

The Sandmen

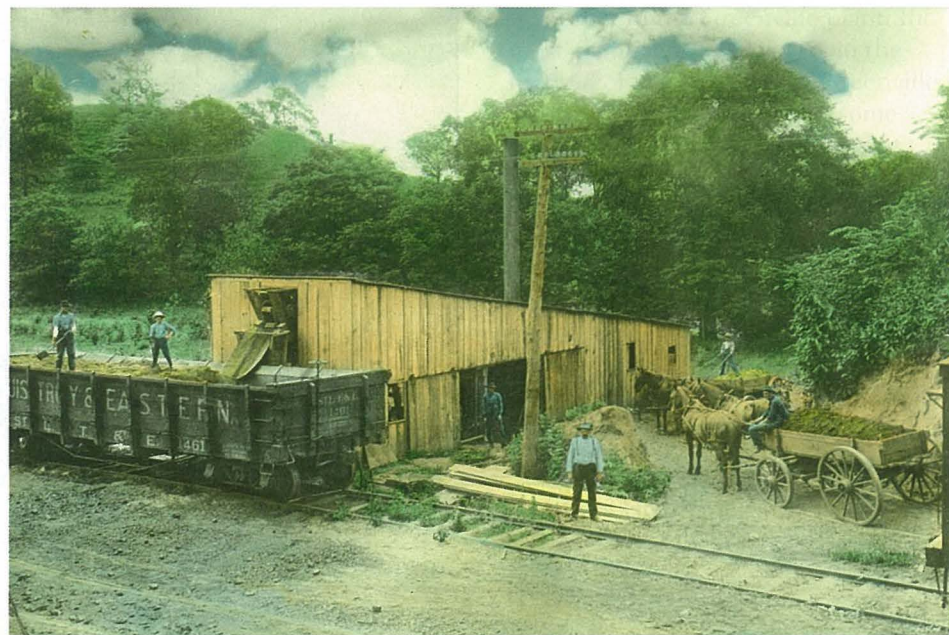
How one Illinois family built a business and a life in an ancient seabed

Story and photos by Cindy Reinhardt

When Gustav Nicol, Sr. started his molding sand* business in 1903, he could not have anticipated the impact it would have on three generations of his family. The business would bring both financial success and depression before steadily flourishing after World War II. From Southern Illinois to Northwestern Illinois, the location of molding sand would dictate the migration and affluence of the family for many years.

In 1897, Gustav and Mary Tribout Nicol returned to Illinois after a financially disastrous farming venture in Arkansas. Family legend says they went to Arkansas from Belleville, Illinois, with a train car of furniture and three children and returned four years later with “five kids and five dollars”.

Gustav, who came from a family of



Nicol Sand Company ca. 1902 Collinsville, Illinois.

farmers and coal miners, leased a farm on Boul's Hill in French Village, Illinois. The farmhouse was a primitive log cabin with a packed dirt floor suitable only for washing and storage, but there was a four-room addition – a bedroom and kitchen downstairs, and two bedrooms upstairs. Gustav, his wife Mary, and six children shared this small living area. Often Mary's brother, Ed Tribout, also stayed with them.

Besides the crowded living condi-

tions, Gustav had other problems.

When he returned from Arkansas, he borrowed money to purchase a team of horses and a wagon. With these he was able to farm his land and haul rails for the St. Louis and O'Fallon Railroad. But he was in debt, and anxious to find a solution to his financial situation.

Nicol Sand Company beginnings

In 1898, a man named Meier from Belleville, Illinois, approached Gustav about a job loading sand. Gustav accepted and worked for Meier until 1903, when he formed his own business. Gustav's oldest son, Irvin Nicol, remembered when his father decided to go into business for himself. “We hitched up the wagon and went to Collinsville all along the bluff looking for sand. And he come to the sand cut down here and leased them hills down there for three dollars a (train) car load.” Gustav sold the sand for eight dollars per car.

Gustav loaded sand the same way Meier had. The overburden of dirt and vegetable matter was stripped away to expose the sand. Then the sand was loaded into wagons and taken to the railroad spur nearby, where it was loaded into train cars in the same form as it came from the ground. In those days, all the work was done with a pick and shovel.

