effort by mining companies to reduce either accidents or lung disease would have to confront these men.40

As prosperity returned, miners and their families grew restless for their share. The operators’ associations, meanwhile, expanded production cautiously to avoid an ore glut. Some companies put workers on a five-day week, while others closed operations for a week every two or three months. “It was just about the first time on record that producers in this field have indicated intelligence enough to unite on a program,” the Joplin Globe observed in late 1923. For miners, these strategies created continual uncertainty about available work and kept earnings below the level of a full, six-day workweek. Despite company commitment to the sliding scale, pay stagnated: $3.50 to $4.00 per day for machine men, the highest earners, and 10.0 to 10.5 cents a can for shovelers. Poor living conditions compounded their frustrations. Residents of Ottawa County experienced overall mortality and infant mortality rates that not only were the highest in the state in the mid-1920s but were two or three times the state average. Mining families had come to Picher for high wages and now they wanted a better quality of life. They wanted to live how they thought white Americans deserved to live in the prosperous 1920s. Instead, their lives were getting worse. Faced with increasingly powerful operators, some turned for help to the AFL’s state affili-
ate, the Oklahoma State Federation of Labor (OFL). But as Picher’s miners looked to restore the balance of power, most could not deny the promises of their poor man’s entrepreneurial tradition, promises that made it hard to imagine unions, even conservative ones, as vehicles of prosperity.41

Since the demise of the Mine Mill locals in 1916, district miners had shown little interest in organizations outside of the political mainstream. At the ballot box, they split votes more or less evenly between Democratic and Republican candidates. Democrats won in Ottawa County in 1916 and 1918, although Republicans ran ahead of their vote elsewhere in Oklahoma before sweeping the county in 1920. In the gubernatorial election of 1922, Oklahoma elected a champion of white working-class interests, John C. Walton, under the banner of the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League, a consortium of Socialists, United Mine Workers of America (UMW) and AFL members, and liberal Democrats. Walton won Ottawa County but only by 93 votes out of over 8,200 cast. He got less support than the Democratic candidate for Congress, who won the county by 420 votes. Two years later, Republican candidates for president and senate won Ottawa County again. Meanwhile, some miners might have joined the Ku Klux Klan, but middle-class people dominated its nearest groups in Miami and Joplin. By contrast, Homer Wear, an organizer for the IWW’s Metal Mine Workers, a union formed in Butte in 1917 to rival Mine Mill, canvassed the district in the summer of 1923. He elicited little interest beyond the Picher police, who arrested him on charges of criminal syndicalism. Although presented with a wide range of political ideas and organizations after 1915, the field’s mining communities registered little collective enthusiasm for any.42

As miners watched company profits rise in 1923 while their wages remained flat, some sought assistance from the OFL’s ambitious new leader, Ira Finley. Late that year, he “received letters from lead and zinc miners telling of the conditions in the fields and urgent need for unionism.” Finley, a Socialist, took them seriously. Just elected, he promoted an aggressive new organizing drive at a time when AFL unions nationally were in full retreat as employers pressed a new antunion open-shop strategy called the American Plan. In the missives from Picher, Finley sensed a chance to establish a new union beachhead that could buttress the OFL’s strongest contingent, the dozens of UMW locals in the coalfields of southeastern Oklahoma. He referred the requests for assistance to Mine Mill’s office in Denver. Although still an AFL affiliate, Mine Mill barely existed in 1924. The union had not held a convention, published Miners Magazine, or paid organizers since 1921. It claimed a few thousand members at most, mainly in Montana. Not long after Finley’s letter arrived in Denver, however, Charles Moyer, still Mine
Mill president, dispatched John Turney, a longtime board member, to north-eastern Oklahoma. Turney arrived in March 1924, and Finley soon joined him. John J. Beggs, a Picher miner and former UMW member, helped orient them; he likely had written one of the initial letters to Finley. By the end of the month, against all odds, these three had organized five new Mine Mill locals: Treece 130, Picher 134, Hockerville 136, Cardin 138, and Commerce 139. Although conducted under the banner of Mine Mill, their campaign was really led by the OFL, which respected the economic and racial views of Tri-State miners perhaps more than any union ever to enter the district.43

