

Sawbones 267: Medical Legends of Alabama

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Intro (Clint McElroy): Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello, everybody, and welcome to Sawbones: a Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin Tyler McElroy!

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee Smirl McElroy!

[audience cheers noticeably louder]

Justin: Um... so it's gonna be like that, huh, Birmingham? Oh man, I'm excited. It's gonna be a good one. Um, it's fine. My feelings aren't hurt anymore. I'm very zen about it.

Sydnee: [laughing] Were you zipping your fly when we came out?

Justin: Just a little bit! No, actually I was—if I can brag for a second, I was checking to make sure it was zipped, and it was, so.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Again, I don't wanna brag, but we've been doing shows with Paul, of Paul and Storm fame. Check him out at [Paulandstorm.gov](#)—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: And Paul Sabourin has been doing shows with us for a long time, and the very first show he ever did, he did that thing about, um, "The show will begin when the audience is sufficiently horny for this one." But when Paul started doing

shows with us it was just My Brother, My Brother, and Me. So now Paul does that before Sawbones, and it has taken on... an uncomfortable vibe.

[audience laughs]

Justin: I would say... it makes me feel slightly uncomfortable.

Sydnee: I don't usually think of our audience as being... horny for—for—

[audience cheers]

Justin: Sorry, if you could say it one more time? I need a clean recording for this ringtone!

Sydnee: Nnn... no. That was good, just the once.

Justin: Just the once!

Sydnee: Just the one time.

Justin: Uh—

Sydnee: I don't have cake on me, right?

Justin: No. Our dau—I gave—Sydnee was really, really TO'd at me.

Sydnee: I was holding our just about one-year-old, she'll be one year old next week, and I was holding her right before we came out, and Justin handed her a big chunk of cake, and she proceeded to just do what babies do, which is kinda wipe it on her face, and then wipe it all over me. [laughs] And I was like, "Why?! Why?!" [laughs]

Justin: In my defense.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: There is none.

Justin: There is none, actually. I don't have one. Hello, Alabama! What a pleasure it is to be here.

[audience cheers loudly]

Sydnee: So, whenever we go on the road and we do live shows, we like to try to find topics that relate to the area that we're doing our show in, and what was really cool—

[indistinct shout]

Justin: Calm down! We don't make you all come up with it—[wheezes] we do it ahead of time!

Sydnee: Wh—what was really cool about, as I started researching I was looking at Birmingham and at Alabama and looking for different like, medical topics—I'm used to, as I start my research, I'm going through a lot of like, really kind of dense like, stodgy medical articles about stuff. Like, that doctors wrote, and they're kinda boring sometimes. And what I started finding a lot of as I was looking into like, historical references, were what I have—and this is with the utmost affection—I call grandma blogs?

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: There were so many amazing like, firsthand accounts! Like, this oral history of all these stories from the area that I—they really look like maybe my grandma made them. Like, but they're cool! And they're like, they know the people who told these stories and they knew this person and they're—so anyway, it was really inspiring. It was really exciting to look into some of these, what I started calling like, the medical legends of Alabama.

Justin: These are true, though. Legends—

Sydnee: No, they're true. Like, they're true, but they just—they were told in this just, really fun, like, personal way, which is a different—it's so different from all the boring articles I always have to read.

Justin: Y'all have had a lot of stuff here, medical-wise. We couldn't narrow it down to just one, so: medical legends of Alabama. I came up with that name. Sydnee originally wanted to title it "Alabama medical stories." And I said, "Syd, it's good, it's so close."

[audience laughs]

Justin: "I love it. Let's build on that."

Sydnee: [laughing] I am one of those boring doctors who usually writes the boring articles.

Justin: Right, I'm the grandma in our relationship.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: You are the grandma of our relationship!

Justin: Come on...

Sydnee: [laughs] No, it's really true!