In 1905, Gustav built a mixing plant to break up the sand and make it



Gustav and Mary Tribout Nicol Family in 1914. Front row from left, Elsie, Mary Tribout Nicol, holding Elmer, Gustav, Jr., Gustav Nicol, Sr., Howard, Louise. Back from left, Edward, Irwin, Ida, Alma, Albert, Roy.

*Molding sand, also known as foundry sand, is sand that when moistened or oiled tends to pack well and hold its shape.
Courtesy Wikipedia



Nicol Sand Company workers in the 1920s. In the first photo, the big man in the white shirt is Gustav Nicol, Sr.



One of the ill-fated Armleder trucks. The men were identified as from left Bob Hamm, Henry Hartman, Bill Dufelmeier and Leo Jones. The photo was taken in Arenzville, Illinois.

Workers in the 1920s. Notice the peg leg worker.

more uniform, but that was the only change he ever made in his end product.

Hard labor and sporadic work resulted in a high turnover of employees who were laid off after each order was filled. During his thirteen years in Collinsville, Gustav hired dozens of men. Most left after a short time. Family members were the most consistent workers. Two of Gustav's sons, Ed and Irvin, worked for him from the time they were young boys.

Searching for Sand

While Gustav mined sand in Collinsville, he was aware that sand deposits would eventually be depleted. The first new deposit he located was in Columbia, Illinois. Ed and Irvin were sent to work this pit, while Gustav remained in Collinsville. The Columbia deposit was worked for two

years, in 1913 and 1914.

In late 1914, Gustav expanded his business by leasing land in Greenville where he would have access to their coarse sand. Now when an order came in, Irvin Nicol would catch the train to Greenville and load the sand. By 1916 Irvin had moved to Greenville, and they had a permanent operation going there. That year brought other changes for the business when mining operations in Collinsville were discontinued. However, the office of Nicol Sand Company remained in a building behind Gustav's home at 817 W. Clay Street in Collinsville.

Meanwhile, they started mining a large deposit of sand that extended irregularly some two miles north from Arenzville, Illinois, along the lower slopes of the valley wall. In a short family history written by Ida Nicol in the 1960s, she told about the discovery

of sand in Cass County.

"One day when [Gustav] was cleaning out a boxcar, a hobo told him that there were sand hills between Beardstown and Arenzville, Ill. [Gustav] took a trip by train to investigate the hobo's story and through the train windows he noticed some beautiful sand hills near Arenzville. So, on the way back, he stopped to investigate the sand, and found it to be good molding sand."

Irvin was sent north to start the Arenzville operation, but after a few weeks, he was needed in Greenville, so Ed Nicol became the manager at Arenzville. About a year later, Ed joined the army and Gustav's third son, Albert, entered the sand business for the first time. At the young age of 20 he became manager of the Arenzville branch of Nicol Sand Company.

During these early years there was



Nicol Sand Company truck.

only one serious accident. It occurred at the Greenville pit on January 31, 1918, when a frozen bank gave way creating a small avalanche of frozen soil near a group of men loading a wagon. According to the *Greenville Advocate*, Walter File was "struck in the groin with a large piece of frozen dirt." A doctor was called immediately, but File was suffering from both shock and exposure. Although he seemed at first to be recovering, his condition suddenly deteriorated and he died that same evening. Death was attributed to the effects of the shock as well as a heart condition. Fortunately, serious accidents at the Nicol Sand Company were rare, and there was never another that resulted in loss of life.

The years during and immediately after World War I brought financial prosperity to the Nicol family, whose years of log cabin living were far

behind them. Gustav's daughter Louise remembered, "When I was confirmed in 1920, that was some of the best years my father had. He took in \$50,000 that year." Although an impressive income for the time, Gustav was unable to save during those years, largely due to some poor investments.

During the 1920s Gustav Nicol, Sr. ran the office in Collinsville and did some sales work, although most of their orders were through sand brokers like Manley Sand Company, Carpenter Brothers Sand Company, or Warren Sand Company. Albert Nicol was the plant manager in Arenzville and Irvin Nicol managed the Greenville pit. Ed Nicol alternated between plants as needed.

