

Sawbones 295: Ben Franklin

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Clint: 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 McElroy.

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Audience: [cheers loudly]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Listen. We went to your, um... your Reading Terminal Market today.

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: Gorgeous.

Sydnee: It was great.

Justin: Second time there.

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Justin: Uh, not to brag... but we've been twice.

Sydnee: [laughs] We've been there two times.

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: It's not a big deal.

Sydnee: It was great. We ate way too much food.

Justin: Yep.

Sydnee: 'Cause there are like, lots of... I was like, well, there's gotta be like, a list of, what are the best things we should eat? Well, I mean, there's like... hundreds of lists of those.

Justin: Yeah. Turns out, it's all...

Sydnee: So we tried them all.

Justin: Tried them all. Um, and while I was there... this is not an exaggeration. I saw no fewer than three framed photos of owners of stores with Ben Franklin.

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: And it's like... you guys know, right? I mean, I don't wanna cast judgment, but like, you know... it got around, right? It's not the real one, right? You know that.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Right?

Sydnee: It's not that Ben Franklin. But, it was very inspiring, because uh, Ben Franklin, among many things that he dabbled in and was an expert on, uh, was medicine. Franklin dabbled a lot in the medical sciences, and so, I

thought, that could be... This was actually Justin's idea. I don't want to take credit for—

Justin: [makes a triumphant trumpet noise]

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] This could be a really good show topic in connection to the area, 'cause even though Franklin was not from Philadelphia, he was from Boston, Philadelphia became like his...

Audience: [laughing]

Justin: Sorry.

Sydnee: I did not...

Justin: Blame like, linear time. I'm sorry.

Sydnee: I'm sorry that he—I mean, he was born there. I can't stop—I can't control that.

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: But he came here by choice.

Justin: Right.

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: And stayed. [laughs] And he like—I mean, it was like his adopted home. So that's... more meaningful, really.

Justin: Yes. He chose. The life he cho—the home he chose. Right.

Sydnee: Right. So... [laughs] I didn't know there was this animosity. I wasn't prepared for that.

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: They're very possessive of their Ben Franklin.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: So, he was not a doctor of medicine; although, he was given an honorary doctorate later in life, but that was for like, electricity stuff, not medicine stuff.

Justin: [laughs]

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: So he was not a doctor. Um, he actually had very little, like, actual formal education. He was originally sent to school by his family to become a minister, but he wasn't really feelin' that, and then, he went back to school a little bit later, but he had to stop so he could work and help support his family, and so, he went into printing instead.

So he actually—a lot of the stuff he learned, it's really impressive, y'know, he learned on his own. And uh, medicine was just—it was kind of one of the things if you were, like, y'know, um... uh, a son or daughter or child of the enlightenment, then you would want to learn about everything. You'd want to learn about science and music and art and culture and medicine and... and politics and society. And so, it was just kind of part of everything that he learned about.

Justin: Kind of like me.

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: A renaissance Justin.

Sydnee: [laughs] And uh, but he was very—

Justin: Master of no trades, but jack of many. Including, it would seem, idioms.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: Like Ben Franklin.

Justin: Like Ben Franklin. A modern day Ben Franklin. Will he, too, become one of our great presidents?

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: History... history will tell.

Sydnee: You know...

Justin: Hold on, one sec.

Sydnee: You know... I'm gonna assume you know.

Justin: I know he's from Boston, yes. But it feels like... Philadelphia's his real home, right?

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: Yeah! They're with me!

Sydnee: So, one of the things I love is that, even though he dabbled in medicine, and usually, as a physician myself, when I hear that, that somebody's like, "Well, I mean, I'm not a doctor, but... I read a lot about it, and... [laughs] I think I know something." I usually get a little nervous. Like, oh, do you? Okay.

Justin: She does, yes.

Sydnee: This is gonna be an unpleasant visit. Uh, he was not—it didn't appear he was like that. He actually, in letters that he wrote to his family, he'd give them extensive medical advice, but then say, "Now, I am not a doctor, so if your doctor says anything other than this, do that. Don't do what I said, do what your doctor said."

