

Shmanners 207: Joshua Norton, First Emperor of the United States

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Travis: [pompously] Henceforth, I declare myself to be... the Emperor of Podcasts!

Teresa: [exasperated] It's Shmanners.

[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to Shmanners!

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: ... for ordinary events. Hello, my love. How are you?

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: Oh, I said "my love." You are my love—

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: —but also my dove.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Oh no. I'm throwing off convention.

Teresa: [quietly] Oh dear.

Travis: And hello, baby Dot!

Teresa: She's here!

Travis: She's just gettin' bigger and bigger all the time.

Teresa: Y'know, I try and squish her, but—

Travis: I know. I've seen it! It's horrifying!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: How are you? How's everything? How's your day?

Teresa: Day's goin' well.

Travis: [holding back laughter] We never see each other anymore.

Teresa: [through laughter] I know!

Travis: We're always traveling!

Teresa: What?

Travis: No. That's a joke.

Teresa: That's a joke. No, but we—we do hardly, y'know... it—times... they are... not... easy.

Travis: No. The times, they are a-always different.

Teresa: And our parenting style is largely divide and conquer.

Travis: This is true.

Teresa: Um, so sometimes, we don't really get to see each other very much.

Travis: And when we do it's, like, while Frozen 2 is playing loudly.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Right?

Teresa: Right.

Travis: So, I'm actually—I'm very excited to tell you about what we're talking about this week. So, uh, I mentioned a couple episodes back about Joshua Norton, right?

Teresa: Right. The King of America?

Travis: The Emperor of America, the first Emperor of America.

Teresa: Oh, okay.

Travis: And the thing is, is this is a—a person slash subject that I have been fascinated by since high school. I—I think it was, like, my sophomore year that my dad, like, either heard something about it on the radio, or saw something about it on, like, uh, public broadcasting. Like, he told me about it, and I instantly became fascinated by it, to the point where I actually wrote, like, a one act play about it.

Teresa: Wow!

Travis: Uh, that, like—

Teresa: How is this the first I'm hearing about it?

Travis: I know! I—I don't know! That's why I'm excited to tell about it.

Teresa: I don't know!

Travis: I wrote a one act play about it, uh, that like, I entered in, like, contests and festivals and stuff, and had a lot of fun with. Um, and it is... I'm proud to say, excited to say. I was worried, when I started researching it, that it would be the kind of thing that would be like, well, of course this was interesting to, like, a 15 year old, but now as an adult it's like, "Ooh, nope!" [laughs] Still *super* interesting and fascinating.

Teresa: Uh, so real quick...

Travis: Uh-huh?

Teresa: What time period are we talking about?

Travis: We're talking about the, like... 1800's, right?

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: So—

Teresa: Because I have to think that in the age of the internet, this would never fly.

Travis: No, ab—absolutely not.

Teresa: Like, this would just become somebody who said something weird. It would be a meme for, like, a day, and then everyone wouldn't care about it.

Travis: Well, so, a lot of this—I should preface this, right? With a bit of a content warning, as there is going to be a lot of, like... mental health things discussed here.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Um, and—and a lot of that, because that's what the core of this is, and I'll get into all of it. Don't worry, folks. I'll get to the details. But, like, the thing is that, what we will keep coming back to is the eccentricity of this person that I don't know would fly today, because now, the world is so used to people trying to style themselves as eccentric as a means to, like... maybe there will be a reality show about them. Maybe they will become internet famous, right?

Teresa: Oh, so you think that, uh, Joshua Norton might just... be one in the sea?

Travis: No, no, no. That—well, if—you're saying if this was today?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: I think if it was today, he would not have become the beloved figure that he was, because I think people would've rolled their eyes a bit—

Teresa: Ohh, okay.

Travis: —and not known whether it was genuine or not. Whereas I think that—so, let me tell you a little bit... about Joshua Norton.

Teresa: Please do.

Travis: Emperor Joshua Norton I of the United States of America.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: So. Um, his—his early life is a bit shrouded... not in mystery so much as it—I just don't know that it was of note, you know? It was a pretty standard, uh, time. Uh, so he was born in London. London, England. Thank you, Alex.

Teresa: Oh, yes.

