

Sawbones 296: Cough Drops

Published October 25th, 2019

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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 am your cohost, Justin McElroy!

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Well, Syd, triumphantly, inspirationally, dare I say it, I am on the road to recovery after last weeks, uh... infirmit. The common cold, perhaps. Maybe something more... serious.

Sydnee: Cold. It was a cold. It was the cold.

Justin: The doctors aren't quite sure.

Sydnee: No, it was a cold. Everybody had a cold. We were on tour and I was in a hotel room in which everyone, it seemed, was coughing.

Justin: Yeah...

Sydnee: But me.

Justin: We were really passin' it around. It was rough.

Sydnee: So much coughing. Nonstop coughing. All day, all night, just lots and lots of coughing.

Justin: Uh, seems to have really got on your nerves, Syd.

Sydnee: Oh, no. I just—I—I just hated to hear you all so sick.

Justin: Uh-huh.

Sydnee: It was my emotional, my—it worried me—

Justin: The part—you're saying, the part of you that is in all human beings that worries about sick people that you're related to was active.

Sydnee: Yes!

Justin: The neurons of that part of your brain.

Sydnee: Those—that part of my brain—

Justin: The sick sympathy for your family members that everybody has.

Sydnee: Those synapses were firing nonstop.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: No, it's just you all coughed a lot. I love you, I'm glad you're all fine now. Uh... I wish you hadn't coughed so much. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Well... sorry, I guess? I—that seems insufficient at this point, but I'm sorry.

Sydnee: No, it's fine. Really, it's fine. It's fine! Anyway... I couldn't help but notice that none of you attempted to stop your cough with any cough drops.

Justin: Yeah, which is unusual for me. I usually—you know what? Um... I just wanted to get—get it all out. Get it—

Sydnee: Oh, okay.

Justin: —uh...

Sydnee: Not hold the coughs in.

Justin: No, not hold the coughs in. I needed the bad things to come out, and I wanted to coughs to be gone, so I just let 'em go. 'Cause if you hold 'em in, that's, like, a set number of coughs that are stored within you.

Sydnee: Okay. No.

Justin: Uhh, so I didn't want to hold 'em back. I just, like, coughed. I went for it, which is unusual for me. A lot of times I'll go with a nice Ricola. That can be nice.

Sydnee: You didn't say it the way—in the—

Justin: [loudly and distantly] Riiiiicolaaaaaa!

Sydnee: There we go. There we go. I, uh—it seems like there's a lot of misinformation about coughs that you're spreading right now, and that is concerning, 'cause I wasn't gonna do an episode about coughs, per se.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: This is just focusing on cough *drops*.

Justin: [coughs]

Sydnee: Thank you—

Justin: You keep saying cough and it's making my...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: ... like, the—like when somebody yawns and it's contagious.

Sydnee: That's not... how that—not how that works. But thank you to AJ and Hope and Gambit for, uh, recommending this topic, because there's an interesting history, cough drops, there. There's a—it's a story.

Justin: This is something where you and I are sort of equally matched, because in middle school, Tommy Red and I did a project about which cough drop works the best, so.

Sydnee: Hmm.

Justin: That's... so I'm going in with some of my own research.

Sydnee: When would you like to discuss your methods?

Justin: In—independent study.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Well, yes. My method was—

Sydnee: And your—your findings—

Justin: —I was—I was sick.

Sydnee: —and results. Conclusion.

Justin: Which kept me—I was sick, which kept me from working on my science fair project until quite close to the science fair.

Sydnee: Uh-huh. This is gonna be an abstract—

Justin: And then I started testing different cough drops that we had around the house to see which one made me feel best, one after the other, and then I just kind of wrote that down.

Sydnee: So your n was—

Justin: Just in. Me.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] One?

Justin: Just n... me. I'm the n.

Sydnee: That was a good pun. Your n was one?

Justin: Number one, yeah.

Sydnee: Just one?

Justin: I have two nostrils. Is that anything?

Sydnee: This was a bad study.

Justin: Uh, well—

Sydnee: I love you. I don't even know that I need to—

Justin: No one wants to put the money into cough drop research, so I have to do my own studies.

Sydnee: There isn't a lot of cough drop research, that is true. But, uh, do I even need to know? I don't even think it matters what the result was.

Justin: All I remember is the deci—we came to the decision that Luden's is basically just rock candy. It's just hard candy. But that's about it.

Sydnee: The p value on this study is not impressive.

Justin: Ce—uh—what—

Sydnee: I don't think—I don't think that this is gonna kill it on the confidence interval.

Justin: The one with the numbing agent works good for sore throat.

Sydnee: Yeah. Cepacol?

Justin: Cepacol, yeah.

Sydnee: Okay. So—

Justin: Which is different from what samurais do if they're disgraced by having a cold, which is seppuku, so they—it's different.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] So let's talk about cough drops, or throat lozenges, if you prefer.

Justin: [quietly] Yes.

Sydnee: Either way. Uh, they are regarded as medicine, pretty much, in the US. And not just in the US, other places, but it's funny because if you go into the history of cough drops, there are places where they're still kind of seen as just, like, candy. Just, like, candy you get to eat when you're sick, and that's probably due to their origins.