Justin: "In fact, I don't know why I wasted all of this ink. I should've put that stuff first."

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: No, but in this—

Justin: They would write letters about like, anything back then. [laughing] Here's some medical stuff you should do unless your doctor says not to.

Audience: [laughing]

Sydnee: Uh, and I mean, that would've been, for the time period, everybody was just kind of guessing and sort of making stuff up, so...

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I mean, it fit him pretty well. Um, but, I wanted to go through some of the areas in which he sort of practiced somewhat medicine, and contributed to what we know about medicine.

Um, first of all, the most obvious is electricity and electrotherapy. So, with the understanding of electricity, there became a lot of interest, not from Ben Franklin, but from like, the public in general, as to, what could this do to our bodies? [laughs] If we applied it to it a lot in different ways, in different areas, at different voltages? What could we do?

Justin: We've discovered one. Kill ourselves. That's... that one happened on accident.

Audience: [laughing]

Sydnee: Not a good one.

Justin: Not a fan. But maybe... hear me out... less?

Audience: [laughing]

Sydnee: And maybe—maybe less, and maybe like, more directly applied. And that was one of the big areas of interest was, in people who had suffered some sort of paralysis, could we use electricity to like, bring movement back? To like, fix whatever? 'Cause we didn't have an understanding at that point why the paralysis had occurred, so like, can we fix it with electricity?

And Franklin himself was very skeptical of this. With all of his understanding of electricity, he was like, "Mmm, I don't really think that's gonna work." But people sought him out anyway, because he was known as an expert in that field. So people would come to him with their family members and say like, "Can you put the electricity on my family, please?" However...

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: He's been outside. Our brother, who has been outside with a kite tied to his leg for many hours, and nothing.

Sydnee: [laughing] "We don't really know how it works, but could you do it?" And Franklin was like, "Well, okay. Why not?" [laughs] So he did. So he tried, on multiple people. And again, this wasn't something he sought to do. It was just, people came to him, and he was like, "Well, I mean, I know how to... I know. I got the equipment. I got the stuff."

Justin: Grab the kites.

Sydnee: [laughs] "I'm not busy." Uh, so he had like, an electrostatic generator, and he had these laden jars, these jars to like, collect the energy that he generated, and he would basically get all the—collect all this energy,

and then direct a shock at like your—at the patient’s leg, or arm, or the whole side of their body, whatever had suffered paralysis. And he would do this multiple times a day, usually for about five days was all... that was usually about all the patients wanted to go through.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] And he wrote that. He was like, “Usually after five days, they were like... thank you...”

Justin: My leg really hurts, but if I have to endure one more day of Ben Franklin guessing where to shock me...

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: And Franklin, for his part in it, was like... “I mean, I told’ja. I said this probably wouldn’t work. I was just willing to give it a shot.” And he wrote that. He said, y’know, that initially, there was like, some subjective, “I think I feel stronger,” response, and he noted that the arm or the leg or whatever that you shocked definitely seemed warmer. [laughs]

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: After.

Justin: More succulent.

Audience: [laughing]

Sydnee: But he said, I don’t see a lot of... I don’t see a lot of real objective improvement. And so, it was something he was at least willing to try, but wasn’t able to really make a lot of advancement in that way.

Now, another area in which he did kind of solve a medical puzzle was, uh, there was a problem during Franklin’s time, a very common malady that was usually called the dry gripes. And this was like... [laughs] Basically, you would have a lot of stomach pain, and you’d feel really weak, and you might

look very pale, and lose a lot of weight. And it was really common, and nobody was completely sure what caused it.