Travis: Alex, uh, our researcher, [through laughter] has gone to clarify, London, England. So—

Teresa: Well, I mean, if someone declares themselves the Emperor of America...

Travis: This is true.

Teresa: It is important, if they were not born in America. Uh, I mean—

Travis: It's notable, yes.

Teresa: I'm—I'm no—I'm no—what is that? Birther? Is that what they call themselves?

Travis: Unfortunately, yes!

Teresa: I'm—I'm not one of those, but the detail is of note.

Travis: Well, indeed. And I guess to Alex's credit, there are probably lots of cities in America named London.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: So, uh, he was born February 4th, 1818. Um, and shortly after, moved to South Africa. Once again, Alex clarified, moved to South Africa with his parents, which... good, 'cause he probably was, like, two? Um, but—

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: —uh, shortly after, moved to South Africa with his parents as part of a UK-backed colonization program.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Um, so his family worked for many years in South Africa, amassing a modest fortune that was left to Joshua when they both passed away in the 1840s. After their death, he moved to America, the United States, winding up in San Francisco.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Uh, so at this point, it's the late 18—like, it's late 1849, so he is 31. With a modest fortune of, at that point, \$40,000, which today would be, like, roughly \$1.1 million.

Teresa: Oh, okay!

Travis: Right?

Teresa: So nothin' to sneeze at.

Travis: Yeah, like, he has money, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Like, if you... if you were 31 today in 2020 and you're like, "Yeah, I've got \$1.1 million in the bank." You're not doin' bad! [laughs] You're doin' pretty good!

Teresa: Well, I mean, especially if you think about, like, he probably stepped off the boat, didn't have a lot of stuff.

Travis: Right.

Teresa: I mean, 1.1 million dollars today would, in San Francisco, probably not even buy you a house.

Travis: Well, not—not today. But then—remember, like, we're talking about a San Francisco in the 1880s, so, like, we're still in the gold rush.

Teresa: Okay, okay.

Travis: Right? So this is still, like—

Teresa: So he's one millionaire among many.

Travis: Well, yes and no. Because a lot of the gold rush... have we talked about it on this show? Well, maybe we—

Teresa: A little bit.

Travis: —that's another episode we should do, because a lot of the gold rush was... the getting of the gold was not really where people made money, right? We're talking about, like, the people—like, Levi Strauss, right? Becoming a thing and making money, because they sold *to* people who were eager to get gold.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: So like, I don't know that there were a lot of, like, millionaires coming out of people who mined gold so much as—like, individually panned for it or found a big vein, so much as it was mining companies, people selling equipment, people selling to people who wanted to, like, make money on gold.

Teresa: Got it, got it, got it.

Travis: Um, and so, there was a lot of opportunities in San Francisco at this point of, like, if you invest well, if you do well... uh, business, y'know, like if you make good business decisions, you will be profitable.

And he was! He opened a business selling mining supplies, uh, to attempt to capitalize on the gold rush. And even though, uh, even early on in his life, he was reported to be, y'know, a little eccentric, he was good at business, right?

So, after the mining supply business, uh, he found success in the real estate market. He actually bought up a—a San Francisco property known as Cow Hollow, which now is like, an upscale neighborhood in the city, but then was... like, literally land used for dairy farming.

Teresa: Okay!

Travis: Um, and then, uh... so, with these investments, right? He quickly became one of the most respected and wealthiest men in the city of San Francisco, and that went great... until 1852. And—

Teresa: Dun dun duuun!

Travis: Dun dun duuun! And much like, uh—almost—it's like a parable, right? It's almost like a fable, right? This massive giant, undone by the tiniest thing you can think of.

Teresa: What—uh, a pea. Uh, a... a pin. Uh—

Travis: Close!

Teresa: Uhh, the tiny—the tiniest thing—

Travis: Rice.

Teresa: —that I can think of—rice. Ohh, rice!

Travis: Rice. Tiny rice. So, in 1852, China was facing a huge famine, so they completely banned the export of rice.

Teresa: Makes sense, you wanna keep it in... keep it inside.

Travis: Yes. So, the San Francisco rice market skyrocketed 800% in price. So—

Teresa: Oh, okay. Okay, okay.

Travis: The peak price was, at the time, 36 cents a pound for rice, but today that would be 12 dollars a pound for rice, right?

Teresa: Hmm.