Mechanization changes operations

The Greenville and Arenzville operations became very different at

this time. In the Greenville plant, the most significant change was in the method of mining sand. In Greenville the company had purchased some large Armleder trucks in 1918 that turned out to be very expensive failures. The trucks were too heavy to move on sand. Their big solid tires dug into the sand or slipped. By 1920, these were traded for lighter, ton-and-a-half Ford trucks, which worked very well.

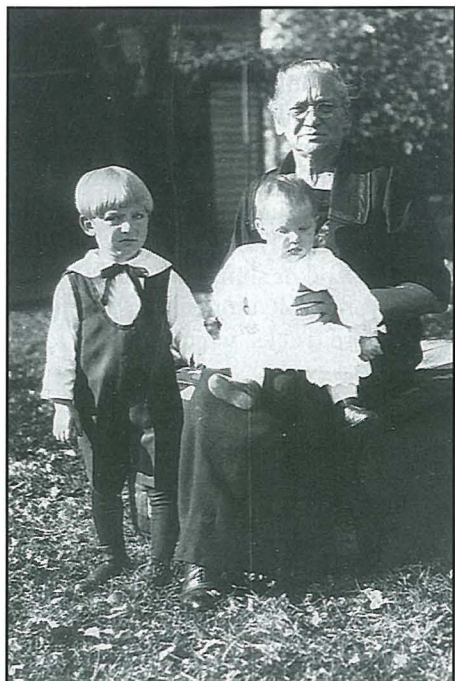
Also during the 1920s the company began experimenting with mechanical shovels. The first was a steam shovel which proved as disastrous as the Armleder trucks. Men could be hired to do the work for less than it cost to run the steam shovel. Fortunately, a gasoline powered shovel they introduced in 1924 proved effective and greatly reduced the amount of manpower required to load a car of sand.

Although Irvin Nicol was manager of this branch throughout the 1920s, the location of the pit did not remain the same. Until 1922, they worked a pit near the Catholic Cemetery in Greenville. Then, from 1922-1926 they worked a sand deposit about 1½ miles east of Tamalco, also in Bond County. After 1926, Irvin returned to Greenville, but worked a new area near the present day Greenville hospital.

While the Greenville operation was making all these advances, Albert was still loading sand with pick and shovel in Arenzville. The mechanical shovel worked well on Greenville's thick uniform veins of sand, but the Arenzville sand lay in narrower strata. During the 1920s and 1930s, no



Savanna, Illinois plant in the 1940s



Eliza Lovekamp Nobis's husband, William, was ill and unable to work in the years before his death in 1920, so she rented out a room in their house for income. When Albert Nicol came to Arenzville he rented a room from the Nobis family, took a shine to their daughter, Ida, and eventually convinced her to marry him. The Albert Nicol family eventually purchased the house and she continued to live with them until her death. Pictured here is Eliza with her grandchildren, Wilbur (left) and Muriel Nicol in their yard in Arenzville, IL. Circa 1923.

machine yet existed with the precision to pick up one layer of sand and leave the unwanted layers alone. Arenzville was also behind Greenville in getting trucks, but by the early 1920s, the horses were gone.

Nicol Sand Company incorporates

On November 19, 1927, Gustav Nicol Sand Company became an Illinois corporation. Their assets included leaseholds, loading stations, and equipment in Arenzville and Greenville. One hundred and fifty shares of no par, common stock were issued at \$100 per share. These shares were all purchased by family members. Gustav Nicol, Sr. owned 60 shares, and the following of his children and

sons-in-law each owned 10 shares.

In 1927 when the corporation was formed, the company was doing well, providing a comfortable living for several Nicol families. Then came the stock market crash of 1929. According to Irvin, they loaded 660 cars of sand in Greenville for the year 1929. In 1930 the full force of the Depression was felt when they loaded only 30 cars of sand.

