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 origi-
nally 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) pro-
gram, first at a junior college in
Compton, CA, and later at UCLA.
Once "trained," Bob joined a mort-
ar battalion at Camp Roberts fol-
lowed 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 gov-
ernment 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 remark-
able 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 grad-
uate, 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 from whom 1 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 expo-
sure 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 under-
standing 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'ed,
The which observe'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 intreasured."