Poor Man's Fortune

Roll, Jarod

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War's return in 1941 gave new, late life to Tri-State mining. American and Allied military spending sparked heavy demand for zinc and lead. At first, federal Office of Price Administration caps on commodity prices hindered expanded mine production, particularly in places where only thin ore deposits remained, such as the Tri-State. In early 1942, the Office of Production Management authorized the Metals Reserve Company, a government entity that stockpiled strategic metal and minerals, to pay a premium price subsidy for copper, lead, and zinc from marginal mines that was at least 33 percent higher than the cap imposed by the price administration. In 1943, Tri-State operators received an average of $100 per ton for zinc concentrate, an all-time record, by far—twenty-two dollars more per ton than the previous high annual average in 1916. Government raises and extensions of the price subsidy pushed zinc to $117 per ton in 1946.¹

These incentives made the Eagle-Picher Lead Company and the other firms “hoggish,” according to Lawrence Barr. The operators took the money while it was there: more than $43 million for zinc and lead combined in 1943, when the Tri-State produced 30 percent of the nation's zinc and 7 percent of its lead. Only 1925 and 1926 had been richer. But ramped-up operations decimated already thinning ore deposits; average yields dropped from 5.00 percent in 1941 to 2.81 percent in 1946. As the money rolled in, district production declined from 478,403 tons in 1941 to 376,236 tons in 1943 and 258,373 tons in 1946—much of that from reprocessing chat piles. Eagle-Picher even mined the immense pillars it had left behind to hold up the ground, including one worth $1 million from underneath the Picher bank. This was the beginning of the end.²

Government mobilization gave Tri-State miners leverage again. The demands of the war created sharp labor shortages. The military draft began taking away healthy young men in late 1940. Many others went to work at new munitions plants in Baxter Springs and Parsons, Kansas, and Chouteau, Oklahoma, all within seventy-five miles of Picher. Still others found good defense jobs through the U.S. Employment Service office in Joplin. To get miners to stay, Eagle-Picher and other operators raised wages in line with...
ore prices according to the traditional sliding scale, up to $5.55 per day for machine men in 1941. By the summer of 1943, more than 5,400 men worked in the district. But sliding-scale raises usually could not match the high pay available elsewhere. Turnover was high.\(^3\)

The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (hereafter referred to as Mine Mill) used the federal wartime labor regime to make its first major gains in the Tri-State. It reorganized by founding new locals to represent workers by company, not by town. The union focused exclusively on collective bargaining rights and pay. In May 1941, workers in Local 514 at the St. Louis Smelting and Refining Company, outside Baxter Springs, voted 254 to 131 to make Mine Mill their sole bargaining agent in a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) certification election. The union pressed the resistant company for higher wages with a complaint to the new National War Labor Board (NWLB) in January 1942. The NWLB ruled in favor of Mine Mill’s proposed wage scale in February, resulting in raises of one dollar per day; the contract made St. Louis Smelting a union shop. Mine Mill’s delivery of tangible results boosted the campaign. “Our union boys point out to these unorganized workers that if they were organized they could increase their wages by at least a dollar a day,” organizer Elwood Hain reported. Within the month, Local 489 won a certification election at Federal Mining and Smelting Company, the district’s second-largest producer, and Local 596 obtained certification by card check at two small companies in Oronogo. All three locals won higher wages with a second NWLB complaint in early 1943. Meanwhile, smaller companies settled with the NLRB to avoid their own hearings stemming from the 1935 strike. By March 1943, sixteen firms had paid out more than $134,000 in back wages. By then, Mine Mill had more than 1,200 Tri-State members working under contract; it had over 80,000 dues-paying members nationwide. The union did not crack Eagle-Picher during the war, although the district’s biggest firm could not escape its influence. To keep and attract workers, Eagle-Picher matched the union’s NWLB-imposed wage scales. Mine Mill stalwart Tony McTeer did not live to see these successes; he died from silicosis two days before Christmas 1941.\(^4\)

