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Tar Creek focus of PBS documentary

By K.E. Sturgeon III –
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COMMERCE — Sitting on the Picher side of Commerce's Marcie Streeter Gym, filmmaker Bradley Beesley chats with fans about action in a girls' basketball game being played between the Lady Gorillas and archrival Commerce.

"Isn't Picher always the underdog?" said Beesley, a producer of a documentary on life in lead-contaminated Picher that will be distributed to PBS stations next year. "Wouldn't you say, no matter what they are doing, people from Picher are always being told you have to overcome being from Picher? It isn't fair."

Norman native Beesley first learned about Picher in 1989 when he was a student at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College in nearby Miami.

"You heard a lot about it," he said. "People at the college were always talking about Picher like it was another country."

Today, Picher is a center of controversy as residents debate federal officials over government plans in the town that sits at ground zero of an environmental disaster left behind when lead and zinc mining companies pulled up stakes in the early 1970s.

More than \$107 million has been spent by federal and state agencies to clean up the area in an effort many residents claim is poorly planned and wasteful.

About 450 abandoned mines, 30,000 boreholes large enough to swallow a child, dozens of mine cave-ins and between 40 million and 50 million tons of gravel- and sand-sized mining waste can be found within the 43-square-mile site, which also contains Tar Creek.

It is from Tar Creek, part of which is contaminated by oxidized iron that percolates from abandoned mining operations, that Beesley got his film's title, "The Creek Runs Red."

"It's a great color," Beesley said. "It's very visual. The area really lends itself to creating visual stories. That's an aspect that gives us a sense of place."

And it is stories that Beesley and his production partners say they want to tell.

"There's a stigma to living there," said James Payne, a co-producer who has been in Picher and surrounding areas with Beesley for the past two weeks. "But, there's a lot more to Picher than people see in the media."

Beesley and Payne, who are working with Los Angeles-based Julie Brannum, say they have set out to make a film not about contamination or political fights, but about the people who live in Picher.

“The whole general premise is to examine the impact on individual human beings living within the Superfund site,” said Payne, an Ardmore native who has a background in environmental geology. “We’ve been at the school and we’ve gone hunting in the Superfund site. We just want to show people doing ordinary things.”

The filmmakers have made six trips to Picher, usually staying two to three days at a time. Their most recent two-week trip to the area is their longest. They plan to come back next month and in March using funds they have received in a distribution deal from PBS and the Independent Television Service.

“We were able to put together about a five minute trailer and show it to them in New York and they came up with some money. It’s enough for film stock and camera rental and travel expenses, but it’s not enough to live on,” Beesley said.

Work on the project is expected to be finished in September and the documentary should be ready for distribution in December, Beesley said.