

Sawbones 376: Balto

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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 am your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And folks, it's finally happening. The episode you have all been demanding all these years since we've started *Sawbones* in 2013. We're finally doing it. We're doing the Balto episode.

Sydnee: You're getting people excited. See, and then you said Balto, and they're gonna be like, "What?"

[pause]

Justin: [bombastically] We're doing the Balto episode!

Sydnee: Can you, uh— when I told you we were gonna do an episode on Balto, you were so confused as to why I would say that you assumed I was talking about *Still Buffering* and not *Sawbones*.

Justin: Correct. Sydnee does *Still Buffering* with her siblings, and it is a show about the pop culture that informed their growing up. And, uh, I— [wheeze-laughs] I— she said "We're doing a Balto episode," and I was like, "That's weird. I wonder which one of 'em loves *Balto*."

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: But, uh, turned out it was for *Sawbones*.

Sydnee: Now, to be fair, Teylor does love *Balto*.

Justin: Fair enough.

Sydnee: Uh, that is what my main context for the— the animated— the 1995 animated film that you may have seen, *Balto*. Uh, I think I may

have intentionally watched it one time, but I have, uh, absorbed it many more times because of Teylor's repeated watchings.

Justin: Fair enough.

Sydnee: Uh, do you remember that movie? Did you see it?

Justin: *Balto*, no, no.

Sydnee: No? How did—

Justin: I remember the trailers. I feel like there was a trailer for *Balto* at the beginning of a lot of, uh, VHS tapes.

Sydnee: Do you know who was in it?

Justin: Uh...

Sydnee: Everybody. I listed it in our show notes, in case you were curious.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Kevin Bacon. Bridget Fonda. Jim Cummings. Phil Collins. Bob Hoskins. So many stars. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Jim— Jim Cummings? Bob Hoskins?

Sydnee: So many stars.

Justin: They're all— the galaxy is— is dark— the skies are dark. And why? All the stars are here, in *Balto*!

Sydnee: Do you know—

Justin: Bob Hoskins? You know it!

Sydnee: For the longest time I couldn't tell if any movie had Bob Hoskins or Danny DeVito in it. I never knew.

Justin: We saw old Jim Cummings recently. He was at, uh, the— the, uh, Huntington Comic Book Convention. Right there next to John Wesley Shipp!

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Shoutout to both of 'em. I assume they're listening.

Sydnee: Uh, so anyway, I think there are a lot of us of a certain age who have— who watched this movie and maybe, like me, because I was younger at the time, didn't fully, like, realize what it was about. I mean, I knew it was about this cute dog. And I was always more of a cat person, so maybe that was why I didn't repeatedly watch it the way that Teylor did.

But, uh, I didn't know that it was medically relevant, really. I mean, I watched it, so I must've understood on some level what the heck all these dogs were doing. But I guess it never really clicked until I was older, and then I was like, "Oh! That was sort of a cool hero medicine story! Didn't realize that."

But it still never occurred to me that we should do an episode about this until Theo wrote and suggested it, so thank you, Theo.

Justin: Thank you, Theo!

Sydnee: Yeah. This was a— this was a great idea, because it is medically relevant. I think is— I think it fits well into the things we cover. And if you [through laughter] have never seen the movie *Balto*—

Justin: Strap in. We're gonna have some spoilies, I guess. Right?

Sydnee: Or also, if you have and you know this whole history and you know why Togo is who we should celebrate, there is so much drama in this dog story. Can I tell you on the front? There's gonna— there's gonna be some medicine—

Justin: [simultaneously] A lot of dog drama?

Sydnee: —but there's just so much drama on the dog story. So let's get into it. So, back before vaccines, in the harder days before we all got vaccinated for things— or at least we begged people, gave them trucks and scholarships to get vaccinated for things— um, one of the most feared childhood diseases was diphtheria. You've probably heard of diphtheria, right? You've heard the name, and it seems like something that people used to get. You've probably never seen anybody with diphtheria, more than likely.

Justin: No, I've never heard— I don't know— never.

Sydnee: It still does happen in parts of the world, but it's pretty uncommon these days. It is caused by a bacteria called *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. You can guess why we named it that.

Uh, it used to cause fairly severe disease for kids, especially kids under five. That's why— this is always important, too, if you're ever having a

conversation with somebody about why we vaccinate children so young. Like, why do we give them these shots when they're so little, and so many? It's because so many of these diseases were particularly devastating in that age group, so we vaccinate 'em at that age because if we wait until later, a lot of them may have already died of the disease before we vaccinate them.

Justin: This is al— this— this thing has always confused me. Like, why— why can't we space it out? Like, why do you want your kid to get—

Sydnee: Because they might get sick. I mean, that's the—

Justin: How about you just give a kid a bunch of shots and, like, go to Toys“R”Us later? I mean, like, obviously Toys“R”Us is closed, so that's not a good... you get it.

Sydnee: [simultaneously] Yeah, but— but spec— well, no, don't. Yeah.