After the war ended, Tri-State workers finally rebelled against Eagle-Picher as part of the larger national uprising to protect wartime gains in the conversion to peace. The company gave ground only after its final appeal of the 1939 ruling ended in the U.S. Supreme Court in May 1945. In the months that followed, Eagle-Picher paid out more than $250,000 in back wages to the Mine Mill strikers. That breakthrough helped Local 108 win NLRB certification at Eagle-Picher’s insulation facility in Joplin. The company was also under pressure from workers at its smelters, particularly the largest at
Henryetta, Oklahoma, where Mine Mill was pushing for a contract. Eagle-Picher signed an agreement with Local 108 in February 1946, its first union contract, but refused to bargain with the smelter workers. They went on strike in April, among more than 2 million American workers who went on strike for higher wages and stronger labor rights in 1945 and 1946. Mine Mill was at the center of that strike wave, with battles in Idaho, Montana, Alabama, and Arizona. The drive against Eagle-Picher inspired workers at its Central Mill in Cardin. They organized a new local, 861. In March, at a public rally in Picher attended by Reid Robinson, Local 861 announced a petition for an NLRB certification election. The union would first poll the mill workers, among whom its support was strongest, and then call for a vote among the underground workers. Meanwhile, Mine Mill won a series of elections at smaller mining companies in the district. The union was confident that organized labor would finally triumph in the Tri-State.5

The fight over price controls in the summer of 1946 galvanized Mine Mill’s campaign. Conservatives in Congress fought hard to kill the Office of Price Administration, which both guarded consumers from inflation and provided lifeblood subsidies for marginal metal producers. Mine Mill was among many unions and consumer associations calling for its renewal as part of a broader postwar plan to make the American standard of living available to all. The union organized rallies in Picher to demand an extension. When Congress approved weakened price controls in June, however, President Truman vetoed the bill in the hopes of securing passage of something stronger. That veto hit hard in the Tri-State because it also stopped the premium price subsidies. Operators closed the mines to await further developments in Washington, a decision that gave the union’s campaign urgency. In late July, the third week of the shutdown, Mine Mill rallied more than 700 mine and mill workers in Picher to demand the resurrection of both price controls and ore subsidies. Truman signed a renewal bill a few days later that extended consumer protections in diminished form until the end of the year and guaranteed the premium price subsidies for twelve months. The mines reopened. In August, Mine Mill won the certification election at Eagle-Picher’s Central Mill, 232 to 113. It had momentum. In early September, the Henryetta smelter workers won their five-month strike with a contract and a wage increase. In November, miners at Eagle-Picher chose Mine Mill as their representative, 475 to 251. Support for the union among the miners “never was very strong,” an organizer conceded, but they believed the mill workers would get a contract and did not want to be left behind. It was the union’s seventeenth NLRB victory in the Tri-State since March 1946. Unwilling to risk a strike while government subsidies were still in effect,
Eagle-Picher agreed to a contract with Local 861, including both mine and mill workers, in the first week of December. It provided a union shop, grievance procedures, seniority rights, lines of progression, vacation benefits, and a wage scale that paid machine men $9.03 per day, a raise of $2.50. Eagle-Picher retained the right to send employees for physical examinations and reclassify them based on the result. By early 1947, Mine Mill represented nearly all Tri-State mine and mill workers—victory at last.6

A majority of Tri-State workers supported Mine Mill in 1946 because it delivered material gains, but the union could not sustain those gains without continued federal help. Despite union and company pleas, Congress allowed metal price subsidies to expire on June 30, 1947. District operators curtailed production while awaiting another potential renewal. With most mines closed, companies laid off 4,000 of the district’s 6,000 mine and mill workers. Truman crushed their hopes by vetoing Congress’s renewal bill in August. He advised those who lost their jobs to seek work elsewhere while the national economy was strong. Many small mining companies closed for good. District zinc production collapsed to 159,549 tons in 1948, the lowest since 1896. Mine Mill’s first contract with Eagle-Picher had also expired on June 30, 1947. Local 861 prepared for “a showdown on wages” but postponed negotiations amid the closures and layoffs. That fall, union leaders tried to organize a local political action committee around demands for government operation of the mines but to little avail. In January 1948, Local 861 threatened to strike Eagle-Picher’s remaining operations unless it got a wage increase, then backed down. Eagle-Picher continued to recognize Mine Mill and abide by the terms of the lapsed 1946 contract, mainly because the pact provided a rare point of stability. During contract negotiations in June 1948, Eagle-Picher offered Local 861 a raise of 10.2 cents per hour, or 9 percent. With no raise for eighteen months and inflation high, the union demanded thirty cents per hour, or 27 percent. When Eagle-Picher refused to budge, Local 861 voted to strike, 302 to 19.7