Justin: Come on... we're all trying to have a good time here tonight, Syd. Come on.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: He has two cake carriers. Like, nice—

[audience laughs and applauds]

Sydnee: [laughs] Like, fancy ones. [laughs]

Justin: [taps mic] [speaks very close to mic] That's untrue. I have three.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Besides, anything could be a cake carrier if you believe in yourself! Uh, please, we're running out of minutes, Sydnee, medical legends of Alabama, cannot wait!

Sydnee: The f—as I—[laughs] As I started looking into the history of medicine in Alabama, what I found is that there was this like, theme of these systems coming in. Like, the first, like, comprehensive public health system was really created in this state, which is really cool, but like, what came with it was this resistance to any of it. Like, a lot of people were like, "Get out of here with your public health. I don't know who you are, and you're from the government and I don't trust you."

And like, this theme ran through a lot of the stories. This probably started with what one author called the Alabama Doctor War, which was a little—I would say a little melodramatic. [laughs] Which is really the story of like, the beginning of medicine as a discipline in the U.S., 'cause in the mid-1800s, medicine here was just whatever. Anybody could call themselves a doctor—

Justin: Here in America, not Alabama specifically.

Sydnee: No. Just any—yeah, in the U.S. Medicine was—anybody who said like, "I'm a doctor!" Was... a doctor. And especially in more rural places where you didn't have a lot of physicians, or any at all, if you had... usually a guy, come through town with a briefcase full of... "medicine..."

Justin: Cocaine.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: And they said they were a doctor. It's like, "Listen, we don't have anybody. This is good enough."

So, you know, you had—actually the cost of medicine was pretty low, because there was tons of competition, 'cause anybody could be a doctor! So you had all of these like, the traditional doctors who actually went to some sort of schooling and apprenticed other physicians and learned some kind of science, who were arguing for like, a traditional kind of medicine, and then you had this whole other group that became known eventually as the Eclectics, which were just kind of doin' their own thing.

And at the time, that made a lot of sense, because if you looked at traditional medicine in the 1800s, your doctor would come and be like, "Well... I don't know. I know there are germs now, because we're at that point, [laughs] where I've learned that germs do things, but I also have no idea what to do about this, so I'm just gonna bleed you and then give you some mercury?"

Justin: "And then... cocaine!"

Sydnee: [laughs] Cocaine was a big part of it. So was opium, was a big part of it. Uh, but then—

Justin: And opium is... part of it. You guys into David S. Pumpkins? [mumbling]

[audience cheers]

Justin: He's—he's here tonight. Come on out, David!

Sydnee: Lotta David—[laughs]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughing] We have Tom Hanks on our podcast.

Justin: But we didn't! We just got David S. Pumpkins.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: He won't answer to Tom, he's been really weird backstage—actually, kind of an unnerving presence.

Sydnee: It's almost like we tricked him into coming here and he doesn't know why he's here.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: We don't have any of the money we promised him.

So, the Eclectics came in and said, "I know that these doctors went to school or whatever you wanna call it, and we didn't, but also, they're not helping you, and in some cases what they're doing makes you really sick, so what we're doing we think makes more sense," 'cause a lot of what they were drawing on were sort of like, herbal traditional medicine, and if nothing else, some of the cures, even if they didn't work, maybe caused a lot less harm than some of the treatments that the traditional doctors were using.

So there was this big battle at time between these two kind of camps, which were really like, everybody who went to whatever was considered medical school at the time, and everybody who just said, "I'm a doctor."

And this came to a forefront in Alabama between all of these different doctors fighting, and it was really—money was the big problem, because the more people who joined the Eclectics... and the Eclectics, the wild thing about it is it wasn't enough to just practice medicine and do it in kind of a different way. They would

teach you how to do it for yourself, which was really putting doctors out of business and lowering the price of medicine, because they would come and like—

Justin: Deputize people.

Sydnee: Yeah, like, "Here's your—" it was almost sort of like a multi-level marketing kind of thing. Like, "Here's your kit of herbal medicines that you can buy from me, and then you, too, can be a doctor!"