Now, obviously people have been making things for, like, sore throats and coughs and cold symptoms since... people have been making fake medicine, which is... the beginning of time. The beginning of humans.

Justin: I know they used to give rock candy, 'cause that's what it said on the box of rock candy that you buy at the Cracker Barrel. It would say this is, like, an old-timey sore throat remedy.

Sydnee: Sure. Well, and I mean—and basically that's how it started. I'm not really gonna get into the ancient history of cough drops. The Egyptians definitely made something with honey and herbs, and it would be kind of similar to what we'd think of as a lozenge; and certainly other ancient civilizations did as well.

But I really wanna talk about the history of the branded cough drops we know today.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: How did we end up with what we think of as medicine for cough... but maybe isn't?

Justin: Okay! I'm on—I'm on pins and needles.

Sydnee: So, this story starts, as most good stories do, with a guy named Sly Hawkins.

Justin: Oooh! I can already tell this guy's gonna be a smooth operator.

Sydnee: Good name, right?

Justin: Very good.

Sydnee: Sly Hawkins.

Justin: Sly Hawkins!

Sydnee: There's not—we don't know a lot about Sly. I mean, we're gonna make a lot of assumptions about Sly on this podcast, probably.

Justin: Based *completely* on his name.

Sydnee: Yes. Uh, we—different accounts call him a traveling salesman, perhaps a journeyman, a peddler, a street vendor, perhaps just a broke, hungry guy. It's hard to say.

Justin: You could be, I think, all those things, right?

Sydnee: I—you know what? His name was Sly. I bet he could encompass all things. These and more.

Justin: That's true.

Sydnee: Sly Hawkins. Uh, one way or another, legend has it—well, this is not *legend*. I mean, it's one of those stories that's—

Justin: Stuff we wrote down.

Sydnee: —it's—it's definitely based in truth. It's probably been embellished over time.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: But there is—there was a guy named Sly Hawkins who definitely, in 1852, walked in to James Smith's ice cream shop/restaurant—I've heard accounts it's an ice cream shop, it's a restaurant. Either way, James Smith was a guy who sold food, and Sly Hawkins was a guy who needed some.

Justin: Food.

Sydnee: Food. But he had no cash. So he walked in and he said, "Hey, listen. I'm really hungry. I don't have any money, but what I do have is a recipe... for cough candy. It's really good cough candy. You can make it here and sell it, and I bet you'll make a bunch of money, if you'll just gimme some food."

Justin: That is *the...* wildest pitch I—"So anyway, sharks, that's my pitch."

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: "I'll give you my recipe for cough candy if you give me some food. Kevin, I can see you're unconvinced. We *can* do a licensing deal with my recipe for cough candy in exchange for food."

Sydnee: Uh, so anyway, apparently Smith bought into it. I don't think Mr. Wonderful would, but Smith did. And he said, "Okay—"

Justin: I—you have to, at that point! It's so wild! What do you have to lose?

Sydnee: It's like a magic beans kind of thing, isn't it?

Justin: Sure!

Sydnee: Like, "Okay, I'll make up your—"

Justin: "I mean, I have—I have some food. Let's see this magic cough drop!"

Sydnee: So he gave him some food, and he went and mixed up in his kitchen a batch of these cough candies. And he named his new candy after—he had two boys, William and Andrew, and so he called it Smith Brothers Cough Drops, after his two boys.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And he, uh—he basically made these little—they look like little hard candies, and he put them in glass jars on, like, the counter and in the windows of the store. You can imagine. That's, like, a very attractive, old-school—

Justin: Sure, oh yeah. My mouth's watering just thinking about it.

Sydnee: —you know, those jars of sparkling candies in the sunlight.

Justin: They've all fused into one gigantic cough candy.

Sydnee: You know—oh, don't—see, don't say that, 'cause what I was envisioning is that sound they make if they're made well enough that they don't stick together.

Justin: Oh, when the scoop goes in and—yeah.

Sydnee: And they click and clatter in there.

Justin: Oh yeah.

Sydnee: It's a good one.

Justin: I love that. And then they pour it in the little paper bag, you know what I mean? It's so appetizing.

Sydnee: Which is exactly what they would do. Pour 'em into little paper envelopes and sell 'em—

Justin: Sort of like what the doctor kept his Jelly Babies in? You know?

Sydnee: Yep. And Smith Brothers Cough Drops did well for about 20 years like that. And as the brothers, William and Andrew, grew older, they aided in the family business and helped with new recipes and flavors and whatnot. But it stayed for a long time just like that. Glass jars of little pieces of candy that you could—I mean, they were candy, clearly. You could use 'em for a cough as well, but they were candy.

But as they grew older, the brothers had bigger plans. They thought, "You know what? These candies have a lot of potential. People really seem to like 'em. They buy them a lot. And also, I feel like we might lose an opportunity if we don't start packaging them," because a glass jar with hard candies is pretty easy to knock off, right?

Justin: Sure, right.

