



Picher, Oklahoma: Catastrophe, Memory, and Trauma (The Charles M. Russell Center Series on Art and Photography of the American West)

Todd Stewart, Alison Fields

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On May 10, 2008, a tornado struck the northeastern Oklahoma town of Picher, destroying more than one hundred homes and killing six people. It was the final blow to a onetime boomtown already staggering under the weight of its history. The lead and zinc mining that had given birth to the town had also proven its undoing, earning Picher in 2006 the distinction of being the nation's most toxic Superfund site. Recounting the town's dissolution and documenting its remaining traces, *Picher, Oklahoma* tells the story of an unfolding ghost town. With shades of Picher's past lives lingering at every intersection, memories of its proud history and sad decline inhere in the relics, artifacts, personal treasures, and broken structures abandoned in disaster's wake.

In Todd Stewart's haunting photographs, faded snapshots and letters, well-worn garments, and books and toys give harrowing and elegiac testimony of constancy and dislocation. Empty buildings and bared foundations stand in silent witness to the homes, schools, churches, and businesses that once defined life in Picher. As these photographs and Alison Fields's accompanying essays explore the otherworldly town teetering over massive sinkholes, they reveal how memory, embedded in everyday objects, can be dislocated and reframed through both chronic and acute instances of environmental trauma.

Though hardly known outside the Three Corners Region of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri, the fate of Picher echoes well beyond its borders. *Picher, Oklahoma* reflects the broader intersections of memory, time, material objects, and changing environments, demanding our attention even as it resists easy interpretation.

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