Uh, so... [laughs] the—and this was a problem all over the US, and in response to this a lot of doctors started organizing, and this is when you see the AMA, the American Medical Association, first form, to try to start like, standardizing, "Here's what a doctor is. Here's what it means to be a doctor. Here are the tests you have to pass. Here's the—you know, you have to have this degree and this license and all that, and if you're not, you're not a doctor."

And it was actually in Alabama, the medical association of the state of Alabama was—it was formed, like, right alongside the AMA! It was one of the very first states to really try to like, formalize that and fight back and say, "No, we need to have, like, doctors who are doctors, and not just anybody be a doctor!"

Justin: They started taking out the Eclectics, right? It says—

Sydnee: Well, I mean, they didn't—

Justin: No, they started takin' 'em out, by any means necessary.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: No. [laughs]

Justin: Rolling doctor hit squads.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: Taking out all fakes.

Sydnee: No, not like that. Just like, "That person's not a doctor—"

Justin: They'll never know that it was a crime, 'cause they know eight places on the human body to poke to kill somebody instantly.

[audience laughs]

Justin: That's why I try not to get Sydnee too mad at me.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That's a secret to a happy marriage. [snorts] Is know that the other person could kill you and get away with it no problem.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] Is that why you've been taking Tae Kwon Do?

Justin: That's—yeah, right! Like I would have defense. I'm a blue belt, Sydnee!

[audience laughs]

Justin: Gimme three years, maybe!

Sydnee: Uh, a big part of this in this state was a Dr. Jerome Cochran, who was kind of like the father of public health, at least as far as Alabama's concerned, and probably should be as far as a lot of other states are concerned, because he was one of the first doctors to start promoting the idea that there are things doctors can do to improve the health of a community and prevent illness on the front end, instead of waiting to treat it after somebody's already sick.

And so, he created this whole public health and sanitation system that was really revolutionary, and would become the model for a lot of other states to follow. It started here. The problem he kept running into is that he had to organize all the doctors. So now, like, we've created this organization that standardizes doctors, so he's got like, an army [snorts] so to speak, of doctors, and that word means something.

But he's gotta get 'em to give him data. Like, that's public health, right? You gotta have data. You gotta know, like, how many people are being born? How many people are dying? How many people have this disease, and what are they doing about it?

All these different—you need numbers! And so he started looking at all these doctors and saying like, "Can you just start—let's start easy. Give me your birth

records, like how many babies did you deliver, and death records, how many people died that you pronounced."

And what he found was that the doctors said, "... No? Absolutely not!" For a couple reasons. One, they were too busy. I love that—the big thing was like, "I don't have time—documentation is such a hassle," which I love to hear, because it's the same thing doctors say now. Like, "I don't have time to write all that down..."

What's the biggest pet peeve—if you ask doctors like, "What's the biggest thing that's causing burnout?"

"It's the electronic medical record."

It's always blamed on documentation, and it was the same thing, then. Nobody wanted to write anything down—

Justin: "When did Jerry beef it?"

"I don't know... Tuesday?"

[audience laughs]

Sydney: [laughs]

Justin: "I don't know... old Seinfeld was on. It's a play that I go see, and they do old Seinfeld the play—"

Sydney: [laughs]

Justin: "[laughing] Every Tuesday at 9 PM."

[audience laughs]

Justin: "It's called MWP: Must Watch Plays?"

[audience laughs]

Justin: "There's like, several plays they do every Tuesday. They do black and white Frasier—"

[audience laughs]

Justin: "Old Seinfeld, Caroline and the Village..."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughing] Caroline and the Village? That's a wild reference that you just pulled out.

[pauses]

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Sorry—I'm not—I'm just saying!

Justin: Full Shack? Is that something? Full Shack, thank you very much.

[audience cheers]

Justin: Acquaintances?

[audience laughs]

Justin: Is that something?