Travis: So Norton saw this and he was like, "Oh, I got it. Okay, great." And a business partner tipped him off that there was one last shipment of rice coming in from Peru later that year. So, Norton bought a \$25,000 dollar rice shipment —

which would be about 750,000 dollars today – from Peru at 12 cents per pound thinking, like, he had just struck it rich, cornered the market.

Well, that would've been the true, if the—if it was the only shipment of rice coming out of Peru. And it was—

Teresa: Ohh, it wasn't.

Travis: No, it was not.

Teresa: Not such a hot tip!

Travis: No. A week after Norton bought his shipment, two more rice deliveries from Peru came in, and by the time Norton had a chance to sell his own shipment, the price of rice had fallen to even lower than it had been before the Chinese famine.

Teresa: Aww.

Travis: So he was not happy, and he got into a long, looong legal battle with the man responsible for the shipment, which... then he lost even more money on, and he did not have that. And after a yearlong battle, the San Francisco Supreme Court ruled against Joshua Norton, and this led to the bank foreclosing on his properties, taking his house, and him filing for bankruptcy.

Teresa: Wow!

Travis: And he was officially destitute.

Teresa: Like, from the very top to the very bottom!

Travis: Yep.

Teresa: Wow!

Travis: A hund—and we're talking, remember, three year—well, four years, I guess, at this point. So it was like, '49, he arrives, and by '53, he has, over the span of four years, gone from being one of the richest men in town to being completely destitute.

Teresa: Wow.

Travis: Which is, of course, devastating. But it is also the very beginning of the Joshua Norton we are going to come to know and love. Um, so it is said that he suffered a complete mental breakdown.

Teresa: Uh-huh, mm-hmm.

Travis: Uh, and it—he completely—

Teresa: Something about losing your entire fortune seems stressful to me.

Travis: Right, especially in this kind of thing where he didn't lose it because he was out partying or 'cause he had, like, wild friends or whatever. It was like, this thing that should have been, like, completely bankable, based on the information he was given, and it just crumbled around him.

And so, he disappeared from public life for about seven years. He didn't resur—or maybe a little bit less, but he didn't resurface until September 17th, 1859, which for Joshua Norton is a major landmark day, because that was the day that he walked into the office of the San Francisco Bulletin and demanded that the editor publish the following statement:

"At the preemptory request of a large majority of the citizens of these United States, I, Joshua Norton, formerly of Algoa Bay, the Cape of Good Hope, and now for the past nine years and ten months of San Francisco, California, declare and proclaim myself Emperor of these United States."

And so, at this point, this could have become absolutely nothing, right?

Teresa: Right.

Travis: If—if the press had been like, "Mm, okay." And this is what I'm saying, right? This is part of, like, the eccentricity of... this is not even like "Hey, have you noticed this eccentric dude about town?" This was him walking in and going, "I declare myself to be eccentric!"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And it's like, "Okay, cool!" But—

Teresa: When the headline could've just as easily been, "Local man is escorted out of the paper's office," [through laughter] or something like that.

Travis: Correct. But instead, the—the newspapers, the press in town was like, "Cool! Let's do it!" And they published it.

Teresa: Ahh. 'Cause, you know, you can sell more papes.

Travis: Well, they sell more papes, right? And at the time, like, this was like... that's the thing is, like, what's bonkers to me is as I think about it...

Teresa: Is this the original clickbait?

Travis: Well, that's the thing, right?

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: It wasn't even a story—it wasn't a story so much as they were like, "Okay, interesting! Sure!" Right? And I do not think that this would happen—they published his letter. Um, and it turned out, everybody loved it. So, people all over the city loved him.

Um, and—and now he has an audience, so he began to make public appearances, and he was dressed in a mixture of, like, Union and Confederate military regalia, in, like, a beaver top hat, y'know?

Teresa: Uh-huh.

Travis: Um, which sounds like he was wearing a beaver on hi—it was beaver fur.

Teresa: No, but—yeah.

Travis: It was a beaver fur top hat, so you don't get the—

Teresa: Which is n—which is, like, a common top hat material.

Travis: Yeah. I don't want everyone to get the wrong—this was not, like, a raccoon cap, right?

Teresa: Right, right right right.

