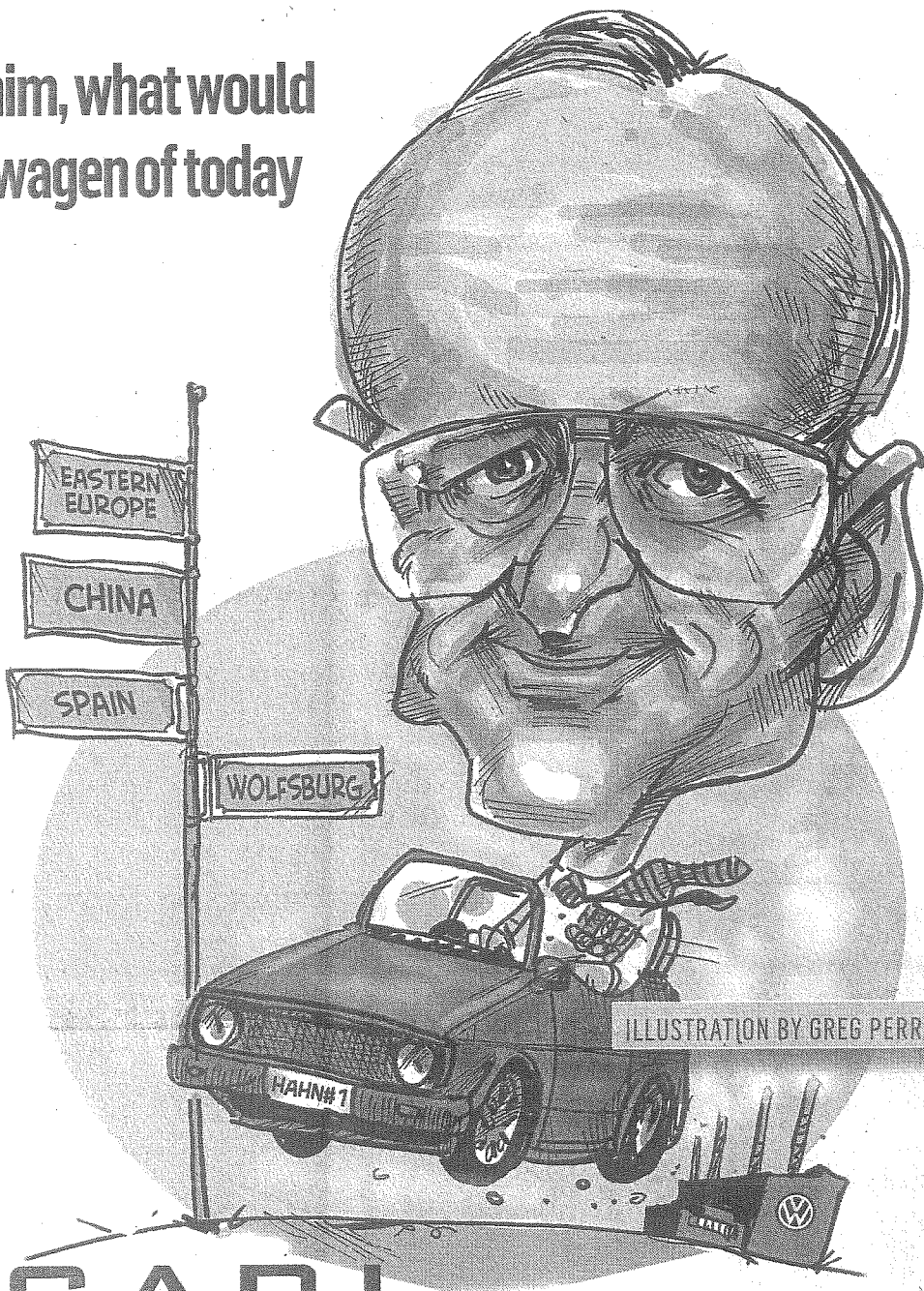


Without him, what would the Volkswagen of today look like?



PRO-FILES
Automotive legends and heroes



CARL HAHN

BY JASON STEIN • Wheelbase Media

It used to be called "Golf Town," except the driving was done on asphalt instead of a green fairway.