Sydnee: So—[laughs]

Justin: Mork and Mindy, who was a witch!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: She communes with aliens...

[theme music plays]

Justin: Well, this is rude, I know, to stop a podcast just as it's really gettin' fired up, but I do need to take a moment out of your busy schedule, and mine, if we're being honest. You know, I got a lot of stuff cookin' too, but that's not gonna keep me from telling you about this week's sponsors.

First up is MeUndies. You know you wanna have a comfortable situation down there, to put it in general G-rated terms. And, uh, there's never—no—nevrybody—neverberdy? Gonna give you a better situation than MeUndies.

They use micromodal fabric, which is three times softer than cotton. They got classic colors, but also some adventurous prints. Right now, I'm wearing Halloween underwear. Very appropriate.

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We'll be back with you again next week, but until then, thanks for listening! We'll talk to you soon.

Sydnee: So, clearly the doctors were very busy. And then the other thing is there was just a lot of distrust. The idea that... I mean, one, if you've got this guy comin' in and he's like, "Listen. I'm with the government, and I wanna know how many of your patients died."

Justin: "No!"

Sydnee: Doctors were instantly like, "Why? What are you trying to say?"

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: "I'm not telling you that!" Nobody—he had tons of—that was actually the first problem. He had tons of doctors who turned in, like, zero deaths. Nobody died!

Justin: Crushed it!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: In this entire—[laughs] it'd be like, for a whole county! Like, "how many people died in the count—"

"Nobody."

Justin: "Nobody. Births: a bajillion. [blows raspberry] I win."

Sydnee: Like, "It's been five years! Nobody died?"

"Nope. Nobody died. I don't know. It's goin' great here. I'm really good, don't come."

Justin: "I'm the best!"

Sydnee: "Don't come here to the town!"

Justin: "Dr. O'Doul rules."

Sydnee: And when he tried to like, lean on the community, when he tried to start saying like, "Listen, if you don't report, you're gonna get fined and you're gonna get in trouble and like, maybe you won't be able to serve this community any more."

The communities would actually protect their doctors, and be like, "Well, forget it. We won't fund your public health system anymore, then. [laughs] You can't have any of our money! We won't pay our taxes. Eat it."

[laughs] And so—[laughs] so like, they really protected—so it took a long time. Of course eventually—and like, this system was really revolutionary for the time! The idea of like, collecting these statistics and start implementing like, better sanitation methods and public health, started here in Alabama. And eventually it spread through the state and spread to other states, and it was a really effective program.

Um, alongside that, carrying into our next story, was Dr. Judson D. Dowling, who was one of the health officers who would've been coming out into the communities like, "I'm a doctor and I'm sort of with the government and I wanna ask you questions and intrude on your lives and... "

It was not popular at the time, or any time. Like, nobody likes that, really.

Justin: [quietly] I do. I work—I work out of the home, so—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: A little company, you know, doesn't hurt.

Sydnee: So if Dr. Dowling came to your house and said, "Listen, we are working on ordinances to start pasteurizing milk, because there's a bunch of germs in milk, and if we heat it up, then we kill them, and then people don't get sick and die when they drink milk! And so we would like to start doing that in your county. How would you feel about that? And also we're gonna have to inspect periodically, so not only are we gonna start enforcing pasteurization, but then we're gonna come out and check your milk for like, bacteria counts and stuff and make sure like, you actually did it."

How would you say about that?

Justin: I would say, "All my milk's already pasteurized, I buy it at Walmart."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Well, I mean, it's 2019, so that's a...

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. Okay, well, this—

Justin: You didn't—listen. Listen.

Sydnee: This is 1921, at this point.

Justin: If you're gonna do a hypothetical, you gotta set a scene for me, please!

Sydnee: So—so it's 1921.

Justin: Okay. Okay. [imitating a standard western tune] [cowboy impression]
"Well, pardner!"

Sydnee: No. nope.