Travis: Okay. Uh, and he had a ceremonial saber strapped to his side. Uh, and he began to tour the streets of San Francisco, inspecting the state of cable cars, sidewalks—

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: —buildings... uh, he would check in on police officers.

Teresa: Is that what he thinks an Emperor does?

Travis: Well, yeah. He was—

Teresa: Just maintenance. [through laughter] You know, road maintenance.
[laughs]

Travis: He was just, like, patrolling, making sure it was done. But, like, he would also make sure that, like, the police officers were doing their regular patrols and keeping people safe.

Uh, and he would also, like, gather sizable crowds on street corners and wax philosophic on a number of topics, and one of the most popular ones was the state of American politics and the future of the Empire. And remember, we're talking, like, 1859.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Right? So this was a time in American politics where talking about, like, the state of American politics was something people wanted to hear. Which I think, once again, was like, he is a product of his time. Of, like, we're—we're in this, like, uncertainty of, like, the Union and all of this stuff, and here is this guy who's, like, talking about it both in an interesting way, and also kind of like a nonthreatening way? Like, "Ah, what a great distraction."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: "What a wonderful story to print that's not about the tensions of the North and the South, and the Union and the Confed—" and, like, also remember, he's dressed in a combination of Union and Confederate.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: So it's like... he's kind of nonthreatening across the board. Like, no one's like, "Oh, well, clearly, he is siding with the Union, or he's siding with the Confederacy." Nope! He's siding with himself, as [through laughter] the Emperor of the United States of America. And—

Teresa: The more I hear about this guy, the more you're absolutely right. Like, these are people who... there was no TV!

Travis: No, right?

Teresa: What else were they gonna do?

Travis: Right!

Teresa: So of course they were... [laughs] They stopped in the street to listen to this dude.

Travis: Oh yeah. People ate it up.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And, like, people in actual power, like, didn't, y'know, adhere to his requests or anything, but the citizens of San Francisco could not get enough of him, and he became a full-fledged local celebrity.

Teresa: Well, obviously they humored him, y'know? Not—

Travis: Well—

Teresa: Not—I mean the—

Travis: —not humored! *Loved* him.

Teresa: No, no. I'm talking about the *authorities* humored him. 'Cause you—

Travis: Oh, yeah, no no no. Well—and we'll get into that.

Teresa: I think that you don't just let anybody walk around with a sword, or you don't just, like—

Travis: Well, at the time, you kind of did.

Teresa: Oh, really?

Travis: It was different.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: It—they were different times. The 1860s—

Teresa: Or walk into the police, uh, headquarters, right?

Travis: Well, we'll get to that.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: And in fact, we'll get to that in a second. But first... how about a thank you note to our sponsors?

[theme music plays]

Travis: We want to write a thank you note to our sponsor this week called Sweet Dreams. Sweet Dreams is a dream interpretation podcast hosted by three siblings, John, James, and Caroline. Uh, they are lifelong dreamers and first time podcasters.

They form a team of dream wizards who are ready to explore the subconscious. Throw away your dream dictionaries and join them as they offer interpretations in real time, whether it's sexy, scary, or just weird! You can send your dreams to sweetdreamspodcast@gmail.com. It's released every other Friday, and can be found on Spotify, iTunes, and Google Play. One more time – that's Sweet Dreams, the dream interpretation podcast.

We also want to say, from Amanda to Mikey, "Happy birthday, Mikey! Thank you for being there for me at my lowest and best points. I'm not sure who I would be now if I hadn't met you. You're killing it in Colorado and I'm so proud of you. I

love you so much, best friend. I miss you so much, and I can't wait to see you soon."

[music plays]

Manolo: Hey, you've reached Dr. Gameshow. Leave your message after the beep.

[beep]

Steve: Hello, this is Steve from Albany talkin' about my favorite podcast, Dr. Gameshow. Dr. Gameshow is a show where listeners submit their *crazy* ideas for game shows, and the two hosts have to play them. And they often bring in celebrities and small children to share in the pain and hilarity.

At first it might seem like Jo Firestone has a contentious relationship with listeners, but that is only mostly true. She actually really respects us. It's a lot like *Lethal Weapon*, where Jo is like, "Oh, listeners! You're all loose cannons! You're outta control!" And we're like, "No, Firestone. You're too by-the-book. You've forgotten what it's like out there."