Turney and Finley declared that Mine Mill and the OFL would help miners gain the benefits of true Americanism. In speeches to mass meetings of hundreds of miners and their families, they said Mine Mill was “being organized along the conservative American labor movement lines.” The organizers emphasized their primary aims to raise wages and improve working conditions. They also criticized the social problems that plagued mining communities, particularly the effects of silicosis and the consequences of poor housing and the constant threat of evictions. Turney and Finley assured those who listened that as key workers in a profitable American industry they deserved better. The organizers reported serious and eager audiences. “Having tasted of the ‘glorious benefits’ of the so-called ‘open shop’ ‘American plan,’” Finley informed readers of the Oklahoma Federationist, “they know that it is the most un-American plan ever devised by the evil mind of an industrial exploiter and they are determined to have no more of it.”44

Turney and Finley heralded the union as the true champion of white, native-born Americans by showcasing its robust support for the new immigration restriction legislation then up for debate in Congress. Finley reported that Tri-State miners “are enthusiastically supporting the Johnson immigration bill,” a law that proposed to set very low immigration quotas based on national origin, with a particular eye to excluding people from southern and eastern Europe deemed racially unfit. According to him, they understood that more arrivals “from the pauperized nations of Europe” would “drop this country into the same bottomless pit into which those countries have fallen.” The OFL’s nativist assertions reflected broad support for the legislation, which passed the house on April 12, among union affiliates in Oklahoma and the AFL more generally. Finley featured it in most of his stump speeches; the Oklahoma Federationist reprinted Samuel Gompers’s letter in support on its front page. To Tri-State audiences, however, these invocations had powerful effects. Positioning the union as a nativist bulwark, Turney and Finley affirmed the long-held racist claims of Picher miners on the district and its profits. Perhaps that was necessary if the OFL campaign had
any chance in Ottawa County in 1924. In the long term, however, the OFL’s anti-immigration campaign fed local working-class hatreds that had always decimated efforts to build solidarity there. Moyer had tacitly accepted this strategy in 1915. While it had failed then, the OFL hoped it might work now. Picher miners “are all American-born white men,” Finley explained, and “are being organized in the open, like real American citizens should be organized.” Beggs hoped that their commitment to the “ideals of Americanism” would “never weaken.”

While union activists reaffirmed the racism and nativism of Tri-State miners, they challenged them to abide union standards of manly responsibility to others. They appealed especially to men with wives and children. Only through collective bargaining, Finley asserted, could “they benefit themselves and their families.” Mine Mill and the OFL were unions of breadwinners, they argued. Men who chose solidarity and responsibility would not only gain higher wages but also reorient their families around the American standard of living and its associated gender roles. Through collective bargaining, Beggs contended, miners with families could show employers that earnings of twenty-four dollars per week for skilled workers were insufficient when the cost of living in Picher was that or more. Paid at or below his “cost of production,” Beggs explained, a miner had “nothing left for clothing for himself and family unless the stomach pays for it. There is nothing left for medicine or doctor; nothing for needed amusements, such as picture shows and picnics.” “We have every confidence,” the OFL declared, “that the new organizations will accomplish wonderful things for the miners, their wives and children.”

Union organizers had harsh words, however, for men who believed that they could get ahead on their own, a risky criticism that confronted the district’s primary male tradition. In public speeches, Finley “placed the blame for the conditions of the miners solely and squarely upon the miners themselves.” “They could have solved their own problems” if they had joined the union earlier, he declared. Everywhere Finley touted the costs of their failure: “unjust conditions,” “miserable houses,” and “a considerable number of men suffering from” silicosis. The “victims” of the disease “stalk around looking at the world out of hollow, sunken eyes from which all hope has fled,” he wrote. Beggs also lacerated the miners for their pursuit of self-interest over everything else. He claimed that children “who die for lack of sufficient food and medical care” go to their deaths believing “Daddy’s so big and strong, can do just anything.” But in the end, Beggs scolded, the children “must tell the God they return to, that Daddy failed them, that he cared more for a soulless corporation than he did for them.” “Men of the Tri-State, the remedy
is in your hands,” he concluded. “May God deal unto you as you deal unto yours, me and mine.” Unlike Ageton and the operators, who thought the miners were too ignorant or fatalistic to care for themselves, the OFL organizers understood that their behavior reflected stubborn attachments to the individual rewards of brutal male power. The union called on Picher men to restrain themselves, to admit their vulnerabilities and accept the need for safety, for the benefit of their families. Whatever these men feared losing in terms of individual opportunity and respect, the union would make up for with new collective strength.47