Franklin noticed that he saw it a lot in his career in printing, and he started to connect it. He started to put the pieces together that there were certain professions among which the dry gripes were a lot more common, and he eventually figured out that they were all being exposed to lead. And so, he was the one who solved the puzzle that lead poisoning is like, a problem.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydney: And that we should limit lead exposure. And he was able to like, use this. I guess you might consider, depending on your proclivities, one of his greatest achievements. He was able to use this to figure out that we were using lead in a lot of stills, and like, the coils and stills. And so, all of our gin was—and rum was like, lead laden.

And so, he solved that, so you could drink all the rum you wanted and not get lead poisoning.

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: Heroic.

Sydney: And there was a doctor in Devonshire who like, wrote to him. This Dr. George Baker and said, "Hey, uh, I think maybe... we've got something called the Devonshire colic, which is the dry gripes, but I don't—I think it might be this thing, only, we don't drink that rum a lot. What do you think it is?" And so like, through like, letter writing, he helped him solve that it was their cider press. So it was their cider.

So anyway, everybody in Devonshire got to drink cider and not get lead poisoning because of Ben Franklin.

Justin: They might've done better if they stopped coming up with like, cool high school nicknames for all these diseases.

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: “So, Devonshire failings is like the dry gripes, but with just a little bit of like, our own local twist on it.” It’s like, it’s called lead poisoning!! You all have lead poisoning! Get rid of the lead!

Sydnee: [laughing] Uh, he also was one of the first people... and this is funny, because Ben Franklin was one of the first to write down that, y’know how we all think that getting, uh, wet and cold, like, being out in the rain and getting—having wet hair, and going out when it’s cold? That was always what I was told. “Oh, don’t go outside with your hair wet, you’re gonna get sick.” Right? You still hear that today.

Ben Franklin was one of the first people to write down like, “This is not real.”

Justin: [laughs]

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: “I know that everyone thinks this is a problem, but it’s not.” The reason he pieced this together is that, from a young age, Franklin had actually initially wanted to be a sailor. He really—that was his plan. And he didn’t end up doing it, but he had a lot of contact with sailors. He was like a sailor fan? I don’t know. [laughs]

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: He liked to think about boats and sailors I guess. I mean, he rode on them periodically. So, he was a fan of sailors, and he observed that they would get cold and wet all the time, and they weren’t getting sick. And he was like, “This doesn’t make any sense.”

And so, he actually was one of the first people to write down, “Y’know, what I think it is is when people are like, closed up in close conditions, that something is happening. When we shut people up and they’re all like, breathing in each other’s faces and like, getting their spit in each other’s faces and all that, something is happening that’s making everybody sick.”

So he was like, describing a communicable disease before he really—

Justin: What a cool period in history where like, “Something’s going on. Anyway. I’m gonna die now. Bye.”

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: “Better luck with this in a hundred yeeears.”

Sydnee: But—

Justin: “Make sure you give me credit for it.” [laughs]

Sydnee: How disappointed would he be every time to you go to like, leave the house, and like, your parent is like, “Don’t leave with wet hair! You’re gonna get a cold!”

Justin: “Ben Franklin said I could.”

Audience: [laughing]

Sydnee: Um, one fun, uh, medical story, sort of medically-adjacent story that Franklin was involved in. We’ve actually—we’ve talked about this some on the show, but it’s been a while, and it’s one of my favorite stories from like, pseudo-medical history. Um, Ben Franklin was part... he was actually in charge of a task force at one point that was set up by Louis XVI, because at the time in France, mesmerism was really popular.

Uh, and Franz Mesmer had spread this idea that there was something called ‘animal magnetism’ that was like this force that we all have, and that all objects can have, and we can like, manipulate, and it flows through us, and if we have like, a clear passage for the animal magnetism, then we have good health.

Justin: We’re wasting your time. You’ve heard about it in health class. You remember this real thing that exists, animal magnetism.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughing] If you have blockages to that flow, then you'll get sick. And he had all these elaborate ways that he could help you like, open up these blockages to the flow of your magnetism. It was everything from just like, sitting in a room with you and holding hands for an hour, to like, these huge ceremonies where like, a bunch of people would like, hold hands around a giant tank of water, and they would like, hum and sing and sway, and... [laughing] Like, get real wild.