And that's why I love the show!

[beep]

Jo: Listen to Dr. Gameshow on Maximum Fun. New episodes every other Wednesday.

[static]

Speaker One: Welcome back to Fireside Chat on KMAX. With me in studio to take your calls is the dopest duo on the West Coast, Oliver Wang and Morgan Rhodes. Go ahead, caller!

Speaker Two: Hey, uh, I'm looking for a music podcast that's insightful and thoughtful, but, like, also helps me discover artists and albums that I've never heard of.

Morgan: Yeah man, sounds like you need to listen to Heat Rocks. Every week, myself, and I'm Morgan Rhodes, and my co-host here, Oliver Wang, talk to influential guests about a canonical album that has changed their lives.

Oliver: Guests like Moby, Open Mic Eagle, talking about albums by Prince, Joni Mitchell, and so much more.

Speaker Two: Yo, what's that show called again?

Morgan: Heat Rocks: Deep dives into hot records.

Oliver: Every Thursday on Maximum Fun.

[static]

Travis: Uh, so the San Francisco Bulletin and other media outlets continued to publish his demands, and here are some of my favorites, right?

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: One...

Teresa: I'm ready.

Travis: We should abolish the United States Congress.

Teresa: Oh!

Travis: And—when this, of course, didn't work, he posted an Imperial Decree that Congress should be removed by the Army.

Teresa: Oh boy. So he—he's inciting a military coup.

Travis: [high pitched] Well... sure.

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: So—if that's how you want to see it.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Uh, two: abolishment of the two party system. Because there was no need for them, 'cause there was an Emperor. [holding back laughter]

Teresa: Alright, alright. I mean, makes sense.

Travis: And three: both the Catholic *and* Protestant Churches need to formally declare him Emperor and swear their allegiances to him.

Teresa: So he wants to be Emperor of both Church *and* State.

Travis: Well, listen! If you're gonna be Emperor, go for the gold. And, uh, there were some slightly sillier demands that were actually taken seriously on a local level. For example, he believed that calling their fair city "Frisco," instead of San Francisco, should be punishable by a \$25 "disrespect fee," and no one enforced it because at the time that was the equivalent buying power of \$830.

Teresa: Oh boy.

Travis: But still, to this day, ask any San Franciscan, and they'll tell you that they hate their city being referred to as San Francisco, and if you investigate that, it is basically credited back to—

Teresa: As Frisco, right?

Travis: —Joshua Norton. Well, yeah. Hated it being called Frisco.

Teresa: Oh, sorry.

Travis: But that is basically credited back to Joshua Norton as starting, and everyone going "Yeah! We *do* hate that!"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And the thing is, is—so, when we talk about, like, humoring, right? And authorities, it wasn't just, like, a media thing, right? Because in addition to writing the news outlets, Norton also wrote to several world leaders, and some of them even wrote back.

Joshua Norton met with Emperor Pedro II of Brazil, *and* King Kamehameha of Hawaii, who had actually denounced the United States, like, State Department.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And he would only deal directly with Emperor Norton. [laughs]

Teresa: Oh, wow!

Travis: Yeah. And—and it was, like, incred—like, he developed real international relationships with these, like, leaders.

And, like I said, he was deeply locally beloved. Uh, he was known to attend many public churches, theaters, social gatherings, and commencements; as many as he could, excelling in public relations wherever he went. And he was so popular that San Francisco toy stores started to carry Emperor Norton merchandise.

Teresa: Oh, boy!

Travis: Dolls, postcards, even cigars. And being Emperor—

Teresa: Well, I've heard of lots of stuff that, uh—that the UK puts on their things, like soaps and lotions and spoons and...

Travis: He was—he was marketable, right?

Teresa: Yeah, he sure was.

Travis: And it came with perks. People began to bow to him in the street—

Teresa: Oh!

Travis: —and address him as "Emperor." He could ride public transit for free. He had his own reserved box seats in several theaters around town. And this was one of my favorite points when I was a high schooler, is that he would attend said shows in those boxes with his dogs.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: His dogs would go with him as well.

Teresa: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. That tracks.

Travis: Um, restaurants would let him eat for free, and merchants would give him free clothing so that they could advertise that they were friends with San Francisco's living tourist attraction.