As responsible union men, OFL organizers argued, Tri-State miners should serve as partners with the companies to make district production more beneficial for all. “These men are not joining the union with the purpose in view of antagonizing their employers,” the Oklahoma Federationist explained, “but for the purpose of solving the many problems that confront the zinc mining fields.” In public rallies, Finley “dwelt upon the necessity of every group of people being organized,” the paper reported, with an appeal to the new 1920s idea of “regulatory unionism” whereby unions offered to help companies make production more rational and profitable. Finley went further to publicly denounce strikes and anyone who advocated them. “In my talks,” he wrote, “I am warning the miners against heeding the agitators who will attempt to bring about a strike. We do not want these people to fall into a strike trap that will probably be set by some enemy of their cause.” The OFL did not rule out strikes altogether but rather urged members to consider direct action only as “a last resort when all other methods of adjustment have failed.” While these warnings seemed to recall the lessons of past conflicts, Finley and Turney also seemed sincere when they instructed new members that successful union “organization is a business proposition.”48

Many miners joined the union that summer. Mine Mill added six more locals: Douthat 140, Baxter Springs 143, Quapaw 144, Galena 146, Miami 153, and Zincville 155. In June these locals organized a central leadership group called the Tri-State Council. At its height, the council claimed 1,000 or more members. Picher 134 was the largest local, with over 250 members, although the Treece, Douthat, and Cardin locals each boasted over 100 members. According to industry observers, they met regularly, collected dues, and took in new members. The Engineering and Mining Journal predicted in June “that in the near future every worker will be asked to show his union card when he appears for work at the mine in the morning.”49

Women gave Mine Mill conspicuous public support because organizers explicitly addressed the problems facing families. During one of Finley’s speeches in Picher, a miner’s wife handed him “a large bouquet of roses with
her compliments for the work we are doing.” After the talk, he reported, “a number of miners’ wives, some with babes in their arms and all with smiles on their toil-worn faces, came forward to shake hands with” him and Turney and to thank them. Women also organized picnics and dinners to bring the families of union members together. The “big dinner” they held on Labor Day was especially notable. “Can you imagine it,” remarked Ed Dunivin, secretary of Local 140, “a Labor Day celebration in the zinc fields; the very first one within my knowledge, and I have been here twenty years.” No longer so excited by the mining camps as Mrs. B. had been, these women saw the union as a way to fix or escape the district’s shoddy housing, high rates of diseases, and general insecurity. Women bore the brunt of these conditions, as they stretched to make household finances work, struggled to raise and care for children, and faced down the looming threat that their husbands would be killed on the job or get hurt or sick with silicosis. They were also eager to enjoy prosperity. Some women organized their husbands themselves. Beggs lamented that many families could not afford a trip to the Devil’s Promenade, a popular picnic spot on a bluff overlooking the Spring River a few miles east of Picher. Rather, according to Beggs, “the Devil’s Promenade for the miner with a family in the Tri-State means catching the devil from his wife as she promenades an unsanitary, poorly provisioned kitchen.” Beggs’s line acknowledged that women were making demands on men to do something to improve their lives, often enough, it seems, for his joke to make sense. Crucially, the woman here not only expected more from her life but also blamed her husband, at least in part, for their condition.50

The Tri-State Council struggled, however, over safety and health policy. After a springtime of organizing speeches, the union made its first foray into action with letters of complaint to the state mine inspector. These complaints targeted alleged violations of the mine safety law. While the council seemed united around the need to reduce mining accidents, which could be easily blamed on the companies, it said nothing about dust abatement or other means of reducing silicosis. The council’s only resolution at the OFL convention in Muskogee in September sounded the alarm about lung disease in the district but offered a curiously weak solution. Citing Ageton’s research, it declared that “alarming conditions exist” in the Tri-State “relative to Tuberculosis,” which “by its very nature causes great poverty to the families stricken.” Rather than use this prime opportunity to rally OFL support for stricter regulation of mine air, the council instead asked the state to build a tuberculosis hospital in Ottawa County “for the taking care of these men.” The closest one was in Talihina, over 150 miles away. The resolution did not mention any of the now well-known federal recommendations for