Sydnee: It's pretty easy to replicate, and so a lot of other drug stores started to do the same thing with—whether or not they knew they recipe didn't really matter. They just made some hard candy, and they would call it sort of things like Smith Brothers, like Schmidt Brothers—

Justin: Smiff—Smiff—

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] There were the Smeiss Sisters.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: There were just other Smith Brothers. There were just people who were just like, "Yep."

Justin: Just different—different—they just found different Smith Brothers.

Sydnee: Straight up knockoff. "Here's some Smith Brothers Candy, whatever."

And so they thought, "You know what? We need to do a better job of selling this by packaging it and patenting it and marketing it as a unique thing that you can't get at any old drug store."

So they started packaging them in these little cardboard boxes that had the brothers' pictures on it, and you may have seen this picture. It's really easy if you google "Smith Brothers cough drops," but you may have seen it.

It's two guys' heads facing each other, and they both have long beards. You may have seen this box before.

Justin: Yeah... yeah, that sounds familiar, yeah.

Sydnee: It became pretty famous, because not only was it a very, like, well known and unique box—I mean, two guys with long, flowing beards, facing each other on the box, but they were—they were very protective of this trademark, and so it became almost comical how much they would go after anybody who tried to copy...

Justin: I mean, when your thing's called "Smith Brothers," you—you really do have to draw quite the line in the sand, I'm assuming.

Sydnee: So by 1877, they had released this box, this package with the two brothers facing each other, and they actually put "trademark" on the box, and they put "trade" underneath William's head and "mark" underneath Andrew's head, so if you look at their heads facing each other and it has all, like, the print in the middle, "Smith Brothers," blah blah blah, and then under their heads are the words "trademark."

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: But because of the way it was pictured, it lead to people calling the brothers "Trade" and "Mark."

Justin: [laughs] Really?

Sydnee: Yeah, which is kind of a—I don't know. In the world of nicknames, "Trade" on its own is... I guess okay?

Justin: Trade, yeah, I could see that. This is my son Spa—uh, what's—Sprainard.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] "This is Trade." But Mark as a nickname is a name.

Justin: Yeah. I mean, you can see how that—that is probably the source of the confusion, I would guess.

Sydnee: That's just a name!

Justin: Just a regular Mark.

Sydnee: "What's your name?"

"Well, my name is Andrew, but everyone calls me Mark."

"Well, is that your middle name?"

"Nope."

Anyway—

Justin: It's my—it's my under name.

Sydnee: —and they were known as this for even long after they weren't running the company, they had died, it had passed on to other, you know, people in the family. They were still kind of known as Trade and Mark by people who bought the candies and, like, used them. They would talk about the brothers Trade and Mark, 'cause they—they look that way.

But either way, it was a good idea, all this stuff with the packaging, because the Smith Brothers Cough Drops became the first really dominant cough drop in the

US, and maybe *the* first cough drop. I mean, it depends on how you—you know, everybody was makin'—

Justin: Sure, right. Like you said, the Egyptians and everybody else.

Sydnee: But the one that was most well known and the one we can trace back pretty early and had a big presence in the US was Smith Brothers Cough Drops.

Justin: Can you still get 'em?

Sydnee: Uh, they're very hard to find.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Yes. They're—I'm gonna get into a little bit more of history of the company—

Justin: I bet that's a rough—I bet that's a rough recipe. I bet that'll really put a little... spring in your step.

Sydnee: The original recipe, by the way, was probably just sugar.

Justin: Ohh, okay. So it's not, like, intense, fisherman's friend level—

Sydnee: No. I mean, originally it—and I say that because there is a moment we'll get to where, like, they actually do add menthol to them. So, the original ones were probably just hard candies. Maybe something herbal. Maybe something like that, but... but more just along the line of hard candies.

Now, of course, as they became successful, there were more competitors, right? As people saw that this cough drop thing is really taking off.

Justin: Right. We gotta get our own.

Sydnee: And instead of just knocking it off, other companies decided, "You know what? We're just gonna have our own brand and compete."

Justin: "This seems wildly easy. We're just gonna make our own kind."

Sydnee: "We're gonna make our own thing." Uh, one such competitor was William Henry Luden.

Justin: Of Luden's fame?

Sydnee: There you go—you're gonna recognize these names. It's the patent medicine days. You name your medicine after yourself.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: If I made a medicine in those days, it would be called Sydnee's.

Justin: Sydnee's. Sydnee's Own.

Sydnee: Sydnee's Vegetable Compound. [laughs quietly]

Justin: With—now with cocaine!

Sydnee: No, no—mm, no. Just... sugar. Just candy and sugar.

Justin: And vegetables, one would hope.

Sydnee: Uh, his candy factory—Luden had a candy factory at first, of course. All these people did, pretty much. It started in his family's kitchen in Reading, Pennsylvania, and he was originally making, like—because of the Pennsylvania Dutch community he was making, like, some traditional German-type candies and things and selling them. A lot of chocolates and whatnot.

And he thought, with this new cough drop market, that he could put an interesting spin on it. He saw an opportunity. Menthol was already a popular cold medicine by the late 1800s, and a lot of people would just carry around a bottle of it when they were sick.

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: When they had a cold or something. I know.

Justin: That's intense.

Sydnee: And that—it is, it's intense, and you have to carry, like, a vial of liquid with you everywhere you go. And so he, in theory, worked with a pharmacist—although everybody worked with a pharmacist—

Justin: Wink.