Justin: And sex stuff, probably.

Sydnee: I'm not saying—I don't—that is not—

Justin: I'm not saying it either, but like, I would probably tell, like... "If anybody writes a history book about this, do leave out the sex stuff."

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: "Just say that we did like—got like, kind of wild around a tank." And somebody will be like, "That's gonna sound really weird without the sex stuff. Actually, that's—you may have made it weirder by excising the sex stuff that was definitely part of it."

Audience: [laughing]

Sydnee: Well... [laughs] Uh... King Louis was not convinced. And this was becoming very popular throughout France, and he was kind of upset about it, and he wanted to like, nip it in the bud. And so, he had this task force of like, doctors and scientists and really smart people put together, and Ben Franklin was in charge of it.

And the idea was, "Can you disprove this, please? Or prove it," but he didn't really think it was real, "So disprove it so people will stop paying to go to these people." 'Cause there were people, y'know, popping up all over France to like, get your money so that you'd come let them clear your blockages.

So anyway, at Franklin's house, they set up an experiment. And they did a bunch of different things. But my favorite part, my favorite test, is that they had one of the practitioners that came to demonstrate their powers go magnetize a tree. He said he could do that. "I can magnetize things. I have the ability to move energy into them, and then you can feel the magnetic pull. So I'll be able to magnetize a tree in this yard, and we can send anybody out, and they will be drawn to the tree after I do this."

So they chose a local 12-year-old boy, and they blindfolded him, and they said, "Now, go find the tree."

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: And he... [laughing] The... Ben Franklin's account of this is that he wandered around for like an hour...

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: And then he passed out. [laughs]

Audience: [laughs loudly]

Sydnee: He was okay. The boy was fine.

Justin: You can read all about it in 'The Griffin McElroy Story.'

Audience: [laughs and cheers]

Sydnee: So... [laughing] Anyway, the task force published all their findings, and it went a huge way to discredit mesmerism and to stop a lot of these kind of fake medical practitioners who were popping up all over France, so...

Justin: Wouldn't you love to live in an era where disproving stuff made people less likely to do it?

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: Wouldn't that be charming?

Audience: [cheers]

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hey, everybody. I hope you're enjoying the show. We know we had fun, uh, making it. Sorry about the quality of my voice, and sorry that it's still like it is. You deserve better, and I wish I was in any capacity to deliver that to you.

Our first sponsor this week is Casper. If you want to get a better night's sleep, and you want to sleep better than your friends, which is really what it's about. It's not improving your personal sleep, it's about out-sleeping everyone you know. Five years ago, Casper revolutionized the mattress industry by making it easier than ever to buy a premium, foam mattress.

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Let me see what else we got for you. Yes, it's MeUndies. Uh, when we got back from this tour, I saw a big, beautiful package sitting on my doorstep. Y'know what I was most excited about? It's not all the bills that I have to pay. No, that would be ridiculous. It's not the, uh, low carb cereal I had delivered. No... it was my new MeUndies.

I look forward every month to getting these, uh, new, fashionable prints that they got cookin'. Uh, right now, you can bring back the joy of picking out the perfect costume with their spooky prints, and Halloween costume onesies. That's right... costumes. Onesies. MeUndies. Imagine, scaring your friends and enjoying the luxurious comfort.

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Audience: [cheering]

Sydnee: Uh, speaking... speaking of that, uh, another thing that Ben Franklin was an early believer in was inoculation. So...

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: Uh, in Franklin's time, small pox inoculation. And now, at the time, this is not what we think about as like a modern vaccine, but this was on the pathway to creating modern vaccines. They were—they were still doing like, if you had small pox, I might take like, some of—one of your sores... I'm scraping it. That's what I'm doing with your arm right now.

Justin: Oh, cool. Yeah.

Sydnee: Like, scrape off some of that like, scab or whatever.