Red-Blooded, Rugged Individuals  /  189
dust abatement or indeed that dust caused lung disease. Stranger yet, the council identified tuberculosis as the problem, not silicosis or miner’s consumption, both terms then in wide circulation. No one in the union, meanwhile, questioned the health effects of the shovelers’ piece rate or the sliding scale. The council sought to protect the welfare of the families of sick miners and to provide palliative care for sick men but not to mitigate the conditions that caused the disease. While miners may have mistrusted the motives of government doctors, they also seemed unwilling to trust union organizers whose message echoed the recommendations of the doctors. Mine Mill had made partial progress but could not convince the men who joined it, let alone the thousands who did not, to abandon the culture of physical risk taking that guided their pursuit of individual piece rates.51

Despite Mine Mill’s assertions of conservatism, companies opposed the union. “The mines of the Tri-State district have always been operated on the open shop plan,” a company notice declared in July 1924, and would “operate on that basis in the future.” Rather than start with punitive measures, the companies sought to seduce miners with assurances of white social equality and promises that the good times would return if they rejected the union. “The miners of this district are the best class of labor ever found in any mining district,” the notice read. “Every man in the Tri-State district is as good as every other man so long as he conducts himself as a man.” This rough bon-homie survived because miners had “grown up and worked side by side” with those who became managers, bosses, and “sometimes owners.” The notice emphasized their shared language and race. “This is a white man’s district so far as the mines are concerned,” the notice stated, “and will always be kept as such.” Rest assured, the message concluded, “there is no place under the shining sun where ability, integrity and loyalty finds quicker recognition and the reward of promotion than in the zinc and lead mines of the Tri-State district.” By conjuring up the promises of the poor man’s camp, the company tempted miners to keep faith in their own self-interest and the special opportunities the district offered men like them.52

Tri-State miners were reminded of the potential rewards as a growing market for zinc and lead spurred district production toward new heights in late 1924. In the wake of the Great War, American manufacturers incorporated zinc and lead into a wide array of products, especially in fast-growing industries like cars, chemicals, and construction. These sectors boomed as consumers pursued advertisers’ promises with plentiful, cheap credit. By early 1925, the average price of zinc ore was over fifty-five dollars per ton. After holding back production with cutbacks and shutdowns, companies opened old mines and developed untapped deposits and continued to drill
for new ones. By February 1925, the OPA reported weekly ore sales of $1 million. Firms put miners back on full-time and hired more. Crucially, companies also raised wages in accord with the sliding scale. By the spring of 1925, machine men were earning five dollars per day and shovellers making 12.5 cents a can, the highest rates since the war. For many miners, the sliding scale reaffirmed both their belief in the market and in their own power. What shovellers had first demanded in 1907, and strikers had won in 1915, industry officials now trumpeted as a customary means of “profit sharing.”

Mine Mill rapidly lost members as plentiful work and high sliding-scale wages made the union seem unnecessary. In November 1924, less than eight months into the organizing campaign, Moyer sent union stalwart Emma Langdon to help Finley revive interest. She fared no better. Finley was dismayed that miners would abandon the union at the first sign of higher pay. In December, he lambasted them in an Oklahoma Federationist editorial that showed how old animosities between Tri-State miners and union organizers still cut both ways. With heavy sarcasm, Finley explained that before 1924 “they had not needed an organization because conditions were so good.” Free of foreign or radical influences, Tri-State miners had been “allowed to work for whatever they please” while their “families live in little shanties … and the children can amuse themselves by watching the ambulances pass.” A miner who did not get killed could “rest assured that he will live on an average of five years,” since “only about 90 per cent of them contract T.B. the first twenty-four months.” Finley asked who was “to blame for the miners not having an organization to sell their labor through” and answered, “It has been the fault of the stupid miner himself.” Like the federal doctors, he concluded that too many men did not want to change. Yet the OFL leader added encouragement for those still in the union. Their allegiance would prove that “a real sign of manhood has been found through the zinc fields.” As with previous union scolds, however, Finley’s harsh challenge probably lost more members than it won.