Justin: [cowboy impression] "I don't know much about pasteurization. Do you know about Jesus and stuff?"

[audience laughs]

Justin: That's me in 1921.

Sydnee: Hm. So, the—[laughs] the people that Dr. Dowling started visiting were not fans of this, either. They thought this sounded very intrusive. They didn't like the idea of inspections, and they didn't know why we needed to heat up milk. That seemed weird.

So, in response, he was kidnapped.

[audience laughs]

Justin: [laughs] Alabama!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So, in the middle of the night, masked vigilantes came and kidnapped him from his home, and roughed him up a little bit, and then told him, "You have 30 days. Leave town."

Justin: J—can I say? Reasonable!

[audience laughs]

Justin: For people that just kidnapped you and beat the stuffing out of you it's like, very reasonable, like, "Well, we want you—I mean, make sure you have another place lined up, and..."

[audience laughs]

Justin: "It's not a big deal."

Sydnee: Now, this—this actually helped turn the tide of the opinion of the community, because this was not the response people wanted. Like, they were suspicious, they didn't like the idea of this, but they didn't wanna beat the guy up. And so in response to this, people found it so outrageous that this poor doctor would get beaten up for just wanting to pasteurize their milk, there were actually laws passed that made it illegal to wear masks in public or in parades.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Which I found very specific! [laughs]

Justin: Hey, y'all—are y'all okay? [wheezes]

[audience laughs]

Justin: [laughing] Are y'all doin' all right? The parades thing is great! 'Cause it's like—[laughs loudly]

"That guy's dressed as L—"

Sydnee: They also—part of—

Justin: "That guy's dressed as Little Caesar, I think he's about to go steal someone so they don't heat up milk!"

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Part of the laws were also that you couldn't lure someone out of their house under false pretenses.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughing] I really appreciated that, too. Like, "Hey, free pizza!"

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: "That was a lie!"

Justin: Or, free pizza pizza.

Sydnee: [laughs] Anyway, because of all this, by 1923 they were pasteurizing 80% of the milk, and the rates of typhoid were way down, so it worked!

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: It was great, it was great! Uh, one of my favorite stories that I kept stumbling over was about Davy Crockett. Uh, apparently, in Davy Crockett's many travels throughout the South, he spent some time in Alabama. He came on like, a prospecting trip, and while he was here, he got really sick.

He got some kind of fever. And like, if you look into medical records at the time, like, well, what did he get? It's always like, Mountain Fever, or Swamp Fever, or... I don't know. Evening Fever.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Morning Fever. It's always—it's just a fever, and whatever he was near. He was like, "There's a tree, it's a Tree Fever."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So he got a fever, and he was very sick. Like, near death, and so he ends up in this valley that's owned by this family, the Jones family, and he writes, and we know that this happened. This isn't fake. We know this happened, because he wrote about it in his own words.

The wife of Mr. Jones, who owned the property, had a bottle of what were called Bateman's drops, and she thought if they killed me—he was only gonna die anyway, so we may as well try these. Like, basically, "You're about to die. I'm gonna give you this medicine. It might kill you, but you're gonna die, so... Bateman's drops."

So she gave him the whole—

Justin: That's a—was that their slogan?

[audience laughs]

Justin: Anyway. "These might kill you, they may not! Anyway, Bateman's drops."

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So she gave him the entire bottle.

Justin: Bad!

Sydnee: He said—and this is from him. "Which threw me into a sweat that continued on me all night, when at last I seemed to wake up and spoke and asked her for a drink of water."

So, he credited these Bateman's drops with saving his life. He spent all night sweating, and then he was fine. Um, so I looked into—what were these Bateman's drops?

Bateman's drops were one of the most popular patent medicines of the time, and patent medicines were basically like, fake medicine. They usually—they usually had something like opium or alcohol or something like that in 'em that made you feel really good, and they were really well marketed and branded, but they generally didn't actually treat or cure anything. Um, Bateman's drops was one of the most popular, and it was probably because it largely just contained alcohol, and opium, and that was it.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So, that's what she gave him a bottle of.