Mine Mill’s 1948 strike reprised, on a smaller scale, the central elements of the 1935 strike. With 500 members, Local 861 blockaded Eagle-Picher’s Central Mill. Unable to process ore, Eagle-Picher and twenty smaller mining companies, which together employed about half of the district’s workers, ceased operations. The strike held for two months as negotiations stalled. The union insisted that Eagle-Picher could afford to raise wages after taking so much in federal subsidies since 1942. Eagle-Picher explained that the subsidies had stopped and accused Mine Mill’s leadership of Communist subversion. In August, the company ran full-page spreads in district newspapers that showed evidence linking national officers Reid Robinson and
Maurice Travis to the Communist Party. As the nascent Cold War fueled the political power of anti-Communism, this was Mine Mill’s principal weakness. The union had been riven with factional splits over the role and influence of Communists since the early 1940s. Mine Mill’s left wing seemed to win in 1947 when Travis, a known Communist, replaced centrist Robinson as president. The issue grew graver in June 1947 when Congress responded to the recent strike wave with the Taft-Hartley amendment to the National Labor Relations Act. In addition to new restrictions on collective action, Taft-Hartley required all union officers to sign affidavits declaring that they did not belong to the Communist Party or believe in or support any organization that advocated overthrowing the U.S. government. Unions that did not submit affidavits would no longer have standing with the NLRB. Indignant at this violation of civil liberties and hopeful of repeal, Mine Mill’s leaders, along with many others in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), did not sign affidavits. This would doom Mine Mill in many places but especially in the Tri-State.8

In early September 1948, Walter Cherry, a thirty-five-year-old welder at Eagle-Picher, launched a back-to-work movement that forced Mine Mill to end the strike. Cherry had deep roots in the district: born near Granby, Missouri, in 1913, he moved to Ottawa County a few years later when his father took work as a miner. Likely backed by the company, Cherry pledged that this group, at first called the Union of America, would be “a peaceful organization based on Americanism, not communism.” Cherry assured potential members that all of its officers would sign anti-Communist affidavits, remain independent of all other unions and all companies, and crucially, petition the NLRB for a certification election to replace Mine Mill. More than 150 workers joined. Mine Mill agreed contract terms with Eagle-Picher the following day. Although the union achieved a raise of 14.2 cents an hour that other companies matched, it was losing support. Only 225 members voted on the contract, which would run until June 30, 1949. Cherry kept organizing. Claiming people were “tired of the word ‘union,’” he changed his group’s name to the Tri-State Mine and Mill Workers’ Association. In November, Cherry’s association collected enough signatures to petition the NLRB for a new election.9

After Cherry’s gains, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) joined the challenge to Mine Mill in the Tri-State. In October, the United Cement, Lime, and Gypsum Workers International Union (hereafter referred to as AFL Cement), an AFL union chartered in 1939 to counter the CIO, launched an organizing drive to raid Mine Mill’s locals. In November, Mine Mill organizers informed the national office that AFL Cement had won the allegiance
of a majority of workers in Eagle-Picher’s Central Mill and other surface operations. Later that month, workers at Eagle-Picher’s insulation works in Joplin chose it to represent them in an NLRB election, 196 to 15; Local 108 vanished. Mine Mill was not on the ballot because it had not submitted anti-Communist affidavits to the NLRB. Meanwhile, Cherry’s association gained more followers among the miners. Mine Mill organizers believed that as many as half of the underground workers in Local 861 now followed Cherry. In all cases, Elwood Hain reported, “the Communist question is quite pertinent.” In April 1949, AFL Cement petitioned the NLRB for a representation election at Eagle-Picher. The board decided to hold a single election in early June with both AFL Cement and Cherry’s association on the ballot. Both groups deployed blunt anti-Communist attacks on Mine Mill, which was not on the ballot. If workers wanted to keep Mine Mill, they had to vote “neither.”