Picher miners had reason to doubt union manhood as the OFL fell into crisis in 1925. Across Oklahoma, employers harassed and weakened AFL unions. Open-shop campaigns in the coalfields decimated Oklahoma’s UMWW locals. The AFL offered no help. Gompers died in December 1924 after a long illness. His successor, William Green, a member of the AFL’s executive council and a national UMWW officer, favored cooperative relations with employers. Green did not come to the aid of the UMWW in Oklahoma. As the AFL retreated further, Finley lost control of the OFL that summer to rivals who disagreed with his strategy of organizing new workers. In Finley’s absence, Mine Mill’s threadbare national office could do nothing to sup-
port the Tri-State Council as its locals collapsed one after the other. Moyer was still isolated and powerless. By August 1925, only Cardin 138 continued to pay dues, and it stopped in January 1926. Although some members remained, Mine Mill was again dead in the Tri-State. It was barely alive anywhere. Moyer and the executive board were forced to resign in 1926; only six people attended the 1927 convention.55

As prosperity flowered, most miners forgot why they had ever needed a union. In 1925, Tri-State companies produced more than 806,000 tons of zinc ore and more than 136,000 tons of lead mineral worth a combined $57.3 million. The district had never been busier, with all firms in full production, many with two shifts. Some even opened old Missouri mines. Although average prices dipped slightly in 1926, companies produced more than 823,600 tons of zinc ore, a new record, and more than 132,000 tons of lead mineral, worth a total of $52.5 million. That year Tri-State miners produced 68 percent of the nation’s and 31 percent of the world’s total zinc ore. Wages remained high, over $4.50 per day for machine men and twelve cents a can for shovelers. With over 7,000 miners at work full-time in 1926, Ottawa County’s combined mining payroll topped $7 million, a new record. The field was again a “rich, rip-snortin’ son-of-a-gun,” one miner recalled.56

Mining families began to enjoy prosperity in Picher. They had more access to consumer goods and leisure activities. Picher’s first radio station, KGGF, began broadcasting in 1925, two years before Joplin’s first station. In 1926, construction crews completed work on U.S. Route 66 from Joplin to Miami, a path that took the iconic national highway through Picher and Cardin. Picher also boasted new cinemas and spectator sports, the most popular of which were football, baseball, and boxing. In the mid-1920s, Picher’s King Jacks baseball team began traveling to play other area teams. The community followed the success of boys’ and girls’ high school teams with avid interest. The front page of the King Jack featured high school sports news in nearly every issue from the mid-1920s onward. Mining families also enjoyed better health as the local economy improved. Ottawa County’s infant mortality rate fell by more than half.57

Picher and neighboring towns remained rough, raucous working-class places where men did what they pleased. Picher in the mid-1920s had “a lot of beer joints,” resident Lawrence Barr recalled, “a beer joint on every corner.” The town’s red-light district was busier than ever. Despite Prohibition, the police still did little to regulate these places, Barr said, because they were afraid someone would kill them. Men reveled in the hazards of their work in ways that outsiders considered selfish or destructive. According to the Engineering and Mining Journal in 1926, Tri-State miners were notorious

192 / Red-Blooded, Rugged Individuals
among safety engineers for their “cussedness,” “a general, all-around lack of principle, with utter disregard of the spirit of fairness.” When not at work they drank and fought in Picher’s bars, such as the Bucket of Blood, the Bloody Knuckle, or the Monkey Inn, and on the streets. “The hard-rock miner drank his whiskey straight,” a local historian explained, and “settled his disputes with his bare fists or a pick handle.” His was “a world of a reckless breed” and of people “as hard as the rock itself.”

Working people took collective pride in this place, with all of its grabbing, hustling, and violence. In May 1927, more than 12,000 people took to the streets of Picher to celebrate its twelfth anniversary. They joined or watched a mile-long parade, competed in games and contests, and caroused at a street dance that lasted until 1 A.M. In a commemorative booklet published for the event, town boosters lauded Picher’s residents for their strength, energy, and guts. “Now a first class city,” Charles Brown wrote, Picher “sprang into existence as a necessity instead of the result of a blue-printed utopia of an idealist. The vitality was here; the resources were here and people came before preparations were fully made to receive them.” Although the town was far from perfect, he admitted, “Picher unblushingly presents no excuse or apology for apparent delinquencies.” Frank Hills applauded their courage and defiance in terms that invoked the poor man’s camp mythology. “They left their former dwelling places because they were enterprising enough to search for better conditions,” he said. “They are red-blooded, rugged individuals, the better kind of people who are willing to sacrifice and suffer a great deal for their ideals.” Hills credited their race and nationality. “They are practically all Americans and all white,” he explained. “They boast of the complete absence of negro and South European labor and prove by their manner of living that the zinc and lead miner is of the highest type of American laborer.” That night, to mark the occasion, someone set alight four large crosses, each at least fifteen feet high, atop the highest chat piles in Picher. Once the fire department discovered that the mills were not on fire, it let the “fiery crosses burn.”