Justin: That's Sydnee's love language. You have to respect it.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: We're all into something different. And then, I might like... if I wanted to inoculate somebody, like, take some of that and then like, blow it up their nose, or y'know, stab them in the arm with it or something. And there were different processes. But, it usually worked, where you might get like, a mild form of the disease, but then you'd get better, as opposed to getting small pox and dying, which is worse.

And it was, at this point, it was just being introduced and accepted, and there was still a lot of resistance, 'cause it seemed very strange. And Ben Franklin was one of the first ones to observe, like, use his brain and observe and say, "This works, and this is great." And he was a huge proponent and published pamphlets about it, and was one of the first like, ones to like, spread the word. "Hey, we're onto something here. This could prevent disease, and we should all, y'know, get our small pox inoculation."

Justin: So you're wearing that t-shirt tonight to celebrate Mr. Franklin's...

Sydnee: Oh. Yes!

Justin: Oh, this old thing?

Sydnee: I'm wearing one of our vaccine t-shirts.

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: We don't normally sell our own stuff during shows, but since the proceeds go to charity, a vaccine awareness charity, we thought it was okay.

Sydnee: That that would be okay. Yeah.

Justin: Yeah. You can go to McElroyMerch.com and you can buy them.

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: Yes, if you want to spread the... spread the good word like Ben Franklin. Your adopted son.

Justin: And give some vaccines to your friends.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: Like, not you. Unless you know how.

Justin: Eh, unless you find some.

Sydnee: Unless that's like, within your—no, only...

Justin: Maybe if you find some, you don't give them away, that's just greedy. If you find some needles that look like they might have vaccines in them...

Audience: [laughing]

Justin: It is your responsibility...

Sydnee: Please don't. Please don't do this.

Justin: To put them in your friends.

Sydnee: No. Only if it is within your job description to give vaccines.

Justin: Especially you're vehemently anti-vax friends, because they're gonna be the least likely to get them. So just any needles you find.

Sydnee: No. Okay, that's assault. Please don't do that.

Justin: Civic duty.

Audience: [laughing]

Justin: Assault, civic duty. It's like, the line is so blurry.

Sydnee: That's a thin line. [laughing]

Justin: Is there a line even? Hm.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: One to ponder. Well...

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Hmm, interesting. One to think about.

Audience: [laughing]

Justin: McElroyMerch.com.

Audience: [laughs and cheers]

Sydnee: [laughing] Um, one of—one of Franklin's inventions. There were many. There were many inventions that he had. But one that was medically relevant was the first flexible catheter.

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: A few fans in the audience?

Sydnee: Catheters!

Justin: Excellent.

Sydnee: They're great, if you need them. Uh, his brother... and he did, as well. Franklin had problems with bladder stones, and his brother, John, had a lot of problems with them, and that created a lot of difficulty urinating. And so, he came up with this idea that he actually like—he had a local

silversmith, like, help him make, and then he like, mailed it to them. He was like, "Here you go, John."

Justin: Silversmith is like the last kind of smith I would want. Rubbersmith, maybe?

Sydnee: It was like this flexible, like, silver coiled thing. And then—and jointed.

Audience: [sounds of horror]

Sydnee: And then, it was wrapped in like, gut and intestine. [laughing] But it worked. I mean... I think. It helped him pee.

Justin: At what cost?

Sydnee: It helped him pee.

Justin: I mean, yeah. You gotta go...

Sydnee: Obviously, we've improved upon those since then. But it was a great idea. [laughs] And of course, we have to mention bifocals, which... I didn't realize, Ben Franklin... so, he made bifocals, because as he got older, he needed both reading glasses for reading, and then, glasses to see far away when he wasn't reading. And so, he was constantly switching between two pairs of glasses, and that got annoying.

And so, he literally just had his lenses, like, cut in half, and then put back together. Which, I didn't know that was how he did it. Anyway, we all knew—I think most of us know that. That's like the thing you remember in school, right? He wasn't president, even though I keep wanting to think he was, and he made bifocals.