Take a cruise through this sleepy, industrial city of fewer than 100,000 souls, and there are Volkswagen Golfs everywhere. Blue Golfs. Red Golfs. Golfs of every shape and color and year.

It's no secret the little car helped build Wolfsburg, Volkswagen's central headquarters in northern Germany, and vice versa.

The Golf made the brown smokestacks that still rise out of nothing in the German countryside churn and burn. Carl Hahn made them burn hotter.

He will be remembered for many things in his decade as the leader of Germany's largest automaker. But he will never be forgotten for turning Volkswagen into an empire.

In simple terms, the soft-spoken — yet often-quoted — man turned VW from a German manufacturer focused on a single mission and a single car into a multi-brand international giant.

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» HAHN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Need proof?

Does Audi technology ring a bell?

Does China seem like a good market to be in these days if you're an automaker?

Hahn helped VW tap into all of it, moving the company into the global business before before the term "global economy" ever caught on.

Looking at Hahn's profile, it's really no surprise.

Born in Germany, educated in Switzerland and France and every bit multilingual, Hahn was always a little more forward-thinking than the next guy. Actually, truth be told, he was more interested in the business of cars rather than simply being known as a "car guy."

He didn't begin working professionally until he was nearly 30, accepting an administrator position at the European Productivity Agency, which was a pseudo-think tank in Europe.

But Hahn was a mover.

He accepted an automotive job with VW in 1954, first as the automaker's export promotion manager, then quickly worked his way up to chief executive officer of Volkswagen of America. In the United States, he understood the Beetle phenomena and rode it to great success.

The Beetle was a cult-status car and Hahn realized its potential and made the most of it.

Within 10 years with VW, he was a full member of the board of management, responsible for worldwide sales. After a short stint as CEO at tire manufacturer Continental, Hahn

came back to VW as its leader and, over 11 years, made Volkswagen tick at a different pace.

When Hahn finally took the reigns, it was a tough time for the automaker. VW had made a lot of money with its Golf brand, concentrating most of its efforts on its primary small car.

Hahn branched out. He turned Audi into a premium brand by loading it with the latest technology. He presided over the acquisition of Spain's Seat (pronounce "see-ah") car brand, positioning it as an Alfa Romeo fighter, and acquired the Czech manufacturer Skoda.

With four full-fledged brands under VW's wing, the group had a portfolio of bargain, mainstream and premium brands as well as a presence in eastern Europe, another hot market.

What was even more significant, though, was his move into China.

Shortly after he became VW's CEO, the automaker assembled its first Santana sedan in mainland China. Amazingly, VW was the only foreign automaker active in China, a market that has since become the next frontier for nearly every global automaker.

Hahn was also at the forefront of German reunification. He was one of few to enter the former East Germany, acquiring the plants and technology that had been shuttered for many years as the East's finances dried up.

Again, it was visionary.

"Nobody seemed to be interested in this new market. But we found out that the East Germans had not adopted all of the bad things

about East Germany," he once told industry trade paper Automotive News Europe, which honored him as a member of its European Hall of Fame.

After his retirement at the end of 1992, Hahn became a member of the Supervisory Boards of numerous companies in Europe and the United States. Eight universities in Germany and abroad honored him with honorary academic degrees. Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Italy, Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Spain, South Africa and the Federal Republic of Germany granted him medals of honor.

Through it all, Hahn, now 87, never changed. And he never really lost touch.

On U.S. industry that's not considering ecological problems and dwindling natural resources: "This could be an additional handicap" in the future, he said.

On Germany's economic growth: "It suffers from too much of a socialist tradition."

And, as always, Hahn is forever looking ahead.

"From a European point of view, we hardly talk about India," he said a few years ago. "India is 20 years behind China, but it has hundreds of millions of people who speak the right language for the global market. That's interesting."

Something says Hahn would love to still be steering that ship.

■ Jason Stein is a feature writer with Wheelbase Media. He can be reached on the Web at www.wheelbasemedia.com by using the contact link. Wheelbase supplies automotive news and features to newspapers across North America.

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