Tri-State miners soon learned the limits of their power, however, as mining companies continued to consolidate control over the district. The boom of 1925–26 prompted a series of mergers. Eagle-Picher purchased two competitors that added 100,000 acres of mining land and a zinc smelter at Hockerville. Commerce Mining bought the ninth-leading producer. Golden Rod Mining acquired several smaller competitors. These firms also invested in larger mills equipped with new flotation technology that processed ore more efficiently and enabled the re-milling of old chat piles. These com-
panies sought closer cooperation in the OPA; Eagle-Picher and Commerce Mining joined in October 1928. Soon after, the OPA absorbed the AZI chapter. The association looked to cut costs, particularly wages and insurance premiums, as zinc prices began a slow, long slide, from fifty dollars per ton in late 1926 to forty dollars per ton in early 1929. Citing the sliding scale, operators cut wages for machine men to $4.25 per day and for shovellers to eleven cents a can. To control insurance costs, the OPA drew on the direct assistance of the U.S. Bureau of Mines and the PHS to fully implement Ageton’s safety and health recommendations. The OPA drive not only sought to change how miners behaved on the job but also considered preventing those with certain injuries or illnesses from working altogether. With no union allies and an uncertain economy after 1926, Tri-State miners navigated these treacherous new circumstances alone.60

In early 1925, district operators began taking Ageton’s safety recommendations more seriously when the Oklahoma State Insurance Board proposed raising workmen’s compensation insurance rates from 6 to 9 percent of total payroll. With production high, companies faced ballooning insurance costs. The OPA and the AZI chapter lobbied the board for an exemption. In a day of hearings in Miami, their representatives emphasized the steps already taken to reduce accidents and compensation claims. “The operators have been fully alive to it,” OPA executive secretary J. D. Conover explained. The board agreed to freeze maximum insurance premiums at 6 percent for a year but warned companies to take command of the risks. “So it is really up to the operators,” the board’s chair concluded, “to so conduct their mines and so supervise them, and so regulate them, as to produce fewer losses, and then they will get a lower rate.”61

Mining companies gave ground bosses new incentives and authority to reduce accidents. The OPA started a “New Broom” club that recognized ground bosses in mines that recorded a month without a lost-time accident by nailing “a new broom” above their office doors. Eagle-Picher, meanwhile, started a cash bonus system for ground bosses that paid twenty dollars if their crews went accident free for a month. With the power to hire and fire, ground bosses could better compel reluctant miners to obey precaution or to not report injuries. Many companies also hired their own safety engineers to implement Ageton’s recommendations. According to his surveys, these measures worked. From 1924 to 1926, OPA companies claimed to reduce the frequency and severity of reported accidents.62

In 1926, the Bureau of Mines and the OPA decided to expand the silicosis clinic. For over a year, Frederick Flinn and his successor, F. V. Meriwether, a PHS doctor who had recently helped identify black lung in Alabama, offered
voluntary health exams to miners and their families, free of charge, in order to gather more data. The federal doctors could only examine a fraction of the workforce in the small facility provide by the AZI chapter. If they wanted a true picture of the problem, Meriwether argued, they needed a bigger clinic that could handle examinations for every miner in the district. The OPA and Ageton approved. So did Royd Sayers, who convinced A. J. Lanza, now head of Metropolitan Life’s Industrial Health and Hygiene Service, to enlist his company’s support. In May 1927, the Bureau of Mines, Metropolitan Life, and the OPA agreed to jointly support a much larger, more ambitious operation. The new plan called for a clinic of five doctors with full-time X-ray, laboratory, and dust-sampling technicians. They would provide free physical examinations, including chest X-rays, to all mine employees, with a particular focus on “controlling the silicosis-tuberculosis situation.” Despite Meriwether’s advice that the exams be compulsory, the OPA would only encourage them on a voluntary basis. The companies would use the results to ensure that men were given only jobs they could fully perform, thus reducing injuries, accidents, and crucially, company exposure to workmen’s compensation claims. Men with serious issues, such as silicosis, tuberculosis, or heart problems, would be advised to seek treatment and given jobs “where they will be a minimum risk.” As Ageton explained to a local mine owner, our “physical examination of employees is primarily intended as a means of increasing efficiency and production.” The bureau agreed to provide $8,000 per year for operating expenses, supply all of the equipment and supplies, and assign PHS-affiliated medical staff. The bureau placed Meriwether in charge. Metropolitan Life agreed to match the bureau’s $8,000 annual grant. The OPA contributed $16,000 per year.63