This battle for representation took place amid a dismal backdrop of falling ore prices and production cuts. In late April, many smaller companies again closed in response to falling zinc prices, throwing 950 of the district’s remaining 2,800 workers into unemployment. Workers in nonunion mines suffered pay cuts of $2.25 per day. St. Louis Smelting laid off its 250 workers. Federal Mining shut its last remaining mines in Oklahoma and Missouri, including the Klondike, the last active mine in Granby. Eagle-Picher continued to operate at the contract wage scale. Only 1,400 mine and mill workers had jobs in the district as the NLRB election approached.

Mine Mill fought back against AFL Cement and Cherry with appeals to the struggle of the 1930s. “If this union-busting AFL organization is successful, it means bad working conditions, low wages and little kids going to school ragged and hungry as they did before in the old AFL Mike Evans–Joe Nolan reign of terror,” one circular declared, “and it may lead to more pick-handle parades and beatings and suffering.” In a radio broadcast, Mine Mill reminded listeners how hard it had been for the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), “of which your present union is descendant, to organize the Tri-State years ago.” It warned of a return to the “‘Blue Card’ days.” No doubt, it predicted, “some of you will weaken” and others “will just crawl before the boss in hopes of saving their own selfish individual skins.” “This is the proven time-tested way of disaster in the Tri-State,” Mine Mill declared. “There is only one way out; to stand up like the men who founded this union, like the men who built it in the Tri-State.”

Workers at Eagle-Picher voted for anti-Communist Americanism. AFL Cement won the election with 448 votes against 232 votes for “neither,” which included both those who remained loyal to Mine Mill and those who wanted
no union at all. Fifty workers voted for Cherry’s association. By June 3, 1949, Local 861 was no more. In the weeks that followed, the district’s agony only intensified. With the Mine Mill contract set to expire on June 30, Eagle-Picher demanded harsh new terms: a 30 percent pay cut of $3.08 per day and the reinstatement of the market-based sliding scale. Having jumped into the fire, AFL Cement rejected the offer, 139 to 98. Eagle-Picher closed its operations on July 1. More than 1,400 employees were again thrown out of work: 800 at Eagle-Picher and 600 at small companies that sold ore to its Central Mill. After three weeks, another back-to-work movement organized, this time led by Clotis Cates, an Eagle-Picher hoisterman. Cates soon had 500 Eagle-Picher employees ready to return to work on the company’s terms. AFL Cement capitulated in early August: 100 members voted for the pay cut and sliding scale, 82 against. Eagle-Picher resumed operations; many other companies never did. Picher’s unemployment rate for men spiked to more than 20 percent.13

Despite rising Cold War demand for metal, Tri-State operators could not compete under the nation’s new, freer trade policies. Federal defense spending ballooned in the early 1950s after American entry into the Korean War and a massive military expansion. As the Department of Defense stockpiled strategic metals, the price of zinc ore and lead mineral soared in 1951 to $135 and $246 per ton, respectively. Rather than rely on marginal districts like the Tri-State to supply this ore, the Truman administration now drew on cheaper foreign sources. This was possible because the 1951 General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, the latest step toward a global free trade regime to contain Communism, lowered duties on imported zinc and lead to historic levels. In 1952, imports of zinc surpassed production from American mines for the first time since 1873, the year Joplin was founded. As foreign ore flooded the market, prices fell below eighty dollars per ton. Local congressional representatives offered bills to raise the tariff on zinc and lead and to reinstitute the subsidy for domestic producers, but both bills failed. Locals accused the federal government of “serving America last.” President Dwight Eisenhower, the first Republican to win Ottawa County since Hoover, maintained Truman’s policy. Tri-State production fell to 71,000 tons in 1953, the lowest amount in seventy years. Picher was nearing collapse, literally. In 1951, Eagle-Picher closed a four-block area in the heart of town because engineers feared the ground would cave in after the company had mined the support pillars. The national press covering the subsequent evictions and evacuations called Picher a “dying town.” Only 3,900 people still lived there.14

