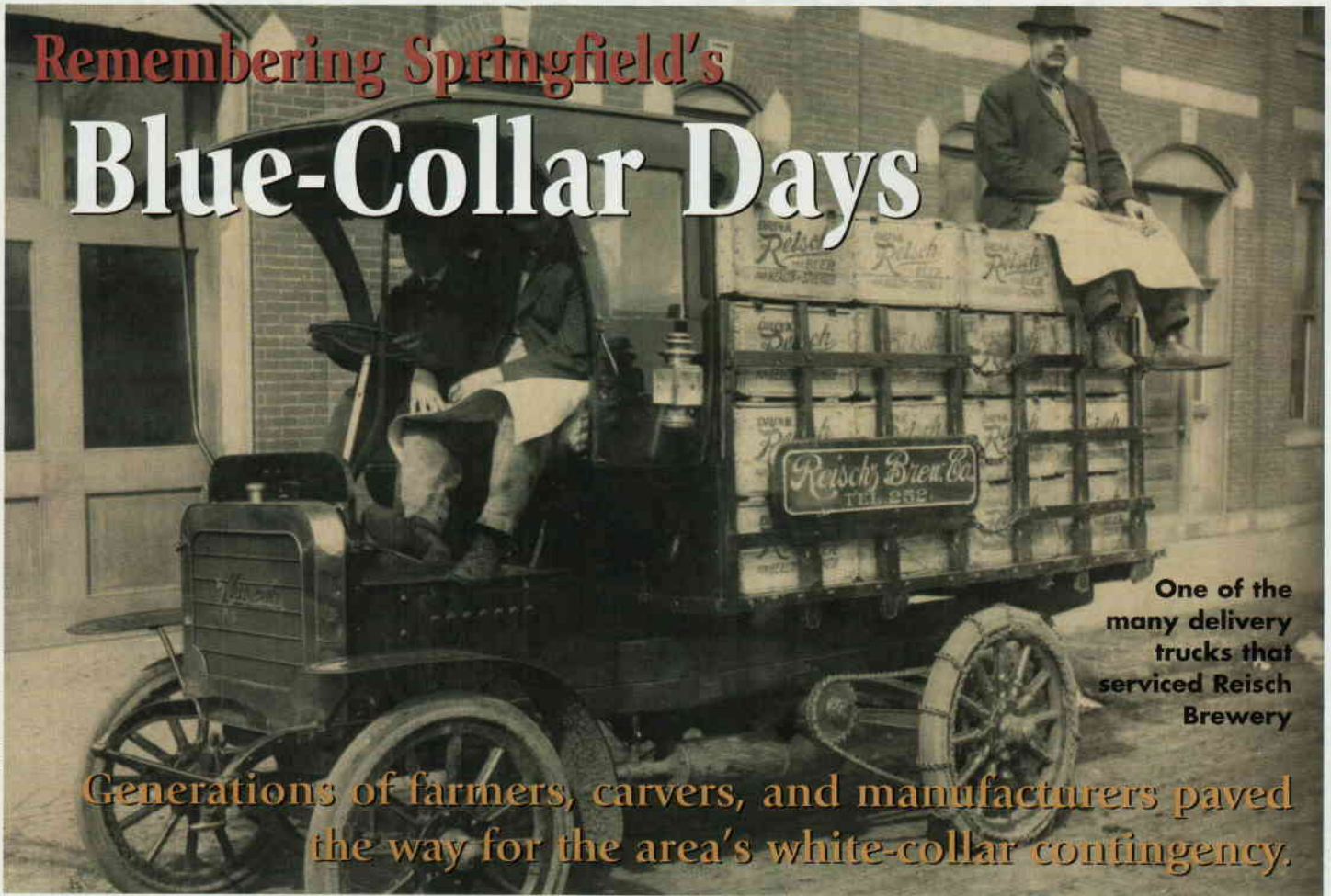


Remembering Springfield's Blue-Collar Days

Photo courtesy of the Illinois State Historic Library and the Sangamon Valley Collection



One of the many delivery trucks that serviced Reisch Brewery

Generations of farmers, carvers, and manufacturers paved the way for the area's white-collar contingency.

BY DAN NAUMOVICH

When Abe Lincoln arrived in Springfield, there were already 11 lawyers in a town of approximately 1,000 people. Had he not been a man of strong will and profound vision, he may have been discouraged by the tight job market for his chosen profession and settled back into a career swinging an axe. Today there are more than 1,000 lawyers working in the Springfield area and, not surprisingly, few log cabins. A long line of laborers who knew how to work with their hands built the white-collar state capitol we know today.

Today, state government is the city's main attraction for those looking for a steady wage, but it was the rich soil and plentiful water supply that drew folks to central Illinois years ago. With the farmers came the carvers, coppersmiths, and churn manufacturers to serve them. Indispensable in their day, these individuals would have a tough time making a go of it in 2001. Even farmers in central Illinois, who have decreased in numbers, have seen better days.

You can still follow in your great-great-grandfather's footsteps if he was one of the

three barkeeps listed in the 1860 Springfield city directory. Throughout its history, Springfield has been home to several breweries. In its heyday, the workers at Reisch Brewery produced 80,000 barrels a year. The Illinois Watch Company, Allis Chalmers, Pillsbury Mills, and Sangamo Electric also

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provided the kinds of manufacturing jobs that the times demanded for a healthy economy. But these names are just memories in Springfield now. When the churn manufacturer was phased out of the local job scene, most of the big manufacturers chose to move away. Pillsbury is still making cakes, and Fiat Allis (the local descendent of Allis Chalmers) is still making tractors. They are just doing it somewhere else. Sangamo changed names and headed to South Carolina, with many of its employees choosing to stay behind.

If given the choice, the job market today favors a strong mind over a strong back. To illustrate this point, consider the situation of two different types of engineers. At one time, working coal mines were scattered throughout the region, employing large numbers of people. By 2008, the number of mining safety engineers in Sangamon County is expected to decrease by 100 percent. During that same time period, the number of computer engineers is expected to increase 83 percent.

While Springfieldians may bemoan the loss of blue-collar jobs, they should be comforted by the fact that industries employing the largest numbers of our citizens today are less volatile. Although not immune to the effects of an economic downturn, state government and healthcare organizations aren't likely to pack their bags and hop a train out of town. As highways become increasingly congested and pollution continues to threaten the environment, some predict the railways will once again be the favored form of transportation. This next great rail age will no doubt need many skilled laborers. ■