And I think what's cool is, among these and all of his inventions, he didn't patent them. That was a big thing with Ben Franklin was not to patent them. He said... his quote on this is, "As we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others, we should be glad of an opportunity to serve others by

any invention of ours, and this we should do freely and generously." Which I think is great.

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: Um, in addition to inventions, he also is responsible for helping found some great institutions. Uh, notably, very close to here, Pennsylvania Hospital was the first...

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: The first public hospital, founded in 1751, with Thomas Bond. And basically, Thomas Bond was a doctor, a surgeon there, and he went to Ben Franklin, because he was trying to get like the political weight on his side to start a public hospital. We would like to use public funds to create a hospital to serve members of our city who are poor or the mentally ill people who can't take care of themselves. We need better resources, and it doesn't make any sense to be sending doctors out into the country to make house calls and see these patients out there. We should have like a local place.

And he didn't know Franklin would go for the idea, but he went and he asked him, and he was all—he was totally on board. And for a lot of very pragmatic reasons that I just mentioned, as well as like... that was a good thing, and we should do it. So, he went initially to the assembly, and he said, "Uh, hey, we would like to do this, and we'd like you to basically use taxpayer money to make this hospital." And they were like, "No. No way. The people will never go for it. If you want to get a bunch of rich people to donate some money and make a hospital, that's awesome. We'll tell people to go to it, but we're not helping with this."

And so, Franklin said, "Okay, how about this? If I can raise X dollars privately, you'll match it."

Justin: Ben, we've told you before. X-dollars aren't real. You made them up as your own secret dollars, and we do not honor them.

Sydnee: It was a lot of money. [laughing] It was like a lot of money. And the assembly was like, “[laughs] Yeah, sure. You're never gonna raise that much money. Go for it. Whatever, Ben. Go get your money, and yeah, we'll match that.” Well, Franklin was very popular and had a lot of pull, and he raised every penny he said he was going to and then some, and then went back to the assembly and was like, “Too bad.”

Justin: “Sorryyy.”

Sydnee: Uh, and that was the founding of the first public hospital in America, so... it was really cool.

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: Um, a note on Franklin's personal health. I always had this image of Ben Franklin as like... older and infirmed, which I think might come from 1776, the musical. [laughing]

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: Which was largely about his gout, right?

Sydnee: Yeah. [laughing] I think it was.

Justin: Which, his gout is like the third tier character. It's like above the credits.

Sydnee: I mean, that was like, my image, was like, well, I mean, he always had gout, right? He was always in that chair, and he always had gout. Um, and in his early years, that was not true. He was very, uh—he was very healthy, he was very active. He was a huge believer in exercise. He was a big swimmer. He was—later, long after he died, he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: He was also, by the way, in the uh, US Chess Hall of Fame. He was inducted in 1999, which is like a cool... that's like a cool dude, right? Like, you hear that and you're like, "Tell me more!"

Justin: "Whoa, cool dude!"

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: Swimming *and* chess. I got it here *and* here.

Audience: [laughs and cheers]

Sydnee: [laughing] Uh, but he also believed strongly in exercise and fresh air. So much so in fresh air that it was noted that he would spend a lot of time with all of his like, windows and doors open in his house, naked, just being naked. [laughs] I love this stuff, like you'll—when you're reading about some famous people, you'll find the strangest, like... "By the way, he was naked in his house all the time." Multiple people wanted to note that, like, for historical record.

Justin: Yeah. "I'm gonna go visit Ben Franklin today."

"Are you excited?"

"Sort of...? I guess kind of, but... there's just this one problem."

Sydnee: The other thing that was notable that I kept finding mentioned about him... this was not medical, but I thought it was interesting, is that he was a terrible secret keeper.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: Which, I mainly found as an argument against him being in the illuminati.

Audience: [laughs and cheers]

Sydnee: Like, listen, if he was in a secret society, we all would've known.