The Depression years

When the Great Depression came the family was hit hard. According to Irwin, business dropped sharply as foundries closed, leaving the business with many unpaid bills. Sometime between late 1929 and 1930, Albert took over most of the debts in exchange for the Arenzville operation. This helped the financial situation for the rest of the family, but by 1933 Gustav had lost the family home in Collinsville.

The Depression marked the end of the Greenville operation. This branch remained on the books as an active corporation until October 6, 1942, but the company never loaded more than 45 cars a year after the stock market crashed. The family members who had invested in the corporation lost their money.

Irvin Nicol left the company in 1930 to find work elsewhere. Gustav, Sr. then ran what was left of the company until 1931 when Gustav, Jr. came to work for him. As Gustav, Jr. recalled, "When I started, there really was no business left. In fact, I worked from 1931 to 1934 and then went to work for the county because they didn't have enough work to support me. Grandpa (Gustav, Sr.) was paying me \$15 a week whenever he could. And sometimes I got it, and sometimes I didn't."

Usually, when there was an order to load, Gustav Jr. would call on two local men to help him load, but there were times when he couldn't afford to hire them, and would find himself loading the sand alone. Other times one of the son-in-laws from Collinsville would work a day or two.

By the mid-1930s, Gustav, Sr. was living in Greenville and helped out when he could, but he had been injured when pinned between a truck

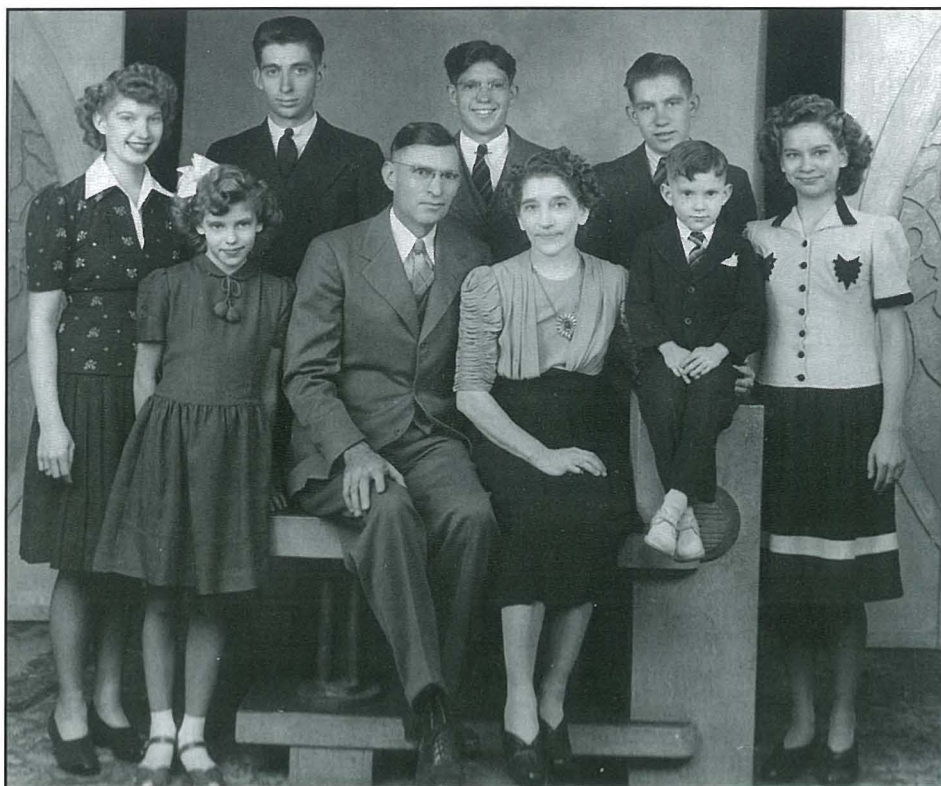
and a sandbank. He also suffered a heart attack at about that time, so the company was taken over by his sons. Roy Nicol supervised the work in Greenville after Gustav, Jr. left in 1934. Roy had always kept the books, but now when an order came in he would contact Bud Beims or Charlie Willman, who would fill the orders for him using Nicol equipment.

