

Louise, dear - thought you might like to see.

boston's black history

by Bob Hayden

Dr. William A. Hinton

Last week in Governor Dukakis' office at the State House, there was a ceremony honoring a Boston doctor who was black. Earlier this year, on June 2, the State legislature had passed and signed into law "An Act Designating the Serology Laboratory of the State Laboratory Institute as the Dr. William A. Hinton Laboratory."

William "Gus" Hinton was awarded his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1912 from Harvard Medical School, but he couldn't lay his hands on a sick person in a Boston hospital. At the time of Hinton's graduation, doctors who were black were not allowed to practice in Boston's hospitals. It wasn't until 1931 that the first black doctor was admitted as an intern at Boston City Hospital.

Fifteen years after graduating from medical school, Dr. Hinton had developed an important blood test for the dreaded disease of syphilis. And in 1936 his book *Syphilis and Its Treatment*, became the first medical textbook written by a black American to be published.

The Hinton Test for syphilis, as it became widely known, was used throughout the country for the next 25 years. In 1935 Hinton's test was adopted as the official

laboratory test for syphilis at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and at all hospitals in the state. Few people knew that it had been developed by a black man.

Dr. Hinton devoted his professional life, over 30 years, to fighting syphilis. He was respected throughout the country as an authority in the field of social diseases. When he retired as Director of the Department of Clinical Laboratories at the Boston Dispensary in 1952, the then Governor Herter wrote in a letter of tribute, "Your name is known the world over for singular achievements which have benefitted all of mankind."

In 1915 Hinton was appointed Director of the Wassermann Laboratory of the Massachusetts Dept. of Public Health and Chief of Clinical Laboratories at the Boston Dispensary. He also began serving as an instructor in bacteriology at Harvard Medical School.

In 1931 his interest in training people for careers in medical science was strong. At the Boston Dispensary Hinton started a school for training girls to become laboratory technicians. These classes of volunteers grew into one of the country's leading

schools for preparing medical technicians. His graduates were quickly hired by hospitals and laboratories throughout the country.

The Hinton Program was a first in the country to help meet the growing demand for technicians well versed in new laboratory techniques. The program survives today as part of a training program at Northeastern University in Boston. Dr. Hinton encouraged women to become medical technicians at a time when they were not readily accepted in the medical world.

In 1934 Dr. Hinton began writing his classic text *Syphilis and Its Treatment*. He said, "I tried to provide a clear, simple, relatively complete account of syphilis and its treatment for physicians, public health workers and medical students."

The book was warmly received upon publication in 1936. It was studied in Europe and the United States as a unique contribution to the field of study of venereal disease. Encompassing Hinton's 20 years of research in the laboratory and hospital clinic, the book became a standard reference in medical schools and hospitals.

Dr. Hinton made it very clear that diseases such as syphilis were "a by-product of poverty and ignorance and poor living conditions...that race was not the determining factor, but that it was, rather the socioeconomic condition of the patient." To Dr. Hinton syphilis was a disease of the underprivileged. His book documented his years of research and "his experience in clinics with patients and the disease from

their point of view."

Hinton disliked publicity and refused to promote himself on the basis of his contributions to medical science. In addition to his natural modesty, he also felt that widespread knowledge that he was a black man would delay the acceptance of his test and book in the medical world.

Most men interested in the field of syphilis knew that he was black, but Hinton didn't want those who didn't know his race to use color as a reason for not recognizing his accomplishments.

For this reason he would not accept the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP in 1938 when this organization wanted to honor him. He wanted his work to be accepted on its merit alone.

Recognition came slowly and late to Dr. Hinton. In 1946, he was promoted to the rank of Lecturer on Bacteriology and Immunology at the Harvard Medical School. And three years later, a year before he retired and 22 years after he developed his test for syphilis, Dr. Hinton was elevated to the position of Clinical Professor at Harvard -- the first black person to attain the rank of

Professor at Harvard.

Dr. Hinton was a modest man. Because he was so self-effacing perhaps his achievements were not as widely known as they should have been. As a young doctor he believed that it was scientist's duty to serve humanity that the greatest reward for long hours of work in stuff laboratories would be discoveries that would advance human knowledge and raise health standards.

From 1916 until his death in 1959 Dr. Hinton and his wife lived in Canton, Mass. He was an accomplished gardener--in what little time he spent outside his laboratory. The gardens around his home were well known as a place of unusual trees and flowers all planted and cared for by the doctor and his wife.

Dr. Hinton was a modest giant in Boston's medical history.

Bill