Sydnee: —when they made these medicines. Or a doctor, somebody. And he started adding menthol to hard candies. He also distinguished his a little bit by adding some honey and some licorice to give them a slightly different flavor, and honey, as we've talked about on the show before, has been associated with, like, health and medicine for a long time.

And, in addition, he made 'em kinda yellow, and most cough candies, cough drops at the time were red. So, these were all just distinguishing factors.

So he started selling these Luden's Menthol Cough Drops, 5 cents a pack, in 1881, and he helped boost the sales by actually going around to railroad workers and giving them out for free, so kind of like viral marketing.

Justin: I just looked this up. I didn't realize that Luden's did—whenever I think "Luden's" I always think of the wild cherry flavor, which are not mentholated, and I—that's what I think of when I think of Luden's. But I guess they've got, uh, some mentholated kinds, too.

Sydnee: If you get into the cough drops—I mean, that's what you'll find. Within brands, there's a lot of variety of, like, the ones that have some sort of medicinal substance in them, and then they have other flavors and, like—

Justin: Halls gets buck wild.

Sydnee: —skews that don't have anything in them.

Justin: Halls is, like, hard outside and then a gooey center, and is loaded with... CBD oil, and... [holding back laughter] tastes like banana mango. It's wild. They got a ton of different varieties.

Sydnee: It's funny you should mention Halls.

Justin: Oh! Okay.

Sydnee: Because around the same time that Luden was moving out of his family kitchen—

Justin: [simultaneously] Parent's house—

Sydnee: —[laughs quietly] and opening his own factory so that he could keep making, in addition to his Luden's Menthol Cough Drops, which were becoming very popular and which he was selling a lot of. He was still making, like, candy and chocolate and marshmallows and all that kind of stuff. So he had this whole Luden's candy factory where he was also making cough drops.

At the same time that was happening, over in the UK there was another pair of candy making brothers who took notice—

Justin: The Mario Brothers.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] N—no.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: No. The Hall Brothers, Thomas and Norman, who had been running the Halls Brothers Company since 1893, initially making jam, and then expanding into, like, some caramels and some other candies. But by the 1920s, with cough drops being very popular in the US and with Luden doing the menthol thing—and the Smith brothers by now had added menthol to their product, and they got wind of all this, and by 1927 Halls also introduced their own flavored cough drop. This one also had menthol, had eucalyptus in it. Mentholypus... you've heard—

Justin: Ohh, alright, yeah.

Sydnee: —yeah, mm-hmm. And they were very popular in the UK, and by 1950 they had actually made their way to the US and were kind of taking over the US market, even. The Halls cough drops became so popular—and there were issues with reasons that the Smith brothers brand was declining and things, but by the 1950s, Halls was extremely popular in the US.

And also, do you remember one time when Jeff Goldblum apparently choked on a Halls on television.

Justin: No?

Sydnee: It's in—

Justin: I didn't know this was a thing.

Sydnee: —I don't know, it was, like, a side note in one of the articles I was reading. He's okay, though, so don't worry about Jeff Goldblum.

Justin: I—I did not know that that happened to Jeff Goldblum.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: I'm—I'm happy to hear that he's alright. Alright, Syd, you ready to head to the billing department? I'm—that's right. *I'm* taking control. I did a research project. I'm just as much an expert as you are. *I'm* taking us to the billing department.

Sydnee: Let's go!

Justin: Get in the sidecar! [holding back laughter] We're taking my motorcycle that I have.

Sydnee: Let's go! [laughs quietly]

Justin: Vroom!

Sydnee: Again—I already said let's go. We just have to go there.

[clip plays]

Jeff Goldblum: You do?

Conan O'Brien: Yeah.

Jeff Goldblum: [chokes] Oh, I do too—oh! [laughs]

Conan O'Brien: What happened?

Jeff Goldblum: [through laughter] I almost choked on my Halls cough drop.

[audience laughs]

Jeff Goldblum: Alright, there it is.

Conan O'Brien: This is the weirdest interview—

[audience laughs]

[clip ends]

Justin: Our first sponsor this week is Squarespace! If you wanna make something—let's say you're a creative type. You wanna get that work out there. There's nobody who's gonna help you get it online easier and more beautifully than Squarespace!

You can blog or publish content, promote your business, announce an upcoming event or special project. They got beautiful templates. They're gonna make you look like a web design whiz. There's e-commerce functionality. They got, uh—you can register a domain with them with over 200 extensions. They got customer support anytime you need it, 24/7, so—

Sydnee: If you wanna make your own... cough candy.

Justin: You wanna make your own cough candy?

Sydnee: Please don't rip off the Smith Brothers. They've been through enough.

Justin: [snorts] 'Cause they're dead. But—

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: —if you wanna make your own stuff, uh, or just make a website about other people's stuff, whatever you wanna do! Use Squarespace. Just check out squarespace.com/sawbones for a free trial, and when you're ready to launch, use the offer code "sawbones" to save 10% off your first purchase of a website or a domain!