With Greenville's operations all but closed, Arenzville was the only going concern left. Albert's oldest son, Wilbur, wrote, "During the Depression years, Dad struggled to bring the Nicol Sand Company from near bankruptcy to a solid financial business. I have many vivid memories of these, my teenage years. For example, going along with Dad to Quincy or Litchfield on 'drumming trips' when he called on foundries selling his sand. Dad also put in a lot of physical work with pick and shovel."

To get by during the Depression, Albert's family lived with Elizabeth Nobis, Albert's mother-in-law, so there were no housing costs. Food was



Four generations: (Age order or clockwise from lower left)) Gustav Nicol, Albert Nicol, Wilbur Nicol and Kirby Nicol; Circa 1942.



Albert and Ida Nicol Family in 1941 before Lee and Albert left for service in WW II. Front from left, Shirley, Albert, Ida, Dwight (on pedestal). Back from left, Muriel, Wilbur, Lee, Albert, Jr., and Joyce.

always plentiful thanks to a large garden, home butchering of hogs in winter, raising their own chickens, hunting wild game, and fishing in the local rivers and streams. They only needed to buy staples from Zulauf's store in Arenzville, but even these items were often purchased on credit. Wilbur wrote, "We were just desperately poor. The thing that made it bearable was that everyone was in the same straits."

The sand business couldn't generate enough cash to provide for a family of three adults and seven children. Albert's oldest daughter, Muriel, wrote, "I can remember Dad going to the post office every day, hoping against hope that he might get an order. Usually he didn't." When there were no orders, Albert tried to find other work. During the summers he would hire out to farmers and help cut and thrash grain. In the winters he would cut wood.

Business never ceased completely during this period. According to Roy McCloud, who worked for Albert from 1930 to 1941, they'd fill an order and then wait a week or more for another. It usually took six men to load a 30-40

ton car of sand in a day in the early 1930s. If the men worked a full six-day week, they were paid \$18.00 for the week's wage.

In winter, Albert and his employees sometimes worked 10-11 hours in just one day to finish a car because of the frozen ground. They often had to open the frozen banks by dynamiting the frost out of the ground. In later years less dynamite was used because they learned to cover the ground during winter with three or four feet of straw to keep the frost at a minimum.

Even with the work slowdown, the business continued to show progress. Up until the mid-1930s, the sand was loaded into trucks, hauled to the train, and then shoveled off the trucks into the train cars. A big improvement was made when the company built a dump on the hill above the tracks. With this addition, they were able to back up the truck, dump the sand, and then let gravity move the sand down the chute into the train cars below. Later, Albert fashioned a "mill" from some old threshing machine cylinders to improve his product by grinding the lumps and blending. Following this

was the purchase of a small Steadman Mill. Foundry technology by this time had advanced to demand the testing of sand for clay content, strength and permeability, so Albert set up a small laboratory to do this work.

Manley Sand Company

In the mid-1930s, Albert made business connections with Manley Sand Company of Rockton, Illinois, producers as well as brokers in the foundry sand field. As Albert's son, Wilbur, wrote, "They came to depend on Dad to furnish their 'fine' sand line. To Dad the advantage was to relieve himself of the selling part of the business so that he could concentrate on the production end. Also, Dad could, through Manley, get such large customers as International Harvester, John Deere, etc."

By 1938-1939, just as the economy was heating up on the threshold of World War II, the sand deposits around Arenzville were nearly depleted. At the same time, the deposits in the Savanna, Illinois area were discovered by one of the Manley brothers. The strategic location near foundry centers and on two railroad lines was recognized at once. Because of Albert's experience and ability, Manley asked him to develop these deposits for them.

Despite dwindling reserves of sand in Arenzville, Albert was reluctant to move his family. He had strong ties to Arenzville and was particularly concerned that Savanna had no Lutheran school for his younger children. Albert began training Wilbur to take over operations in Savanna so that he would be able to spend less time on the road and more time with his family.