Teresa: So, here's the thing, right? This is brilliant, as far as, like, uh, livelihood goes. I mean, he became such a figure, it sounds like, that he didn't have to worry about money or a job or anything. Where did he live?

Travis: Well, he lived in a boarding house.

Teresa: Okay, okay.

Travis: Um, people would even occasionally donate to him, just give him money 'cause they felt bad about his situation, and they were—they called these donations, uh, tax payments.

Teresa: Okay, yeah.

Travis: Because he was Emperor.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Uh, he even started—this is one of my favorites. He even started to print his own currency.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Which many city establishments began to accept.

Teresa: [laughs loudly]

Travis: And some of these... Nortonbucks. I don't know if they were actually called that or just that that's what they're called now, but they are still around today as collector's items, and you can find a website from a few years ago that listed some businesses in San Francisco that still recognize Norton dollars as currency.

Teresa: Oh, wow. Oh, wow.

Travis: And—and so, it is easy to look at this and see—and think, like, that Joshua Norton, you know, had some serious mental trauma and some legitimate issues, right? Diagnosable issues going on. But it is also important to note that, throughout all of this, he still remained quite the businessman, as you said.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: He made royalties on the merchandise, and he would meet with anyone who wanted to meet with him and, you know, seemed like things were not... going poorly, all things concerned?

Teresa: I mean, he—he seems like kind of... y'know, like the Paris Hilton effect where it's like, you're a personality, and so you make money being a personality?

Travis: Yes. But I—but once again—that's what I'm saying is, like, I don't know that he would survive—that he would have the same story today.

Teresa: Hmm.

Travis: Because we have seen people like Paris Hilton who have made a living off of being notable personalities.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Um, and—and I don't know that his was a plot to do that. I think he legitimately was going through some stuff.

Teresa: Certainly, certainly.

Travis: Yeah. And I also think that this is a great time to point out that this is... uh, a good object lesson to take away, that we see a lot of people living on the streets now, and it's easy to assume that that person came to that situation because of, you know, maybe drug addiction, or poor life choices, or whate—however you want to phrase it.

But Joshua Norton, remember, was a millionaire, right? Who just made some bad business decisions, and suddenly, was living basically on the streets until this happened and, like, was living in a boarding house, and all of this stuff.

So it was also, like... somehow, he was able to make do, just by being... beloved, right? For who he was.

Teresa: It's kind of like the original Patreon.

Travis: Yeah, a little bit.

Teresa: Just the community rallied around him.

Travis: Yeah, the community rallied around him and kind of took care of him. So, not everyone was convinced, though. Um, he was once arrested by a policeman named Armand Barbier.

Teresa: Ooh.

Travis: And maybe I'm just pronouncing that cooler than it should be. But, uh, he wanted to throw him in an asylum for, quote, "apparent lunacy," end quote. However, the *moment* the public got wind, they lost their.. [pauses] bleep.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: So, droves of citizens sent angry letters to the police and media on Norton's behalf, and even the newspapers ran scathing reviews of the police department for imprisoning their ruler. And upon his court date, hundreds of protesters mobbed the courthouse in solidarity for their beloved Emperor.

And the chief of police got so fed up with all of this negative attention that Emperor Norton was released unscathed, and he got a formal, public apology on behalf of the entire police force. And, luckily for the police force, Norton issued a royal pardon to the man who arrested him, and from that moment on, whenever he passed a member of the force, policemen would salute him in a show of camaraderie.

Teresa: Wow! Wow! So this is—it's kind of like when you think about, like... [pauses] Somebody on Twitter sending all their followers to go after somebody who attacked them, right?

Travis: A little bit, but he didn't do it.

Teresa: Oh, no.

Travis: He wasn't like, "Get them!"

Teresa: No, no, no.

Travis: Right? But yeah. I mean—

Teresa: But it was like the stans coming after him.

Travis: A little bit, yeah. Uh, and so... listen. Aside from adding this kind of personality, y'know, to the city of San Francisco, some of his declarations actually came true.

Uh, he demanded on several occasions that a bridge should be built between San Francisco and the Oakland Bay area, and it got built in the 1930s. Now, not because of him, mind you.

Teresa: I mean, it was probably a good idea to do that anyway.