I am so excited to bring back this sponsor, Quip, to *Sawbones*. You know, brushing your teeth is important, and a lot of people will tell you otherwise, but me, the J-Man, I'm here to tell you, you gotta brush 'em. Uh, and—

Sydnee: I mean, I support that, too.

Justin: Well—

Sydnee: I—I am very invested in tooth brushing.

Justin: Uh—the important thing about Quip is how it helps you to develop better habits. You see, Quip has these vibrations with a builtin timer that guide gentle brushing for dentist-recommended two minutes with these gentle 30-second pulses, ensuring an even clean.

Sydnee: Hmm!

Justin: You brush one quadrant of your mouth, say, top left. Then it buzzes at 30 seconds to let you know, "Hey, just a gentle reminder, it's time to move on."

Uh, Quip will also automatically deliver you brush heads every three months, so you don't have to worry about changing 'em. They new one's will just show up.

Sydnee: That's definitely good for me—

Justin: [sneezes]

Sydnee: —as I will go... a very long time without changing my brush if you don't remind me.

Justin: Yeah, Syd. You nasty, but—

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: —uh, I always make you change them by secretly throwing away your toothbrushes. Uh, but luckily Quip's here to fix our marriage—[clears throat] or what is left of it.

Quip starts at just \$25, and you get your first refill for free at getquip.com/sawbones. It's a simple way to support our show and start brushing better, but you gotta go to getquip.com/sawbones to get your first refill free. Right now, getquip.com/sawbones.

Sydnee: Alright, Justin. Are you ready to continue our tour of modern cough drop brands?

Justin: Yes. We've left the Halls hall—

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: —and now we're moving on to—well, something else. I don't know.

Sydnee: Uh, so, like I said, as time wore on in the early-to-mid-1900s, more and more companies wanted to get in on this action, and they were kinda all copying off of each other with, like—first it was just candy, and mainly sugar was the thought, that sugar soothes your throat, and so that's good for you. And then the menthol was thrown in there, and then around the same time, a Swiss company was founded by Emil Wilhelm Richterich.

Justin: Email?

Sydnee: Emil? [laughs quietly] Emil?

Justin: Emil! That's my Dad's middle name, Sydnee. You should know how to pronounce it.

Sydnee: Well, I don't know. Maybe it's pronounced differently.

Justin: Okay. It's Email. Go ahead.

Sydnee: [laughs] I didn't mean to say that. Emil—

Justin: I'm pretty sure your right! I'm pretty sure it's Email.

Sydnee: [laughs] Email—*Emil*—[laughs] Now you have to say Email!

Justin: Email... Wilhail Mail.

[pauses]

Justin: Email—

Sydnee: [simultaneously] Richterich.

Justin: —is—just commit to Email. That's—

Sydnee: And Daniel Ruoss Sr. established their own company. Uh, can you just read that for me?

[pauses]

Justin: [sounding it out] Confiseriefabrik Richterich... and Co.

Sydnee: Laufen.

Justin: Laufen.

Sydnee: Good. After the purchase of a small bakery in Laufen. And again, it started out as a candy making business, right? They bought this bakery and they were gonna make candies from their.

Justin: That's been a through line.

Sydnee: Sweets.

Justin: Not a lot of these start with doctors, Sydnee.

Sydnee: No. No, they don't. And, uh, one of the sweets that they made at their company was, um, using a lot of herbs. Apparently herbs are a big thing there. It's a big thing in Switzerland. They like their herbs. Uh, they like growing them.

They take great pride in the variety of herbs and how wonderfully lush their herbal fields are, and all the different things they can, do, and... so, uh, he kind of caught on to that trend by taking a bunch of local herbs, maybe just 'cause they looked pretty or people liked to use them a lot, he heard the names—it's not really clear that they were chosen with specific medicinal value in mind, but he took 13 different herbs and put them into a hard candy. Into, like, a little sweet. And a lot of people would buy these and actually dissolve them in hot water to make, like, an herbal tea.

Justin: Oh, really?

Sydnee: Yeah. Um, you can imagine when you get, like, the sugar in there, and then you've got all the herbs, I mean—

Justin: Sure, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. It'd be pretty good. So, uh, he started making these. They were pretty popular, and they actually started marketing them under an abbreviation of the name of the company.

Justin: Oh, instead of Richterich and Co. Laufen, it was Ri-co-la!

Sydnee: Ricola. This is when Ricola became popular. By the 60s, they officially changed the name of the company to Ricola, and it was known for these herbal cough drops. They were also one of the first to kind of, like, pioneer a sugar-free cough drop.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: That was a big deal, um, because—especially, like, by the 80s, the idea that sugar is bad for you, or too much sugar is bad for you, that we should be concerned at all about sugar—and so they started making some sugar-free as well, but the herbs were the big thing that set Ricola apart, and even now—because obviously Ricola is still around—you can visit the Ricola gardens. Their, like, show gardens—

Justin: [snorts quietly]

Sydnee: —in Switzerland. They have, um, five different gardens that you can go to where they grow all the herbs that they use in Ricola. Now, they're not the herbs that they actually put in the candy. Those are somewhere else. And they use locally grown herbs, but these are just for show, and you can go look... and see all the herbs.

