A Fortunate Life
A Friends’ Personality
By Gordon Eriksen

For a future history professor in a midwestern university, Hamilton, Ohio is a great place to grow up. Hamilton is a small city north of Cincinnati which was originally named Fort Hamilton, after Alexander Hamilton, in 1791. As Robert Hahn II, this issue’s Friends’ Personality, remarked, “Hamilton was the sort of town that had edges. I could walk a half mile from my home and be in the country, in the fields and woods north of town.” The Hahn family has lived in Hamilton for generations. His father was the supervisor of a machine shop; his mother of strong Irish stock was a home-maker. Robert and his brother attended the local public schools from which Robert graduated in 1941. He was able to study for two years at Miami University, but joined the U.S. Army in the late spring of 1943 in the midst of World War II.

When Robert comments on his war experiences, he points out that, unlike World War I, which had a high degree of unrelieved carnage, WWII was, for him, a great learning experience. The first “world” conflict had been fought on a few square miles of northeastern France. World War II was a global war; the allies fought in places that were unknown to them except possibly by name. Most of the soldiers had been geographically limited by a decade of depression; the truly world-wide travel that military service often required and offered was a liberating experience for those with an interest in places, history, people, self-discovery. For a young man from an industrial community in southern Ohio, even his first long trip by train to San Diego was unprecedented.

Military travel was less than speedy and efficient in the 1940s since supersonic jets were not yet available, and troop trains did not receive priority scheduling. In fact, they were bumped by any other traffic on the lines. Bob Hahn recalls all too clearly the long, slow ride that ended at Camp Callen north of La Jolla, where he spent the next 17 weeks in basic training, including two weeks in the Borrego Desert east of San Diego. His next stop in his military career was the AST (Army specialized training) program, first at a junior college in Compton, CA, and later at UCLA. Once “trained,” Bob joined a mortar battalion at Camp Roberts followed by a posting at Camp Carson, located in the mountains above Colorado Springs. Such a good life could not last, and in the late summer of 1944, the battalion embarked for England—and the war. Although not involved in D-Day, the unit found more than enough action in Belgium, Holland, and Northern Germany.

Demobilized after returning to the States in the late summer of 1945, Hahn returned to his home in Ohio on February 7, 1946, just one day after the beginning of the spring semester at Miami University. He rushed to the campus, was permitted to enroll late, and by July of 1947, he had earned his Bachelor of Arts, cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa. A master’s degree in history was completed by the summer of 1949 at Ohio State University. Along the way, Bob had acquired good French skills and some German so he was an excellent candidate for the Fulbright Scholarship that he received in 1951 to study for 15 months at the University of Strasbourg. From his Strasbourg studies, a dissertation emerged—an investigation of German unification efforts in the Revolution of 1848, and the influence of the French government on these efforts. The work was accepted at Ohio State University, and he received his Ph.D. in December 1955, with a specialization in early modern European history and English constitutional history.

Dr. Hahn’s first academic post was at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. Given his international experience and interest, it was not surprising that he was appointed Foreign Student Advisor one year after his initial appointment. One of his advisees was Gabriele Puetter, whose family had lived in Stralsund, Germany for more than three centuries, and who came to Knox as a foreign exchange student. Advisor and advisee came to know each other well, and some years later, Gabriele became Mrs. Hahn. They have raised four remarkable children: Robert III, a WMU graduate who is a lawyer in Detroit; Christine, a Kalamazoo College graduate who is a physician in Boise, Idaho; Sigrid, a WMU graduate, who is a physician in St. Louis; and Nicolette, a Kalamazoo College graduate, who is a well-known lawyer and City Commissioner in Kalamazoo.

In 1961, Robert Hahn was enticed to Kalamazoo to join the faculty of the Department of History at Western Michigan University. For thirty-two years, he taught hundreds of students and served the institution with distinction and style. A self-proclaimed “quiet man,” he spent his time instilling a love of history in all with whom he came in contact. Near the conclusion of his interview, he raised an eyebrow and noted: “You haven’t asked me how I became interested in history.” This is what he said:

“I grew up in a town which had historical significance. My mother always read to us, usually from myths and legends which are a part of pre-history. I knew all four of my grandparents with whom I frequently took Sunday drives where we visited cemeteries to study family histories. History was taught throughout my school years: Beacon readers in the first and second grades, general history in the fifth and sixth grades, American history in the seventh and eighth grades, and European history in the tenth through the eleventh grades, and another year of American history in the twelfth grade. I never lost my interest in and love of history that was rooted in this tremendous exposure during every year of elementary and secondary schooling as well as at home.”

Robert Hahn II, historian, believes he has lived a fortunate, even privileged life. Perhaps it is because he has always taught that a knowledge of where he, and we, came from brings a unique understanding of where he, and we, are going. Or, as Shakespeare said in Henry IV, Part 2:

“There is a history in all men’s lives, Figuring the nature of the times deceas’d, The which observer’d, a man may prophesy, With a near aim, of the main chance of things As yet not come to life, which in their seeds And weak beginnings lie treasured.”