In the first year, Meriwether’s team examined 7,722 employed men, 642 men seeking work, and 261 women and children. The exams for the men were unusually thorough in a place that had long lacked adequate medical care. Patients first completed a survey about their “personal, family, and occupational history” and then had their photograph taken, received a chest X-ray, gave spit and blood samples, and went through a full examination of their “eyes, teeth, hearing, nose, throat, chest, abdomen, rectum, hernia, genitals, and limbs.” The lab tested their blood for syphilis and their spit for tuberculosis. Clinic staff used the results to form a diagnosis and issued a card to each patient that included his photograph and signature and a list of “all physical defects noted and a rating of his working efficiency.” The ratings ranged from A to G, with Class A reserved for “perfect specimens of manhood”; Class B for the “average” man with only minor defects, such as slightly impaired hearing or vision; Class C for men with “a physical defect that may
interfere with the man’s working efficiency,” such as missing fingers or first-stage silicosis; Class D for men with serious physical defects or venereal disease; Class E for men with advanced silicosis; Class F for men with early-stage tuberculosis or advanced syphilis; and Class G for men with advanced tuberculosis. Since the exams were voluntary, the OPA allowed individual companies to decide how or if to use them. Meriwether, however, considered the C grade “a warning.” “The entire thought,” he explained, “is to keep the workman informed of his physical condition hoping that he will take the necessary steps to have corrected such ailments as found” and to convince a miner with “tuberculosis and silicosis in its incipient state . . . to go to a high, dry climate, where his chances for recovery are decidedly greater.” He continued to advise the OPA that the exams should be mandatory.

Merrwether’s first annual report revealed the terrible physical toll that Tri-State miners had paid for their work. In the twelve months from July 1, 1927, the clinic gave A grades to 1.65 percent of patients, B grades to 63.90 percent, C grades to 16.77 percent, D grades to 7.92 percent, E grades to 0.41 percent, F grades to 6.13 percent, and G grades to 3.14 percent. Of the 7,722 miners examined, 26 percent had some stage of silicosis or tuberculosis. Of those who had worked in the district for ten years or more, 52 percent were so afflicted. For all men who labored in the ground, the overall rate was 38 percent, with machine men and shovelers reporting the highest rates of incidence, 43 and 39 percent, respectively. Shovelers, however, developed silicosis much faster. Those with first-stage silicosis had worked in the mines for an average of 8.4 years, while first-stage-silicotic machine men had labored in the ground for an average of 11.4 years. Meriwether advised men with first-stage silicosis to “leave the mines and seek occupation in the open air,” under the assumption that recovery was possible. However, workers with first-stage silicosis remained productive. First-stage shovelers averaged forty-three cans per day. These men were unlikely to leave the mines voluntarily. Once miners developed second-stage silicosis, their productivity dropped considerably, to an average of thirty-three cans per day. Meriwether urged the OPA to adopt clear, tough restrictions on hiring them. “As soon as the second stage develops,” he advised, “the men are not recommended for work in the mines.” Meriwether was also alarmed that 20 percent of the men examined had syphilis, which some actuaries and doctors identified as a cause of serious accidents, most notably Thomas Parran, who would later oversee the Tuskegee syphilis experiment as U.S. surgeon general. Meriwether recommended that these men be excluded from work until they had completed treatment.
Miners distrusted the new examination regime, especially the individual grades. “The men thought that the work was mainly for the protection and benefit of the operators and of little, if any, benefit to them,” Meriwether reported in 1928. His weekly meetings with insurance adjustors, who took a keen interest in the exam results, belied the OPA’s public claims that the clinic was for the benefit of the miners. To allay suspicion, the OPA launched a publicity campaign to emphasize that the exams were entirely voluntary and would not result in anyone losing their job. In late 1927, the OPA posted large notices at all mines stating, “You are not required to take this examination. It is available for you if you desire it. You are free to act as you wish in the matter.” The exam grades could still complicate employment for men who were new to the district or those looking to change employers. The clinic’s expansion coincided with reduced production in 1927 and early 1928. Mining companies reinstated periodic shutdowns for days or weeks at a time that laid off hundreds of miners, 3,000 at the worst point in early 1928. Uncertain employment made it harder for miners to protest by switching jobs, as they had in the past, especially so for men with C or D cards. Miners learned to alter the first examination grade cards by switching out photographs with those on cards with higher grades or erasing and replacing the original information entirely. After several unsuccessful attempts to prevent
fraud, the clinic began imprinted the cards with a Bureau of Mines seal that embossed the letter grade and the photograph. Meriwether was confident that the federal agency’s imprimatur made the grades indelible.66