Justin: Wow, that is—

Sydnee: I bet it smells and is—

Justin: —that is—

Sydnee: —I bet it's a delight to the senses.

Justin: —quite a first date.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: "Sweetie, I'm taking you to the garden where they grow the herbs for Ricola cough drops. Well, not the *actual garden* that they grow the herbs for the Ricola drops, but a reasonable simulacra of the—wait! Where are you going? Oh, I'm sorry, is it 'cause it sounded so unfathomably dull?"

Sydnee: Look—look at pictures. Just look at 'em online sometime. They're—it's gorgeous!

Justin: I shan't.

Sydnee: It looks absolutely gorgeous.

Justin: So, Syd, I just wanna clarify, now. You think that a good use of *my* time, as a father of two, and husband to you, and podcaster—a good use of *my* time is to look at pictures of the gardens where they grow Ricola herbs, no, wait, not the actual gardens, but pictures of a reasonable simulacra of the gardens where they grow Ricola. Herbs.

Sydnee: I mean, you were watching the movie *Spanglish* the other day, so I feel like this is a better use of your time than that.

Justin: That was for—that was for *Blank Check*, I had to watch all the James L. Brooks movies, I don't wanna talk about it. Okay.

Sydnee: Now they only use 10 herbs in their drops, and it actually—if you've noticed, they're on the package. If you think about the Ricola bag—

Justin: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sydnee: —I don't know if it occurs to you right away when you look at it—at least, it didn't to me—that, like, "Oh, this is what's in it." Which is kind of nice.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: You know? They're just pictures. They're pretty.

Justin: That way you can make your own at home.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] Good luck. It's a closely guarded recipe.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: It's quite secret. I mean, here are all the ingredients, but still. How to put 'em together, that's the key. Uh, there were obviously—

Justin: [holding back laughter] And one of 'em is made up.

Sydnee: —there were obviously smaller brands that were growing during this time period, and some of them that may be outdated—it's hard—like, you go into the stories—you can read the stories of every cough drop.

That's how you know it's a patent medicine. Most medicines are like, "We needed to make a medicine, and so we... spent a bunch of money in a lab until we made a medicine for something."

The stories behind patent medicines are always like, "So... [laughs quietly] a wandering traveling salesman came into my restaurant and traded a recipe." They're always stories like this. So if you look at—some of the smaller brands have some of these stories as well, and some of them claim to have been a little bit longer than Smith Brothers to call into question who was first, but Fisherman's Friend is one of those.

Justin: Yeah, those are—those are the strong ones. Those will mess you up.

Sydnee: Yes, and they were created by a pharmacist, James Lofthouse. It was originally a liquid, in 1865, and then at some point after that they were transitioned into lozenges. So a lot of these came from, like, cough syrups.

Justin: I'm assuming they didn't start off calling them Fisherman's Friend. That would've been a wild pull to just be like, "These are for fishermen. I made 'em for you, fishermen."

Sydnee: Well, they were made for fishermen. No, they weren't initially—it was the fishermen themselves, supposedly. The story goes that the fishermen started calling them friends.

Justin: Ohh, okay.

Sydnee: "Do you have any friends?" And "Can I have some friends? Do you have any extra friends?" And anyway, that's—

Justin: Oh, that's sweet.

Sydnee: —that's why they started calling them that. Apparently used by Margaret Thatcher, famously.

Justin: Alright.

Sydnee: Yes. Fisherman's Friends. There's also—man, I love these British lozenges. Victory V lozenges. Have you ever seen these?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: It's a killer package.

Justin: Oh yeah?

Sydnee: They're a British licorice lozenge—

Justin: [groans]

Sydnee: —that have been made since the 1800s by Dr. Edward Smith. The original formulation that Dr. Smith came up with—again, it probably started as some sort of syrup, and then became a lozenge. But the original formulation wasn't just for cough, and we know this because [holding back laughter] it contained licorice, *ether*, and *chloroform*.

Justin: Daaang.

Sydnee: So, intense, I would say. An intense lozenge.

Justin: Yeah, right.

Sydnee: Used for whatever ailed you. Whatever you didn't wanna be awake for—

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: —uh, you could use it for. Eventually he did start targeting them to coughs. They were called the, you know, a Victory V cough lozenge. And today, they don't have chloroform and ether in them.

Justin: Huge.

Sydnee: In case you're—in case you're curious. In case you were wondering—

Justin: What's the point?

Sydnee: —um, you can—some of these you can find. Like, it's funny—I was looking to see, like, could I get those Victory V lozenges? I can. They're very expensive, I think, here. I imagine they wouldn't be in the UK but, like, here, if I'm trying to buy them it's, like—this one was, like, \$33 for 15 of them or something—

Justin: Dang.

Sydnee: —which seems excessive. I'm not gonna get that. But as I was looking—I was looking at the, um—the reviews, and this is my favorite. This Amazon review of Victory V lozenges.

"The cost is like chemotherapy. Anyone who would spend this kind of money on such an over-the-counter medicine should see a witch doctor, if they haven't already. I can hire two people to breathe for me at half the price."

Justin: [laughs] Wow!

Sydnee: There are so many questions I have. [laughs quietly]

Justin: That person is, uh—has a lot of free time, I feel like, maybe.