Justin: And it—I mean... and it worked?

Sydnee: I mean, he got better. It's one of those, right, where like, he was gonna get be—

Justin: Whoa, Dr. Smirl McElroy!

Sydnee: No, he got better.

Justin: Don't you think we should talk about this a little bit? I mean...

Sydnee: Nah, he just got better.

Justin: You've been pretty hard on opium and alcohol mixed together in bottles over the years, but it seems to have really done the trick for old... king of the wild frontier, Davy Crockett.

Sydnee: Then there was never a Dr. Bateman that these were named for. It was just marketed that it was Bateman's drops. Who's Bateman? We don't know. It just sounds official.

And really, they were one of the eight most popular patent medicines of like, that century. I mean, really when they looked through that time period, everybody was taking Bateman's drops, which you could understand. Um, 'cause they were alcohol and opium, so...

Justin: Yay!

Sydnee: They made Davy Crockett feel good. Um, this is gonna seem like a bummer to mention, but I wanted to briefly mention [laughing] the great cholera epidemic of 1873?

[audience laughs and cheers]

Justin: And, uh, I'm gonna be doing some—

Sydnee: I love how everybody cheers for cholera.

Justin: —good jokes about the great cholera epidemic of 1873! Sensitive, tasteful jokes, about a cholera epidemic that was apparently great!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: So... what happened—people—we knew about cho—so, cholera is an illness that gives you terrible diarrhea, is the main thing you need to know. And it's serious! Because if you—

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: It's serious!

Justin: I thought that was my moment, but no, no, no. Keep going.

Sydnee: It's—it's serious if you can't rehydrate somebody. Now, especially in like, the developed world, we can give you IV fluids and get you through cholera, when before we could do that, and especially when we didn't know what was going on, people could die, and did, from cholera, quite often. So cholera was a big deal. It was big, bad deal.

And so, when it landed in Birmingham in June of 1873, people were really freaked out. It probably came—like, they've traced it back. I think it's so fascinating that we have this record. They traced it back to this guy who's only known now as Mr. Y.

Justin: Okay?

Sydnee: Like the letter, not like the question. Like, Mr. Why?!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] Why cholera?! Who lived in Huntsville, and then came to Birmingham—

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: So it's Huntsville's fault.

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: It actually—he moved, and the cholera didn't come with him initially. It was when his stuff came. Like, all of his stuff got delivered two weeks later.

Justin: And his jar of cholera!

Sydnee: [laughs] He brought his jar—

[audience laughs]

Justin: Why did you save it, Mr. Y?

Sydnee: So he got sick, and after he unfortunately succumbed to cholera, they didn't properly dispose of all of his stuff, and that's kinda how this thing spread. So like, the people who were exposed to like, bedding and stuff. They got sick, and—

Justin: "I'll take his toilet."

"Okay, well... probably shouldn't do that."

Sydnee: Those people didn't realize that they had cholera, so nobody properly disposed of that stuff, so it kept spreading from there, and at first, like I said, none of the doctors really knew. Like, we knew about cholera.

They knew about epi—like, that cholera could pass, and epidemics, and like, that there were certain ways to dispose of clothes and belongings and stuff, but they just didn't—it took 'em a while to figure out that it was cholera. So once they started to figure it out, their initial reaction was to burn pots of tar on the corners of the city. That's not effective against cholera.

[audience laughs]

Justin: Kind of a takeaway for you all tonight!

Sydnee: But it was—it was commonly thought to be effective at time, 'cause they thought it had something to do with bad air, so it's like, they just burned some things and flush out the bad air.

Justin: Burn some tar! To make some nice, good air!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: Uh...

Justin: That one doesn't even hold water logically.

Sydnee: What I liked about the story is that a lot of the doctors in the city stayed. Like, people vanished from the city during this epidemic. Like, just scores of people just took off. Were like, "Forget it."