Travis: But this is what I'm saying, is, like, as a leader, right? He was not short of good ideas. He also said that there should be a league of nations that should uphold international interests. [laughs]

Now, I'm not saying that the—the—the league of nations and leader, the UN, was formed because of Joshua Norton ideas.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But... I am saying that, like, he was a good lead—he could have been... a good community leader, and—and all of that. Um, and in the two decades that Norton ruled, uh, people got very real delight from his presence, and people loved him. And like I said earlier, like, this is a time when San Francisco really could use a father figure like this.

So, during the period of the 1800's, thousands of Chinese immigrants were flocking to San Francisco to escape famine and to build a better life for themselves, right?

Teresa: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Travis: This influx of people, combined with the already shaky economy, made them an easy scapegoat for thousands of out-of-work San Francisco natives. They were—like, there was a horrible trend of anti-Chinese propaganda all over the city, and even a political party that was formed to "send the Chinese back to China."

Teresa: [clicks tongue]

Travis: And maybe that sounds a little familiar.

Teresa: Whew. [sighs]

Travis: So, uh, there was this documented incident where an angry mob of unemployed workers targeted a small band of Chinese immigrants in the city of San Francisco. Things were getting scary, when suddenly, Norton showed up—I just got, like, a wave of emotion.

Norton showed up, the crowd quieted down as he walked through it, and he stood directly between the Chinese men and the angry crowd. Everyone fell silent, and he took off his hat and began to recite the Lord's Prayer.

Teresa: Aww...

Travis: And he continued praying and quoting scripture without moving away from the would-be victims, and in the end, because of his interference, the crowd dispersed without incident.

Uh, and—and he was known for being able to help people in trouble. Um, and so—like, this is the thing. If you wanna look at this and say, y'know, was he doing this on purpose to become a beloved figure? Was the eccentricity a result of, y'know, true, like, trauma? Uh, or was it, like, a ploy to... I don't know, become a beloved figure?

I don't think that matters. I think that what matters is, he never abused this—this attention. He never seemed to play to his own ends, you know what I mean? Like—

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: He used—he made people happy, and he seemed to be a good guy. Um, and so that is part of the reason why his death came as such a tragedy.

So, Emperor Joshua Norton collapsed on January 8th, 1880 on a San Francisco street corner, uh, right in front of a church. And a police officer who happened to be on duty rushed to him and ordered a carriage to take him to the hospital, but he had passed before the carriage arrived.

Teresa: Aww.

Travis: Uh, in the coming weeks it was learned that Norton had spent the last few years of his life in complete poverty. He had five dollars in his pocket upon his death, and a single gold coin in his boarding house. Uh, now, there was a collection of walking sticks, his saber, a collection of tattered hats and telegrams, a few letters, some memorabilia, and 98 shares in a defunct gold mine.

Teresa: Aww.

Travis: Uh, he was not the rich businessman he had been when he came to San Francisco. But, he was not to go without a funeral. Several local businesses and establishments pitched in so he could have a proper burial, and he was laid to rest on a Sunday, two days after he died, and *30,000 people* lined the streets to pay their respects.

His procession was said to be two miles long. A day later, there was a total eclipse, and many people said it was a sign of the light going out over San Francisco. I'm getting choked up talking about it.

Teresa: Wow!

Travis: Since 1974, the Imperial Council of San Francisco has been conducting an annual pilgrimage to Norton's grave in Colma, just outside San Francisco. In January, 1980, ceremonies were conducted in San Francisco to honor the 100th anniversary of the death of, quote, "The one and only Emperor of the United States."

The Emperor Norton Trust, founded and based in San Francisco from 2013 to 2019, is a nonprofit engaging in research, education, and advocacy to advance the legacy of Emperor Norton. They're currently running a campaign to ceremonially name the San Francisco Oakland bridge after him. After all, they say with a smirk, it was his idea.

Teresa: Wow! I—I feel—I have a lot of feelings about this. The first one being that I can't believe this is the first I'm hearing of this. It sounds like this man touched a lot of lives.

Um, and I mean, admittedly, before the turn of the century, but also, like... [sighs] You were talking about, you don't know if this could happen today. But I feel like it was—it was a highly localized thing, right? So I hope that it *does* happen today. I think that we just don't—we just don't hear about it, because maybe it's not happening in our, y'know, personal community.