Savanna's sand proved to be of excellent quality and in great quantities. Wilbur wrote in one letter, "We found some exceptionally fine sand on the Gridley property (site of Savanna's present Methodist Church). The Milwaukee Railroad property where the mill was built was also a sizable deposit. Then we opened up the deposits on the Mamie Florian farm. We also mined some sand on the Earl Boothby property, site of the present city dump. The Savanna deposits were

unique in that they varied in grain size from the very finest to medium coarse, thus giving us a product for the smallest aluminum and bronze castings (or for gray and malleable iron.”

World War II brought new demands for the foundry sand business. Before the war, the sand business catered to customers such as International Harvester, John Deere, J. I. Case, Maytag, and many smaller firms. During the war they shipped exclusively to defense plants. Maytag, who during the war manufactured B-29 gun turrets instead of washtubs, at one time was calling for three car loads of sand per week from Nicol Sand Company. Wilbur Nicol was given a draft deferment for two years because of the Maytag account.

But the war also brought shortages that made business difficult. The Savanna Ordinance Depot was rapidly expanding because of the war, and the railroad and construction industries were also booming. The result was a shortage of both manpower and housing in the Savanna area. Nicol Sand Company began “importing” men from Arenzville where the going wage was 25¢ an hour, compared to the 40¢-50¢ an hour wage being paid in Savanna.

The company built a shed-type bunkhouse to sleep twelve men. Divided into three rooms, there was a sleeping section with bunk beds, kitchen facilities and Albert’s office/laboratory. During the bunkhouse years, the men came to Savanna to work during the week, and drove home to Arenzville on weekends. At one time, as many as 16 men were commuting to work in Savanna, where they lived in the bunkhouse.

As the war went on, the commuting workers became a problem as shortages of gasoline and tires increased. This was relieved somewhat with the purchase of a newly invented tractor end-loader. For the first time, the sand could be loaded with a power shovel instead of being shoveled by hand, reducing the demand for labor. In 1943, Albert bought two houses in Savanna and persuaded Charles Long and Werner Lovekamp (distant relations) to move to Savanna with their families to work at the mill. By this time Wilbur had married and had a



Albert Nicol home on Chicago Avenue in Savanna, Illinois in 1940s (still in existence).

home in Savanna and another worker, Luther Lovekamp, was living in Savanna, so they were able to abandon the bunkhouse system.)

Things were going smoothly for the two plants until Wilbur lost his deferment in October 1944 and left for military service. For a short time, Albert tried to run both plants himself, but it was physically impossible for one man to maintain two plants 190 miles apart. Even with an “A” card allowing him to buy gasoline and tires without rationing restraints, available cars, gasoline, and tires for the trips back and forth were scarce.

It was about this time that Harold Buck entered the sand business. A week after “Buck” married Albert’s daughter, Muriel, Albert asked his new son-in-law to move to Savanna to work for him. Muriel said of those times, “Dad needed help desperately and Buck was (classified) 4-F since he is deaf in one ear. So, our plans changed and we moved to Savanna in January of 1945.”

Muriel went on to describe their first few months in Savanna. “The town was overflowing with people and everyone, even the farmers who had empty rooms, or even a shed they could empty, rented them out to SAD (Savanna Army Depot) employees and their families. Needless to say, there was no place for Buck and I to rent, so we moved into the old bunkhouse down by the sand mill, along with Dad, Bob Roegge, and a couple other workers.” Muriel took care of the office, as she had done for a while in Arenzville,

until August 1945, when Albert hired Miriam Kreuder as secretary.

Fortunately, this living arrangement didn’t last long. In the spring of 1945, Albert bought a house on Chicago Avenue and with great reluctance moved his wife and children to Savanna. In addition to his home on Chicago Avenue, Albert bought two additional properties, the 80 acre Florian Farm and the 55 acres around his mill. For the first time in the history of the company, they were no longer paying royalties for sand.

Another technological improvement for the company came in 1942-1943, when Albert bought a rotary dryer. Until this time they had always been at the mercy of the weather. On wet days they loaded wet sand and on dry days they loaded dry sand. The sand now went through a series of screens, which took the roots out, through the dryer, and out on a conveyor belt. This was one of the last major changes in the molding sand production process for Nicol Sand Company.