Sydnee: They also can hire people to breathe for them, which... seems flawed.

Justin: Yeah. Lemme know how it works out.

Sydnee: Medically flawed. Uh, in the 30s we got Sucrets. Vick's came out with their cough drops. There was also a brand called Frog In Your Throat. You can find the packages for this all over, very popular images that you can find. But as far as, like, finding the lozenges, probably not.

I did like their tagline. The Frog In Your Throat said, "Innocent and immediate refreshment for your throat."

Justin: Mmm.

Sydnee: "Innocent." Uh, those were released in 1921, and they only were sugar. They were just candy. Nothing in 'em. Nothin'—nothin' that—you know.

And all the while, the Smith Brothers were trying to compete with all this. They added Vitamin A in the 50s as just, like, another stab at, like, "Is this anything?"

Justin: "Is this somethin'?"

Sydnee: "Do you like this, maybe? This is healthier?"

Justin: "Do you need this?"

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] The company traded ownership multiple times, and by the 70s, like, they lost the branding, and then eventually they just kind of fell off the shelves.

Justin: Ahh.

Sydnee: Yeah. In 2014, the company was purchased by a UK-based company to bring production back in the Chicago-based factory, and I found these articles about, like, they're gonna bring back this candy—well, this cough drop candy—and everybody was very excited. They were gonna use the old-school Smith Brothers brand with the two heads on it, except they were giving them, like, a hipster makeover.

Justin: Great.

Sydnee: I mean, the long beards.

Justin: Of course, yes.

Sydnee: It's perfect, right?

Justin: It's so good.

Sydnee: They—they look like hipsters. And so they brought back three original flavors: cherry, honey lemon, and warm apple pie, and they just didn't catch on. It just underperformed. And so now they're almost impossible to find again. Even though they were on the market as recently as, like, 2017, they're really hard to find.

Justin: Oh, bummer.

Sydnee: There are still—

Justin: I say it's a bummer. It doesn't actually matter.

Sydnee: No, it d—[laughs quietly]

Justin: Just different cough drops.

Sydnee: There's just a lot of cough drops is the thing. And, I mean, I've covered some of the major ones, but obviously there are endless numbers of cough drops.

Here in the US, again, stuff like—especially I always think of the Halls commercials, the Halls of medicine that were made out of those bricks of Halls.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And they used to say in the commercials, "Halls is real medicine."

Justin: [holding back laughter] Which is something real medicine often has to say out loud.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] Which is interesting when apparently there are places where Halls are eaten as candy. I assume these are places where they've never heard of chocolate? [laughs]

Justin: Or real can—yeah, no real candy there.

Sydnee: So, is it? That's the question, then.

Justin: Candy? Yes.

Sydnee: And the end of all this, is it candy?

Justin: Sounds like yes.

Sydnee: Or is it medicine?

Justin: I mean, it's not *medicine*, 'cause it doesn't treat anything, right?

Sydnee: They don't have a lot of evidence behind them. They were made as candy, right? Like, nobody made these with the intention that they were actually gonna fix something, at first. They were definitely being made in home kitchens. Lozenges with honey and things that, you know, back before you would get your medicine from a doctor and you made your medicine at home.

You know, so, they were based on, like, observations. "This seems to help with a cough. This seems to soothe a sore throat," that kind of thing. But there was no study that said this was the way to do it.

Um, menthol, which is in a lot of cough drops—not all, as you said, but is in a lot—has been shown in some studies, small studies, to increase your cough threshold. And what they do to figure that out is they, like—they have a group of people that get some menthol, and they have a group of people who don't get any menthol, and then they challenge them both with something that should trigger a cough, like—I think it's, like, capsaicin inhaled, like, chili pepper you have to inhale, and that should make you cough.

And what they say is that if you have menthol beforehand, it will take more of that to make you cough than if you don't.

Justin: Huh. Okay.

Sydnee: Other studies have not shown that.

Justin: [snorts] Oh—well, alright. Guess we haven't made a bunch of progress.

Sydnee: And they're all small, so it's inconsistent, so it's hard to say. Does it help? Maybe. Or maybe it doesn't. Um, it does make you feel like your airways are more open. This is interesting. This is the—and we've talked about Vick's VapoRub a little bit before. You get the sensation that you've opened up your airways, subjectively; meaning that objectively you...

Justin: Have not?

Sydnee: ... have not. But people say they feel better. And, I mean, if you're just riding out a cold, that doesn't seem necessarily dangerous. They, uh, do seem more helpful than placebo in soothing a sore throat. So if we're not focused so much on the cough part of the cough drop but, like, the throat lozenge part of it, if they use something like benzocaine, which is what's in Cepacol, they do seem

to somewhat numb and soothe your throat. And there are other ones that do that. And sucrose itself has been shown to do that a little bit, so just the sugar could be—

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: —soothing and numbing your throat, and maybe a soothed, less irritated throat, you wouldn't cough as much? Maybe?

Justin: Maybe?

Sydnee: Again, these are all very small studies, and this is—I mean, it suggest this, and I think it's easy to say that something that's a topical anesthetic is gonna numb your throat a little bit.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Sure. But are there risks?