Travis: Well, we do have—we do have a guy very similar to this in Cincinnati, Jim Tarbell.

Teresa: Oh, that's true! That's true.

Travis: Jim Tarbell is a very beloved figure here in Cincinnati. He's a former mayor. Um, there's a huge mural of him in, like, top hat and tails. And, like, he—I see him just about every year at, like, the opening day ceremonies at Arnold's for the Cincinnati Reds where, like, he plays harmonica to "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" and stuff.

And he is a beloved figure, and I think that there are beloved figures like this all over the place. And you know what I will say, even though you may never have heard the name Joshua Norton, I know for a fact you are familiar with a character inspired by him, because anybody's who's ever read Huckleberry Finn...

Teresa: Yeahh!

Travis: Right? The King is directly—is meant to be Joshua Norton.

Teresa: Okay!

Travis: Uh, Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, they both based characters on him. Stevenson's stepdaughter would go on to write about Norton, saying, "He was a gentle and kindly man, and fortunately found himself in the friendliest and most sentimental city in the world. The idea being, 'Let him be Emperor if he wants to.' San Francisco played the game with him."

Teresa: That's great.

Travis: Um, I also remember from my research when I was a high schooler that Mark Twain wrote his epitaph. Wrote—or, sorry, his obituary.

Teresa: Oh, okay.

Travis: Wrote his obituary. Um, and—and so—

Teresa: I mean, if you're gonna have somebody write your obit, that's amazing!

Travis: Right? And, listen. There's a lot about this story that's complicated and, y'know, potentially dark. When we're talking about, like, mental illness, and was there an ulterior motive, any of that stuff, like I said.

But, like... as a symbol, as a unifying idea, as a... not to make a joke, 'cause it's gonna sound like I am, but it's like Batman, right? Where it's just like you look at Batman and it's like, is he the hero we deserve? Is he the hero we need? Right?

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Joshua Norton was this figure at a time where, like, the city really needed something to come together over, and they came together over Joshua Norton. And to me, I think that's incredible. And it's also just such an interesting story, right?

Teresa: Sure is.

Travis: Like, phew! So, yeah. All hail, uh, Joshua Norton I, Emperor of, uh, America. Uh, please—and this is the thing where, like, I'm fascinated by this. Do more research. Uh, share this episode.

I think that this is, you know, a cool and interesting story that everyone should hear about. Um, yeah. And if you know anything about it, if you have any personal connection to this, please tweet at us @ShmannersCast. Uh, I'd love to hear it. Or you can email us, ShmannersCast@gmail.com. You can also email us there if you have other topic suggestions.

If there is other, like, public figures like this that, like, have such an impact... [laughs] Whether it be local or national or international, please let us know. I love doing these kinds of episodes.

Um, check out all the other amazing shows on MaximumFun.org. They're all incredible. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: Thank you to Brent "Brental Floss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found.

Also, thank you to Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art, like Travis said, @ShmannersCast.

Dot: [babbling quietly]

Teresa: You wanna say somethin' too, Dot?

Travis: We're almost done, Dot, I promise.

Teresa: Thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for our cover picture of the fan-run Facebook group, Shmanners Fanners. Go ahead and join that group if you love to get and give excellent advice from other fans.

Um, let me think. Thank you Alex—

Travis: Oh yeah.

Teresa: —for your assistance and research.

Travis: Could not have done this without Alex. Thank you so much. Um, and—and I—I'm just gonna say one more time, very sincerely: if you enjoyed this episode, please, please share it with people, because this is... I hope was clear from the episode, a subject that I am—that I love.

I love the history of Joshua Norton, um, and I love this story, and I was very excited to be able to present it to you guys and present it to Teresa, and I really enjoyed talking about it. So, it'd mean a lot to me on a very personal level if you enjoyed this episode to please share the link, tell other people about it, uh, whatever. Whatever you want to do.

Teresa: And if you enjoy any of our episodes, uh, rate, review, and subscribe on iTunes! And, you know, tweet out links! We love it. We love to see people tag us so that we can see what your favorite episodes are and how you're sharing them.

Travis: Absolutely. And that's gonna do it for us. Join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to Shmanners...

Teresa: Manners, Shmanners! Get it?

[theme music plays]

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