



# Charles Sprecher Davidson



Charles S. Davidson died on March 15, 2000, at the age of 89 of complications of Parkinson's Disease. He is survived by a myriad of trainees, collaborators, associates and friends. We all cherish his memory.

Charlie, the son of Mary Blossom and Charles Sprecher Davidson, was born December 7, 1910 at Berkeley, California. An ancestor, Thomas Blossom, settled with his family in the Plymouth Colony in 1629. Shortly after the discovery of gold in 1848, another Blossom ancestor walked beside a covered wagon across this country, while his wife, with their furniture, sailed around the Horn to San Francisco. The Blossom grandparents had a ranch in Red Bluff. His mother graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in

1906, at the time of the San Francisco earthquake, and ultimately became Dean of Women. He never knew his father, who had died when his engineering crew was lost in the Mohave Desert. His great grandfather Sprecher was the second president of Wittenburg University, and grandfather Davidson was superintendent of schools in San Diego.

Charlie received an AB degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1934, and his M.D., C.M. from McGill University in 1939. In 1941, he came to Boston, to the Harvard Medical Services at the Boston City Hospital, as a resident in the Thorndike Memorial Laboratory. Thus began his long clinical and research association with the Harvard Medical Unit at the BCH. Within a year of arriving and while still a Thorndike resident, he was appointed the director of the residency program, a role that he held with relish throughout his tenure at the BCH. Charlie's gift for administration was quickly recognized and exploited by individuals with lesser administrative skills (e.g., Drs. Castle and Finland). Thus, he was responsible for selecting and nurturing what by all accounts was the best talent pool in American medicine. Charlie also ran the II & IV (Harvard) Medical Services (as Associate Director from 1948-1970), directed

the clerkships of the Harvard medical students, presided over “Residents’ Coffee” each morning, and served in the Castle tradition as facilitator, fixer, trouble-shooter, patient escort, etc. From 1963-1970 he was Associate director of the Thorndike Memorial Laboratory, and from 1970-72 Acting Director of the Harvard Medical Unit at the BCH. Academically, he was the Francis Weld Peabody Fellow in Medicine in 1947-49, Professor of Medicine in 1969, and William Bosworth Castle Professor of Medicine from 1974-77.

Charlie was recruited to the Thorndike by George Richards Minot to study “blood coagulation and certain problems in nutrition” with F. H. Laskey Taylor and Henri Tagnon. After working long hours with the victims of the Coconut Grove fire in 1942, Charlie developed a group to study nutrition in burn victims. Both this event and his shattering experience with the victims of extreme malnutrition, whom he saw in Europe at the end of World War II, were major factors in his creating a research program in nutrition and liver disease. He was also concerned with nutrition in alcoholics. He created the Thorndike Division of Liver Diseases and Nutrition, the first American clinical research unit dedicated to the study of liver disease. The unit grew rapidly, and included many individuals from throughout the world who have made profound contributions. Highlights of the discoveries from the Thorndike included the demonstration of salt retention in cirrhotic patients, of the role of thiamine deficiency in Wiernicke’s encephalopathy, and of several mechanisms and treatment of hepatic failure, particularly hepatic encephalopathy.

Charlie’s job was more than facilitating liver-related research and arranging for an excellent house staff. True, the people selected by Charlie to train on the “II & IV” became Charlie’s boys and then, after what was surely the most grueling, thrilling and intensive year of learning one could experience, Charlie’s men (few women, unfortunately, trained at the BCH in these times). More profoundly, Charlie brought together critically ill patients, a dedicated house staff, attending physicians and outstanding physician-scientists into a learning experience for life that none of his trainees ever forgot. Charlie ran the Medical Services as well as his Division with endless energy and unrelenting encouragement in the long hours of struggle. He taught by example: it was not uncommon to have the benefit of his consultation late at night, at the bedside of a critically ill patient. Expert guidance, help and support were always there. In addition, Charlie was a mentor and friend not only to members of his Division but to all who sought his counsel. Many trainees fondly (but perhaps with some trepidation) remember the invitation to dinner (at the late Cafe Amalfi) and Symphony, hosted by Charlie and Max Finland. For the residents and Thorndike fellows of the 1950’s, ‘60’s and early ‘70’s, this was a golden period in their professional and personal lives. Charlie contributed perhaps most of all to the “mystic bond of brotherhood [we] still feel deep down in [our] heart[s] today (Thomas F Paine, Jr.)”

When it became apparent that the Harvard Medical Unit at the BCH would disband, Charlie “zipped up [his] briefcase and left, after thirty-two exceedingly happy years.” He began a new career in Cambridge in 1973. As faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as well as at Harvard, he continued clinical research and initiated courses in medicine and health care for undergraduates. He remained

active clinically, at the Mount Auburn Hospital. Two Charles S. Davidson Professorships of medicine were established in Cambridge in the early 1980's. Two of us (RAA and SHZ) were not only recipients of this Chair at the Mount Auburn Hospital, but also benefited from Charlie's ongoing guidance, support and friendship. Charlie was a regular attendee at Medical Grand Rounds at the Mount, and continued to travel the globe as Harvard's international ambassador.

At the same time, he was increasingly drawn to his cottage in Truro (Blossom's Hill). Under the guidance of Bob Bednarek, he became an avid bird watcher. Ultimately, he became a "full-time" resident of Truro, while keeping his apartment on Memorial Drive for his activities in Boston. He served as chairman of the Truro Conservation Commission and as founder and trustee of the Truro Conservation Trust, and in both roles was an advocate for land preservation. As chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Center for Coastal Studies in Provincetown, he participated in research and teaching activities. He helped found the A.I.M. health clinic and to improve health care on the outer Cape. He played the piano, took lessons in art and singing, and sang with a group in Provincetown. Charlie maintained his zest for life: for vigorous swimming or hiking, for singing, for parties, for medicine, for the Boston City Hospital. His glorious, rolling Ho! Ho! Ho! identified him in any group.

The occasion of Charlie Davidson's eightieth birthday in 1990 was a major event for alumni(ae) of the Harvard Medical Unit at the BCH. Although the Harvard Medical Unit no longer existed in brick and mortar, it did exist in the hearts and minds of trainees and staff. Charlie's party was the focus of this love, and Charlie was pleased at the outpouring of affection. Reunions of the Harvard Medical Unit were also held on the Cape in 1989, 1993 and 1997. Charlie attended them all, and with Bob Bednarek hosted some of the activities at Blossom's Hill. Although slowed down by his Parkinson's Disease, he responded with his usual enthusiasm and warmth to the many individuals who considered him a special friend.

Although Charlie had no biologic children, he has literally thousands of descendants! These are the individuals who knew him as a teacher, mentor and friend, in any of his venues. His high professional standards, his empathy for the underdog and underserved, his patience, dedication and understanding made him a role model. For his BCH children, Charlie was supremely important in creating the ambience for growth, and for the bonds that remain strong among us even as we age.

Well done, Charlie!

Peter V. Tishler, *Chairperson*

Irwin M. Arias

Ronald A. Arky

Robert Bednarek

Jessica H. Lewis

Margaret N. Lewis

Irwin H. Rosenberg

Frank E. Speizer

Stephen H. Zinner