Justin: Okay, two points. One, that's what they would say. Two... two, do you know how bad you have to be at keeping secrets for it to be in history books?

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: Like, for someone to be writing a history book and come up behind him and be like, "Hey, make sure you put in there in the book... make sure you put in how bad Ben Franklin was at keeping secrets. I told him what I was getting my wife for Christmas, and he sucks, and... put it in the book that he was bad at keeping secrets. I know you have a lot of other facts in there about Ben Franklin, but get this one in your history book."

Sydnee: It—this became particularly relevant in the '90s when... and this was one of those things I read, and it kind of rung a bell, like, "I think I may remember this." In 1998, they were renovating Franklin's home in London. The Franklin House, which was the last still standing, like, home of Benjamin Franklin.

Justin: No booing for London. Interesting.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: Uh, but they were renovating it, and during the renovations, they started digging up, in the basement, a lot of human bones.

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: Like, eventually, they found 1,200 pieces of human bone.

Justin: Whoa! That's so many more than I thought you would say!

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: A lot of bones.

Justin: That's like, so many more than I have!

Audience: [laughs]

Sydnee: Well... not 1,200 individual bones. Pieces of bone. There were probably like, 15 different people. Uh... and so, there were all these like, headlines, like—

Justin: He broke 15 people into 1,200 pieces, and I'm supposed to feel comforted?

Audience: [laughs]

Justin: “No, it's not what you think Justin. He friggng anatomized these people. He burned them to their very essence. He pulverized them into dust. It's fine.”

Audience: [laughing]

Sydnee: But there were—there were all these headlines that were like, “Ben Franklin: Murderer? Was he a serial killer? Was it the illuminati? Was this all part of the conspiracy?” No. He was not. And you'll still find stories like that. But what the most likely, I would say, what I would bank on, explanation for this is that, at Franklin House, he had set up his protégé when he wasn't there. 'Cause obviously, he didn't live there all the time.

He let his protégé in, a young man named William Houston, who like, studied under him and was also a doctor. Was an actual, medical doctor. Uh, he set up an anatomy school in the house. And so, at the time, it was illegal to dissect corpses, except under very specific situations. And so, that provided very few opportunities for young physicians and students to learn how, y'know, the human body was put together.

So, a lot of the dissections were kind of done, um, y'know, off the record. So he had like this secret anatomy lab where he would either like, probably

either go rob graves himself, or he would get some resurrection men to go rob graves for him. He'd pay for bodies, bring them there, like, secret-teach all of his students, and then just bury them in the basement. [laughs]

Justin: Sure.

Audience: [laughing]

Sydnee: So he didn't get caught.

Justin: Sure. Sure. So, maybe the most important lesson we can all learn from Ben Franklin... if you think you're about to die, make sure you get someone and tell them about the perfectly normal bones that you have in your basement. Like, "Oh, one last thing. I made up the stuff with the kite, and... there are perfectly normal, legal bones. And I want to tell you why. You gotta cover that before you beef it. So important." But thank you.

Sydnee: Yeah. He didn't murder anybody, though.

Justin: Thank you, Ben. Did you make—did he make it? He's not here tonight, but thank you to Ben for all these great contributions. Thank you to uh, the Verizon Center for having us here in this beautiful place. Thank you to you, Philadelphia, for having us.

Sydnee: Thank you.

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: We're gonna be back with My Brother, My Brother, and Me in a couple minutes. Uh, make sure you take advantage of the facilities if you need to, or buy a poster, whatever. And uh, thank you to Paul Sabourin for the mustard on the mic gag. Hilarious.

Audience: [cheers]

Sydnee: [laughs] Thank you, Paul.

Justin: Thank you, Paul. And uh, thank you to the Taxpayers for the use of their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program.

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: And thank you to you for being here, and listening in the future. Uh...

Audience: [cheers]

Justin: Anything else, Syd?

Sydnee: That's it.

Justin: So, uh, that is gonna do it for us for this week. So, until next week, 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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