The workers who remained looked belatedly to the CIO for help in a rear-
guard fight to stall oblivion. The sliding-scale provision of the 1949 contract was devastating their weekly pay as imports drove down ore prices. Workers at Eagle-Picher were fed up with AFL Cement. In April 1953, they voted for the United Steelworkers of America (USW) to represent them and organized as USW Local 4915. The USW already represented the Henryetta smelter workers after raiding the Mine Mill local there in 1950. They had won a wage increase in 1952. Local 4915 hoped for the same when it demanded a raise of forty-eight cents per hour in May 1953; Eagle-Picher offered four cents. With talks in stalemate, Local 4915 went on strike in June. By again closing the Central Mill, the strikers idled the 1,100 workers who remained in the district, over 800 of them at Eagle-Picher. The strike lasted for six months. Local 4915 accepted a raise of fifteen cents per hour in December. In stark contrast to district production—which delivered around 110,000 tons of ore in the mid-1950s—they remained bullish. In July 1955, Local 4915 went on strike for three days and won a raise of ten cents per hour. That December members threatened another strike and won five cents more. The flurry of latter-day defiance continued in September 1956, when another threatened strike won an eight-cent raise. They had finally learned the lesson.15

The Tri-State mining district went under in 1957. Eagle-Picher ceased operations twice due to low zinc prices: in April, for five weeks, and again in July. The few remaining small companies that relied on its Central Mill closed for good. Local 4915 continued to meet with company officials through the end of the year about a new agreement that might allow it to restart operations. The recession of late 1957 ruined those chances. Local 4915 held on for another year, stubborn to keep hope alive amid crushing unemployment. The union threw a Christmas party in 1958 complete with “an appearance by Santa Claus with treats for the children.” The mines never reopened.16

There was nothing ironic about the Tri-State miners turning to the CIO in the 1950s. After Taft-Hartley, conservative and centrist forces within the congress attacked the left-led unions that had refused to accommodate the Red Scare. By February 1950, the CIO had expelled eleven of them, including Mine Mill. The expelled unions were not only the most robust critics of capitalism but also the most committed to organizing the unorganized and to promoting racial and gender equality. The CIO, and particularly the USW, now pursued the narrow goal of delivering more pay and benefits for those who were already members. With the blessing of president Philip Murray, CIO unions joined the AFL in membership raids on their former partners, targeting more than 1,200 locals combined between 1951 and 1953. The CIO raids against labor’s left wing emphasized anti-Communism and American-
ism, just like William Green and the AFL; all “flag-waving, breast-beating, and Red-baiting,” a contemporary reported. Some raids, such as the USW drive against Mine Mill in Alabama, also relied on overt appeals to white supremacy. In 1955, the CIO and AFL merged around these common commitments: the economic and social privileges of white working-class men, patriotic nationalism, and the defense of American capitalism.17

If there was any irony in the Tri-State story, it was that its miners and mill workers had found a union that fully represented them and their long history but too late to save themselves. Since at least 1896, they had pursued their own material self-interest, primarily in the form of higher wages, above all else. Tri-State miners showed little loyalty to the district’s mining companies. For a half century or more, they seldom shied away from pugnacious opposition to the biggest firms, whether the American Zinc, Lead, and Smelting Company or Eagle-Picher. They switched employers without notice, often to go work as strikebreakers for higher pay in other districts. They used the courts and government agencies like the National Recovery Administration to advance their interests. Many went on strike themselves, at first in short, small wildcat actions but later, particularly in 1915, 1935, and 1948, in organized efforts with district-wide impacts. They often seemed on the verge of organizing in unions—in 1900, 1911, 1915–16, 1924, and 1933–35—but only when the unions promised material gains within the capitalist system and defended the privileges of white Americans. When independent action failed, Tri-State miners were drawn most to the AFL because its policies reflected their traditions and its devolved structure offered the most freedom from outside interference. Sometimes, significant numbers of them joined the WFM or Mine Mill but only really ever as a means to get into the AFL. Its leaders, whether Samuel Gompers, Green, or state-level officials, often reciprocated the attraction in the hopes of turning the Tri-State into a bastion of conservative metal-mining unionism. The AFL’s enthusiastic acceptance of the Blue Card Union testified to the elemental power of that affinity.

Most Tri-State miners remained mistrustful of, if not openly hostile to, the broad-based solidarity of the WFM and Mine Mill for fifty years or more. After the 1896 Leadville strike, Tri-State miners regarded the militant anticapitalism and ethnic diversity of the WFM as a threat to their own prerogatives as native-born white men with entrepreneurial ambitions. Their clashes in western strike zones deepened the chasm: encouraging Tri-State miners to double down on their sense of racial and national advantage while leading the union into more confrontations to destroy the prevailing system. Men on both sides of those clashes struggled to overcome the divide, even
after the WFM moderated its aims and tactics. While some Tri-State miners would join the WFM and Mine Mill, they continued to see the union as more radical and more alien than the AFL and thus always suspect.