Post War prosperity

After the war, business remained good, even without the work for defense plants. The Nicol boys who were in the service returned home and went to work for the sand company. Albert Jr. stayed only a short time before moving to the state of Oregon, leaving Wilbur and Lee to work with Albert.

In July of 1949, Wilbur decided to

leave the sand business and start farming. After Wilbur's departure, Albert and Lee were the only family members left in the sand company on a full time basis.

The year 1950 brought major changes to Nicol Sand Company. The Milwaukee Railroad decided to expand their yards, so the old plant and bunkhouse had to be torn down and moved to a new location. At the same time, they also built a new office and laboratory where they could run complete tests on every car of sand they shipped, including clay tests, screen tests, permeability tests, moisture tests, and green strength tests.

Also in the early 1950s, the business stepped up their production of sands other than natural-bonded molding sand. They began furnishing sand for blacktop. It was a fine sand, used in the final layer of blacktop. Lee wrote, "The first job that used our sand was Chicago Avenue in Savanna when it was widened and blacktopped, and Route 64 between Mt. Carroll and Polo Junction, also Mt. Morris to Rochelle. We trucked sand to Freeport


for streets in Freeport also."

The sand business continued to operate successfully during the 1950s. As in the previous decade, two of their largest customers were still Maytag and International Harvester. They also sold to Muskegon Piston Ring Company and Frank's Foundries.

End of an era

In January of 1960, Albert arranged a deal to sell Nicol Sand Company to Portage Manley Sand Company. After the final sale, Albert signed a contract with Manley to work in an advisory capacity and to assist in managing the Savanna plant. When the Savanna pit was closed in July of 1962, Albert became responsible for upkeep of the property until his contract expired in January of 1964 when he retired. The men working for Albert when the plant closed were hired by Manley at their plant in Oregon, Illinois. Lee Nicol, who made the move to Oregon, would spend his entire career in the sand business.

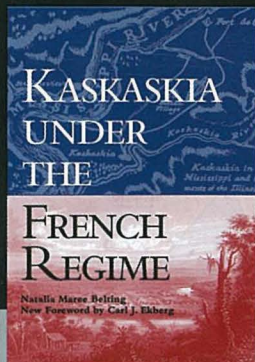
Although this marked the end of the Nicol Sand Company, there is

evidence of its existence today. The ground where they mined sand has been leveled and covered with new growth, but landscapes in many Illinois counties were changed. Gustav Nicol's entrepreneurial spirit greatly influenced his family as they moved north in Illinois. And several generations of Nicol men, even those that didn't remain in the sand business, found their vocation as operators of heavy equipment, a legacy from their fathers and grandfathers, the sandmen. 

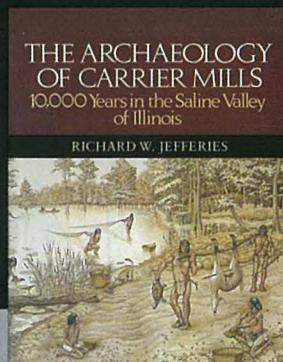
Note: Although the company also at times used "Gust Nicol Sand Company" and "Arenzville Molding Sand Company," the name "Nicol Sand Company," was most commonly used, thus is referenced throughout this article.

Author Cindy Reinhardt is the great granddaughter of Gustav Nicol. Material for this article is from family documents and from a series of recorded interviews and letters collected by her in 1979. Reinhardt is the author of two books on the history of Leclaire and Edwardsville, Illinois.

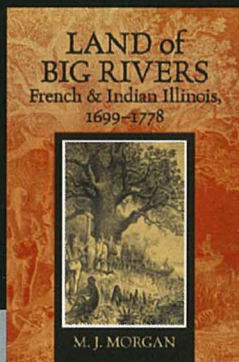
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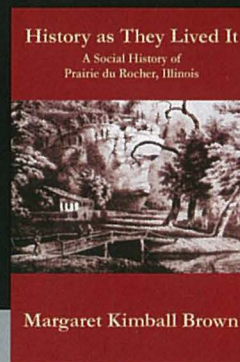
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