And this happened—I mean, when you read about cholera epidemics all throughout the United States, not just in Birmingham, the cities would just empty

out, but the doctors all stayed, and the doctors all stayed to take care of people. A lot of 'em, anyway.

Other people who stayed were one, a local madam named Louise Wooster.

[scattered cheers]

Sydnee: Who was a very famous local madam who wrote an autobiography that—parts of it might not be true, is my understanding, but if they are, lived a very amazing life. But there's a lot of folklore. But she stayed to help take care of all these cholera patients, and a lot of her employees stayed and also helped take care of cholera patients, so they were credited with like, really caring for the sick and nursing a lot of people back to health.

Alongside them was the city alderman, Francis P. O'Brien, who—I mention him because he stayed and took care of sick people, got cholera, got so sick that they ordered him his own casket and printed his obituary in the paper.. but he didn't die!

[audience laughs]

Sydnee: What a cool thing to have! Can you imagine?

Justin: "Anyway, this is my obituary."

Sydnee: "And I'm still here."

Justin: "So, how much did you want for that used car? Did I mention I have my own obituary?"

Sydnee: So that's why I bring up a cholera epidemic.

Justin: They're like, negotiating—okay.

Sydnee: I just think that's amazing that all these people stayed and they took care of people and... the last—this is the last brief story that I wanna mention, and this is not our usual Sawbones story. Usually we kind of talk about like, the weird or the wrong or the wild stuff that we've done in medicine. This is one of those like, positive stories. Um, amazing but positive, that I like to share. Especially in lieu of the fact that it is Black History Month.

This is a story I had never heard. It's about the first female physician who practiced in the state, who was also a black female physician who practiced in the state.

[audience cheers and applauds]

Sydnee: And this was in the 18—this was in 1890, so this was at a time where the idea of women being doctors was still, you know, on the fringes. And so, the fact that she was a black woman doctor was a huge deal at the time.

She had already gone through medical school, and there was an advertisement for—they needed a doctor. Um, it was actually at—Booker T. Washington had put out an advertisement that they needed a doctor to come and take care of, um, some of the students at the local school. They needed a doctor on staff to kind of take care of some of the students.

And so he put out this advertisement and she decided that she would come and interview for the job, and he was a big fan, and he thought she would be great for the position, and so he wanted to hire her, but before she could do that she had to pass the licensing exam for the state of Alabama to be a physician, here.

The licensing exam... and this, like—to think about this now as a physician, to have to take this exam, like, it makes me so anxious. The licensing exam was a 10 day oral examination, and each day you had to go in and sit face to face with a leading expert in that—whatever that day's test was on, in that field, and answer questions, for however long they decided they needed to ask you questions.

And so you can imagine, she had to sit for this 10 day exam with, I mean, they were all white men, and answer their questions, for 10 days! Which is just—and she passed the exam. They could find no fault, so she passed the exam, and she went on to be a physician, and I just think—I think that's an amazing story! And it's one that we're not often told.

I haven't even named her. Halle Tanner Dillon Johnson was her name. I realized I just haven't said her name.

[audience cheers and applauds]

Sydnee: And Dr. Johnson passed this exam—and it's just ama—I don't know—10 day oral exam, face to face with leading experts in the field? I would've cried after day 3! I don't think I could've handled it!

Justin: I feel pretty confident that I could do it, but—

[audience laughs]

Justin: I am a mediocre white man, so I got that sorta built in. Alabama, thank you so much for being so cool!

[audience cheers]

Justin: Y'all are fantastic. Lotta great medical history right here in your home state! We got a lot more show for you. I want to thank The Taxpayers for the use of their song Medicines as the intro and outro of our program. I wanna thank the Alabama Theater, beautiful. I wanna thank Paul Sabourin, and we got a lot more show for you, so stick around.

But, until the next time that we join you, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a hole in your head!

[audience cheers]

[theme music plays]

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