It was easy for Tri-State miners to see the WFM as a threat in the 1890s because they had seldom doubted their chances to succeed, as workers, under capitalism. From the Granby stampede in the 1850s to the zinc boom of the 1880s, Tri-State miners had as prospectors and owner-operators created a poor man’s camp with their own muscle, appetite for chance, and astute navigation of the metal market, at great risk and often greater cost. Despite a legion of failures, many men in the district continued to enjoy real, if small-scale, opportunities to work for themselves and pocket the profits when increasing numbers of American workers no longer did. They had faith in their own self-interest in the market, which set them in opposition to both radical unions and large corporations. From the 1870s on, Tri-State miners opposed monopolies that threatened to crush small-scale producers like them. Many went so far as to support the antimonopoly proposals of the Knights of Labor and the Greenback-Labor and Union Labor Parties. Yet most Tri-State miners refused to join with other miners of metal and coal who organized together, particularly in the Knights, as permanent wage-workers to confront those same monopolies. Tri-State miners would not abandon their owner-operator ambitions and traditions; they believed that they were special, that the problems others faced were not their problems. That conclusion set them on a collision course with the WFM in Colorado and Idaho, where strikebreakers unironically identified the union as another kind of monopoly trying to limit their freedom of action.

It also framed the way they and their sons understood wage labor once the poor man’s camp was no more. Led first by strikebreakers and then by shovelers, Tri-State miners accommodated permanent wage labor with increasingly aggressive physical assertions tied to claims on market-based performance incentives, especially the piece rate, despite the growing silicosis crisis. At the height of their influence, in the 1915 strike, shovelers used their essential masculine power not to end the piece rate but to induce their employers to yoke the piece rate to a sliding scale that followed market prices; their triumph, then, was to further commit themselves to capitalism, just like their predecessors had with leasehold provisions on zinc ore. This approach drew upon a profound confidence in the privileges and respect due white, native-born, working-class men like them—a confidence that the Picher boom seemed to confirm.

For Tri-State miners, American nationalism was an essential white working-class vehicle that advanced both the promises of capitalism and
the privileges of race and nativity. The nation-state delivered real, material benefits to them. The federal government cleared Native Americans from the land before 1840, facilitated the railroad links that connected the area to national markets, provided tariff barriers beginning in the 1890s that protected domestic ore producers from foreign competition, guarded strike-breakers across the West, cut off most foreign immigration in the 1910s and 1920s, reconstructed capitalism in the 1930s, paid premium price subsidies that kept the mines open in the 1940s, and helped silence anticapitalist radicals in two Red Scares. Most important, the United States fought wars, lots of them, which each demanded more lead and zinc than the last. These wars not only boosted market prices and wages, especially under sliding-scale contracts, but also reaffirmed who and what the nation was for. Beginning with the Spanish-American War, if not earlier, nationalists used the state to create and promote exclusionary Americanism. Tri-State miners made strong claims to this ethnonationalist project, particularly during wartime. They also asserted the prerogatives of Americanism themselves in creative, often violent ways for their own ends in the absence of war, as prospectors, strikebreakers, shoveler, and back-to-workers against supposed foreign union foes and sometimes their own employers. Between 1896 and 1920, they turned Americanism into a newly belligerent, working-class male drive for racial and nativist privilege in a political economy increasingly dominated by middle-class voters and corporations.

The Great Depression almost broke the power of white working-class Americanism in the Tri-State. The district hit peak production in 1926. The subsequent decline undercut the influence of its miners and allowed newly powerful companies like Eagle-Picher to assert control over them and their behavior with the help of federal agencies. The companies adopted a managerial logic of efficiency that threatened to remove the last means working-class white men had to command a livelihood that reflected their sense of racial and national status: their willingness to risk their bodies for economic incentives. In the Tri-State, that strategy turned doctors, insurance companies, and government-backed health plans into the new enemies of poor man’s camp miners.

