

# Robert

Just doing what  
he wants to do  
— experience  
life from the  
other side of a  
desk.

The walls of the studio are lined with his work. Neatly framed watercolors hang beside stark black-on-white sketches. Models of proposed buildings jut from the corners. Wooden work tables, scattered with tubes of paint and scraps of unfinished projects, fill the backroom. And amidst the clutter stands Robert Hanna, wearing a blue denim apron and a friendly smile. He looks content. He looks relaxed. Robert Hanna looks like a man who is doing exactly what he wants to do. And, in fact, he is.

Hanna says he's found the secret to happiness — his, anyway. But it took him awhile.

Ten years ago, Hanna was a full partner in the architectural firm of Bahr, Hanna, Vermeer and Haecker, with offices in Lincoln and Omaha. He was, by society's standards, a real success story. But Hanna saw it differently.

One day, he realized his life was not headed in the direction he wanted.

He quit the firm and went into private practice, leaving behind the problems of what he terms a sometimes too competitive profession.

At 46, Hanna has become a more unconventional architect.

He still does design work, acting mainly as a "hired gun" for firms located throughout the Midwest. He says he enjoys concentrating on design work because he is not involved with production, or, as he put it, "the headaches of building a building."

"And nobody sues me, so I've got the best of it."

But Hanna has broadened his world since he "retired" from the fast track. His real joy, he says, comes from doing sketches and watercolors.

His favorite subjects, are buildings which reflect memories of his childhood near Grand Island. The culmination of that work can be found in Hanna's first book, "Sketches of Nebraska," published in 1984 by the University of Nebraska Press.

The hardback publication contains 124 sketches of buildings which Hanna feels portray the originality, strength and vitality of Nebraska's carpenters, architects and engineers.

Originally, Hanna says, the publishers wanted to include only buildings located in Lincoln and Omaha, since the main buying public was there. Hanna balked at the idea.

"I told them that everybody who lives in Omaha and Lincoln came from towns like Willow Island and Alveda. And the strange thing was, we wound up throwing out all the drawings of Omaha."

"Sketches of Nebraska" has been a regional success. It is among the best selling books in Nebraska, Hanna says, and has gone into a second printing. That pleases him, of course.

He also enjoys the responses he gets at book signings and from telephone calls.

An 85-year-old man once called from



Story by  
Kristin Ward

North Platte to comment on a drawing of a Beaver Crossing railroad depot he had seen in Hanna's book. Hanna asked him if he liked the depot.

"Hell no," the old man replied. "I don't like railroad depots." But in back of the depot was an elevator. And that, said the old man, is where as a boy, he had heard a radio for the first time.

Responses like that, Hanna says, make him happy he completed the book.

Hanna says he also hoped that, by calling attention to some of the buildings, some effort may be made to preserve them. Unfortunately, many of the structures have been destroyed since the book's publication, both by natural disasters and demolition.

"... I'd do them (the sketches) and then I'd come back and the buildings would be gone. So I'd tell anybody that if they wanted any building removed, just have me go out and sketch it and it'll be gone in about a month."

Hanna's second book is now in the works. This book will have more interior sketches, he says, highlighting things that have been discarded with the rise of fast-food chains and department stores. Things like soda fountains and small roadside cafes.

Hanna is also mapping the location of

Nebraska's disappearing towns. The map, which he has titled, "Lost Towns of Nebraska," only includes towns which are no longer in existence.

"I thought it'd make an interesting place mat for bars and restaurants along the interstate. Visitors would look at it and try and find Omaha or Lincoln. But they wouldn't be there. It'd be like, 'Where are we?' It'd be like a 'Twilight Zone.'"

But as happy as Hanna sounds, he is the first to admit that making the transition from tough competitive architecture to his present, more relaxed, lifestyle was not easy. He credits his family with helping him.

"They've stuck with me through all of the changes and the things that I've done."

Changes are also occurring at home for Hanna and his wife, Arlene, who, he jokes, has been married to him for "almost a hundred years."

Since their three children have moved away (Laura is married and living in Colorado; Bob and Lisa are students at UNL) he "has to develop a relationship all over again with (his) wife," he says with a grin.

"There's no noise. It's quiet all the time... It's a strange transition." Hanna says he has no regrets about leaving the firm.