Justin: [makes "I don't know" sound]

Sydnee: [pauses] Well... it's a question you should ask.

Justin: Okay, are there risks?

Sydnee: I mean, if they're medicine, you gotta know the risks!

Justin: Okay!

Sydnee: So, when it comes to benzocaine, there is a very rare risk—and when I say very rare I mean *very, very* rare, so I don't wanna freak everybody out about using cough drops.

But there is a risk of something called methemoglobinemia, and it affects the way that hemoglobin binds oxygen and delivers it to your cells, and if you have this reaction to things like benzocaine and lidocaine and those kinds of topical anesthetics, it can be very bad. But it's *extremely* rare. In one study, they found it to be a prevalence of, like, 0.06 percent.

Justin: Probably not gonna happen.

Sydnee: It's probably not gonna happen, but it is a reason to know that, like, if you have ever had that reaction—I mean, there's gotta be somebody out there—and you wanna use a cough drop that has that in it, please don't. Like, check the ingredients, because some of them do have these topical anesthetics. And so they're not advised for, like, very young children or people who are sick or have, you know, immuno-compromised, that kind of thing.

As for the menthol, there was a lot of concern that could—'cause menthol, if you take enough of it, can be toxic. So there was concern, if we have menthol in cough drops and people are treating them like candy and not medicine, is that dangerous?

Justin: Eat too much, yeah.

Sydnee: Could you take too much menthol? Well, the dose you would need to take to hurt yourself with menthol is 1000 milligrams per kilogram.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: The average cough drop is between 3 and 10 milligrams of menthol.

Justin: So that'd be a lot.

Sydnee: So, if you—so, let's say I weigh 65 kilos, and even if we assume I'm using the strongest ones, the 10 milligram menthol drops, I would need to eat about 6,500 cough drops a day to OD on menthol.

Justin: Nobody's even gettin' close to that, Syd.

Sydnee: So, I mean, it's reason—they've found, like, cases of people who literally ate two bags of cough drops a day for, like, 20 years and got sick.

Justin: And nothing, right?

Sydnee: Well, no. There—I mean—

Justin: Oh, oh. Just that much—

Sydnee: —yeah, but I—and so I would say, like, if it does have a medicinal property, I wouldn't... eat them nonstop. But using them occasionally, you're not gonna overdose on menthol.

Now, there was a study just last year that came out that suggested that perhaps, if you use mentholated cough drops too much, you'll actually increase your cough.

Justin: Oh no!

Sydnee: Like a rebound effect, and so—

Justin: Oh no, what a ripoff!

Sydnee: —they fixed a bunch of people's coughs by having them stop using cough drops.

Justin: Oh no!

Sydnee: I don't know. It was just one study. It was just last year, but it's a reason that if you're using cough drops nonstop and you still seem to have to use them—

Justin: Worth tr—maybe hang it up.

Sydnee: —like, take a cough drop vacation, see what happens. Um, and then of course the ones with sugar have sugar...

Justin: Not great.

Sydnee: ... and if there's a reason you shouldn't be eating a lot of sugar—which, I mean, none of us should be eating a *lot* of sugar—

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: —but, I mean, if you're a diabetic, you know, that's something to check. They definitely have sugar.

And of course there are sugar-free ones, but that comes with their own set of... issues.

Justin: Diarrhea.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: [through laughter] Folks, thank you so much for listening to our podcast—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —we appreciate it. Uh, we've ended this episode as we do all episodes of *Sawbones*: talking about diarrhea. Uh, wanna thank The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program.

Sydnee: I meant to ask you, though, Justin.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Do you think that William Goldman was right?

Justin: When—what—what was he—that he said, exactly, about cough drops in *The Princess Bride*?

Sydnee: That—uh—[laughs quietly] that true love is the best thing in the world, except for cough drops?

Justin: Yeah. That's only in the book, right?

Sydnee: That's only in the book. There's that whole thing about mutton lettuce tomato sandwiches in the movie—

Justin: Oh, God. Just—Billy Crystal headed to the Borscht Belt on that one. No thank you, Billy. Let's just keep it to the books, okay, bud?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Anyway. Yeah, they're—I'm not—they're pretty good, I would say. Not better than love, but good stuff.

Sydnee: I've never been a huge fan of cough drops, so I guess I'll take the true love.

Justin: Fair enough. Um, hey, we wrote a book. It's called *The Sawbones Book*. It's illustrated by Sydnee's sister, Teylor Smirl, and you can buy it anywhere you buy books! If you wanna do that, I think you'd like it. If you like this show, I think you'd like that.

Um... I think that is gonna do it for us, right? Yes? This one?

Sydnee: I think so!

Justin: Yes, I think—I believe so. Oh! We are going to be—if you're coming to see us, uh, next month—that's in November—we're going to be in Chicago on... uh, November 14th, and Minneapolis November 15th. If you're gonna be at one of those shows, tickets are sold out, but if you get any ideas in the area, uh, let us know.

Sydnee: Yeah, we always look for topics for *Sawbones* that relate to the places we go.

Justin: Uh, that is gonna do it for us, so until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

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

[theme music plays]

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