Tri-State miners looked with hope to the New Deal for a restoration of past glories, not a revolution. For some, the New Deal made unionism make sense without challenging the tenets of white working-class Americanism. Some rallied to CIO social democracy, but only a minority. The majority remained much like they were in the 1920s, now more open to an organized response to the economic crisis that pledged to empower working-class men—but in a changing, uncertain political climate. Exploiting confusion
exacerbated by shaky federal laws, companies co-opted the district’s violent, antiradical, nationalist traditions with the Blue Card Union to foment a popular backlash against Mine Mill and the new CIO’s model of social democratic unionism. Despite immigration restriction, foreign threats still mattered in the 1930s as anti-Communism and anti-Semitism gave new expression to older forms of nativism and xenophobia. The New Deal labor regime rallied to kill the Blue Card Union but not before the AFL reinforced the white working-class conservative ideas at its core. Tri-State miners did not turn to those ideas in simple reaction to the CIO; they had cultivated them, in word and deed, since the nineteenth century.

With supporters like those in the Tri-State, the New Deal, and especially its wartime extension, was made in part by the conservatism of white working-class men. While voters across the district supported Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936, they did not remake themselves to do so. Hoover had won a landslide in Jasper and Ottawa Counties in 1928, with 71 percent and 64 percent of the vote, respectively. That support reflected the district’s prosperity in the mid-1920s as well as the power of the Republican consensus on economic protection and nativist exclusion. Roosevelt won over a swath of these voters with the promise of an economic recovery that would again include them. The Tri-State story of the 1930s was mainly a battle to define what that would mean, with a minority vision of a new future challenging the majority’s long-held certainties. Votes for the New Deal only told so much: members of both Mine Mill and the Blue Card Union selected Roosevelt in 1936—the latter in far greater numbers. The march of social democracy was not held back by southern racists in Congress alone. White working-class conservatives like those in Tri-State helped define the limits of the New Deal from within the coalition by resisting the CIO, supporting its AFL rivals, and defending white supremacy and narrow Americanism, often with violence.

The federal wartime state proved its New Deal by reaffirming the privileges of white, working-class men. Once again, a war boom provided jobs to replace those lost as district production waned. The remaining workers benefited from government help through price subsidies that supplied profits beyond what the market would bear. Mine Mill took advantage of its standing with the NWLB to push for higher wages that beat the sliding scale, which brought miners back to its locals. To maintain that standing, Mine Mill turned itself into an agent of Americanism by backing the war with a pledge not to disrupt production with strikes. Despite its democratic and progressive heritage, and important new locals with diverse memberships in Alabama and New Mexico, the union did not challenge the racial and ethnic exclusions that Tri-State miners had demanded since 1900; nor
did it restrain its white members elsewhere, such as Butte, Montana, where a 1942 hate strike targeted African Americans. Tri-State miners looked and sounded like most other white union workers in the late 1940s as the war mobilization entrenched the New Deal order in its most conservative essential form: strong state support for capitalism and a collective bargaining regime that delivered material gains for white working-class men.18

While trade liberalization dealt the death blow to Picher in the 1950s, the Tri-State mining district was already long into a decline that had begun in the late 1920s. The population of Picher fell by half between 1930 and 1950 and then by another 35 percent in the next decade. As the workforce shrank, and mechanical loaders replaced shoveling, the intergenerational transfers of skill and meaning slowed. When World War II ended, most young men looked elsewhere for work. Lawrence Barr “decided that a man wasn’t supposed to live his life underground.” He left the mines after the war to start an air-conditioning business in Tulsa. Other would-be miners went to Joplin, now home to a growing pack of trucking companies. Mutt Mantle refused to have his son follow him into the mines. Every day after work, he threw batting practice to Mickey in their yard in Commerce. People in the Tri-State experienced the dislocations of deindustrialization earlier than most other Americans, but they would not be alone.19