Merrifether gradually increased the clinic’s influence. In early 1929, he requested and received funds to treat sexually transmitted diseases, which exams had shown to be rampant. In its first six months, Merrifether’s “VD section” treated 363 cases of syphilis and 188 cases of gonorrhea. By his count, however, almost 300 additional syphilics continued to work without treatment. Influenced by Parran’s interest in the social and economic effects of syphilis, Merrifether argued that these infections represented a serious compensation risk that rivaled the costs of tuberculosis. “There is no excuse for the men with such diseases continuing to claim the right for employment,” he reported to the OPA. Merrifether’s vigilance against sexual infections gave the clinic new invasive powers, literally. He instructed clinic physicians to perform prostatic massages to test the seminal fluid of any male patient who seemed likely to have gonorrhea. The OPA enthusiastically backed this broadened mission. Its welfare nurse reported uncooperative women with syphilis or gonorrhea to the local police, who forcibly treated them in the county jail.67

The OPA, Bureau of Mines, and Metropolitan Life renewed the clinic agreement for another two years in 1929. Merrifether’s second annual report showed that the number of men with first-stage silicosis had not changed much but that the number of those with advanced silicosis or tuberculosis had fallen. He noted that “companies are enforcing physical examinations and are carefully studying cards before employing men.” “It has taken some time to bring this about,” Merrifether explained, “without causing serious labor disturbances in the field.” It had paid in lower insurance costs, down to 3.6 percent of payroll. Still, the report reiterated that all employers should resolve to eliminate “tuberculosis and second and third degree silicosis from the mines of the district” by “hiring [only] men free from such diseases,” a standard that would exclude those with a D grade or lower. Merrifether wanted them to go even further. Anyone who presented “increased compensation risks,” he advised, “should be encouraged and persuaded or coerced to change their occupations.” Sayers decided not to publish this report. In private correspondence, however, Merrifether reiterated his call for the OPA and the clinic to commit to “the very closest cooperation in elimination of undesirable and unfit men” from the Tri-State.68

Beginning in 1915, miners had rushed into the new Picher field with renewed faith that brutal, risky work for individual incentives would yield them pros-
perity and respect. For more than a decade, their muscle again delivered record production and profits for mining companies. Their achievements in the ground shaped a rough working-class community around the prerogatives and appetites of forceful men. While many women seized opportunities in this male-dominated world, all were subject to its dangers. They were confident that white nationalist privileges would not only ensure good fortune but also offer protection. By the mid-1920s, despite periodic slumps, Tri-State miners and their families expected to enjoy the same standard of living that other white Americans seemed to enjoy. For a time, union organizers from Mine Mill and the OFL tried to convince them that collective action offered the only means to achieve better, more secure lives, often conceding to their racist and nativist views in doing so. Although some might see the value of unionism, most miners remained too eager to chase high wages in the hopes that the next boom would be different and would last.

By 1929, however, their claims on prosperity offered no defense against a new scientific business regime that sought efficiency, stability, and above all, control. In fact, miners’ faith in the fortunes of strong men who ran hard risks in pursuit of commensurate rewards defined the terms by which mining companies would control them. The firms that developed the Picher field, led by Eagle-Picher, Commerce Mining, and others, were bigger and richer than any companies in the history of the district and benefited from the direct assistance of various federal agencies. With government and insurance industry help, companies began to see miners who were once valued for their risk-taking productivity as themselves primary risks to future profits. By 1929, the district’s white working-class male ideal led into the civilizing cage of the examination clinic and its grade cards. Most miners could still get work at wages determined by the sliding scale but in the knowledge that any injury or illness could mark them for oblivion as unfit and unemployable. Men who had power and prestige in 1917 now had neither just as work became harder for everyone to find as metal prices and mine production plummeted to the lowest levels in living memory.