Local historian Genevieve Stovall Craig worried that people would forget about the mines as the nation enjoyed postwar prosperity. In a 1955 essay for Ford Times, the car company’s monthly travel magazine, she described the town’s past and present for tourists who might travel that stretch of Route 66 and wonder what had happened there. Craig imagined the view from atop one of the chat piles: “The clamorous mills glitter as their lights begin to flicker; derricks and hoppers punctuate the prairies.” “You recognize the wealth the earth yields so that we can have so gentle a thing as baby powder, as well as paint, dyes, linoleum, ink, adhesive tape, wash tubs, barn roofs, pipe organs and smoke screens.” Her readers would also see “the high-fenced, desolate heart of Picher where, because of threatened cave-ins, blocks of its proudest buildings are leveled into a rubbish graveyard dense in weeds and cotton wood trees.” Once the metal had been stripped out of the mines, all that was left were the chat piles, mountains of waste. Men, armies of them, had moved those mountains, metal and all, out of the ground with little more than shovels. Now, Craig wrote, Picher clung to its “perishing wealth,” with no future. She could not forget the men who made it happen or the costs of the making. Her father had been a shoveler in Carterville. He died from silicosis in 1916, when Genevieve Craig was six years...
old. Now, she informed her readers, Picher’s children were “uninterested in its history.” Craig understood that “inevitably the end must come to Mother Earth’s generosity, the day when the last vein is pillaged, when there is no further discovery.”

Some miners still believed. Prospecting scavengers, known as gougers, worked abandoned leaseholds. These men carried on in the tradition of the poor man’s camp a century after the Granby stampede. The gougers were “a unique breed of men,” Craig explained, “the ‘old-time Saturday night hell raisers’ who gave Picher a name in the lusty boom days.” “Descending as far as three hundred feet underground with pick and carbide lamp, the ‘old-timers’ haul the sparse lead gleanings to the top in old pots and pails, using an ancient motor as a hoist.” The gouger dug “against the certain belief that around the next pillar, in the next drift, there’s the rich, the solid vein, just for him.”

Even at its end, the Tri-State district lived on in its favorite son, Mickey Mantle, who exemplified the power and pitfalls of white working-class masculinity in 1950s America. After a season with the Joplin Miners in 1950, Mantle debuted with the New York Yankees the following year at age nineteen. By 1956, the last full year of production in Picher, Mantle was the nation’s most famous baseball player on its best team. He was strong, white, and native born, an Okie from a poor town called Commerce. “The story of Mickey Mantle reads almost like a deadpan parody of the red-blooded, All-American boy reaching fame and fortune,” a midseason profile declared. He went on to win the Triple Crown and a World Series title that year and was named the American League’s most valuable player. What impressed people most was his prodigious strength. “Take it from me,” declared his coach Bill Dickey, who had played with Babe Ruth, “Mantle hits a ball harder and farther than any man I’ve ever seen.” He swung with reckless might, what one coach later described as “pure, blue-collar farm-boy aggressiveness.” In an earlier time, Mickey Mantle would have been a hell of a shoveler.

Mantle never forgot where he came from and could not escape its darkest legacies. For all of his physical power, Mickey feared dying young like many of the men he had known growing up, including his grandfather, two uncles, and father. Mutt Mantle died of cancer in 1952; he is buried in Miami, Oklahoma, a few hundred feet from Joe Nolan. Mickey was convinced that Mutt died of silicosis. Mining “was killing” him, Mickey later explained. “Every time he took a breath, the dust and dampness went into his lungs. Coughed up gobs of phlegm and never saw a doctor” because Mutt reckoned “he’d only be told it was ‘miner’s disease.’” “So what the hell,” Mutt would say, “live while you can.” “He was always so strong,” Mickey recalled, and then he
weakened fast and was dead. “I always wished my dad could be somebody other than a miner.”

Most people who stayed in Picher had no patience for regretful thinking. Velma Nieberding, a local historian who had moved to Miami in 1915, anticipated that many readers of her 1983 history of Ottawa County might wonder whether it all had been worth it. “Would you have the land as it was before the mines?” she asked readers. Would you erase the whole history of the Tri-State district if you could? Nieberding must have harbored her own doubts about living in such a place. Her first husband, a Miami police officer, was gunned down by thieves in 1934. Since the mines closed, Nieberding and her neighbors lived amid the environmental fallout from the mines—subsidence, residual lead contamination, and acidified ground-

*Epilogue / 257*
water. The new Environmental Protection Agency listed Picher as one of its worst Superfund sites in 1983. Nieberding made it clear that they wanted no pity. “Do not use the words waste, pain, tragedy and death. These are the words of failure,” she instructed. “The era of King Jack was lusty, exciting, fearful, prodigious and cruelly strong. But it was not failure, not exploitation, not unbridled waste. It was exultant progress.” 24