Justin: Just give your kid a bunch of shots. And then, like, they won't get sick. Okay?

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] You get it by, uh—

Justin: That's its own reward. You don't need to buy 'em a Transformer afterwards.

Sydnee: Health is its own reward. You get it by respiratory droplet transmission. Um, it's pretty contagious. And you stay infectious for a few weeks, two to three weeks. So it's a big deal, um, when it— when you have an outbreak of diphtheria— or it used to be. Symptoms will start as, like, a sore throat, a fever. You could get inflammation of your tonsils, so tonsillitis.

Um, but it can progress to something much more dangerous, because the bacteria releases a toxin, and this toxin is responsible for a lot of the damage that the infection— that is done by this infection. It will destroy a lot of tissues and cause, like, a lot of... what's basically like waste product, this sort of debris that the toxin has left behind. And this, like, grayish-white debris will accumulate all over the back of your throat and mouth and respiratory structures.

We call it a pseudomembrane, 'cause it's not a membrane, but it has formed one now, sort of a false one that has formed. Um, and you can imagine trying to breathe through this sort of grayish film that is enveloping the back of your throat and everything.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, you can't, unfortunately for many people who would get diphtheria. Um, it can also, of course, damage your heart. You can get inflammation of your heart from it, or your nerves. Pneumonia, respiratory failure... it can completely obstruct your airway and you can't breathe. And all in all, prior to vaccines, diphtheria would kill about 20% of children under five who got it.

So, I mean, put that in context. If you have an outbreak of this very contagious illness, diphtheria, among, you know, a classroom, a school, a neighborhood of children, whatever, one in five of those kids under five will die of diphtheria.

Justin: Whew.

Sydnee: So it was a huge deal. It was a huge, um, scourge in children. And I should say, it can also be deadly in adults. Um, it was mainly feared for its effect on children, but people over 40 were also very susceptible to severe illness. Um, and even some of those in between.

In the late 1800's when we first sort of pinned down— as we were understanding, like, the germ theory of disease, and we were connecting certain organisms that we could find and locate and grow in, you know, petri dishes with certain diseases, and all that was being put together, uh, we put together what diphtheria was and what caused it, but we didn't know exactly what to do about it at first.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: We just had— I mean, it was like a lot of things. "Great! We figured that out. What... the heck do we do now?"

However, soon after that, uh, there was a— there was a solution of sorts, at least something that would give us some, you know, relief until the vaccine would be made.

Um, by the 1920's, when this story I'm gonna tell you takes place, we had antitoxin. It was synthesized right before the turn of the century by two different scientists, Shibasaburo Kitasato and Emil von Behring. And they both basically tried to, like, take the toxin part, they isolated the toxin part that came from the bacteria, and killed it with heat.

Justin: Oh!

Sydnee: And then you could give it to somebody as, like, an antitoxin.

Justin: Cool!

Sydnee: It can stop the toxin. This would go on to be sort of, like, refined, I should say, into this antitoxin that was made by injecting it into horses. You would basically, like, inject a horse with a toxin, they would create antibodies, get the serum out of the horse, and now you have this serum that you can give to people who have diphtheria to stop them from dying. That was the idea.

Justin: Then you could just take the horse to the center of town and everybody'd, like, come drink from this horse.

Sydnee: Well, you don't drink from the horse.

Justin: Everybody'd come suck this horse's teat. I guess you could do... that.

Sydnee: [hesitantly] I gue— don't?

Justin: Would that work?

Sydnee: N— n— no— I don't—I don't know...

Justin: To suck— to slurp from the life-giving udders of the horse?

Sydnee: I don't know—[laughs quietly]

Justin: This incredible anti-diphtheria horse?

Sydnee: Well, I mean, there are— you can get horse milk, I suppose.

Justin: You can milk anything with nipples. I learned that from *Meet the Parents*.

Sydnee: I don't know how well, uh, the... [laughs] the antibodies in the serum are secreted in horse breast milk. Uh...

Justin: I think— can I say something, Sydnee? I feel like you—

Sydnee: This is not what we did!

Justin: —I feel like you do know and you just are trying to scare us away from delicious horse milk that cures diphtheria.

Sydnee: There was a famous horse named Jim who was responsible for some of these early... experiments. Anyway.

Justin: Thanks, Jim!

Sydnee: Thanks, Jim. So—

Justin: History remembers you... Jim.

Sydnee: Jim the horse. You can look up the article. It's like "Jim," and in parentheses, "(horse)."

Justin: Jim (a horse).

Sydnee: [holding back laughter] Jim (a horse).

Justin: With incredible udders.

Sydnee: No. Uh, but anyway, they would take the serum then out of the horse, and then you could give it to people, and it would counteract the effects of the toxin, which would prevent, hopefully, the severe disease and death. So you could still get sick, but not that sick. Um, so in Nome, Alaska— this is where the focus of our story takes place. In Nome, Alaska, in the winter of 1924, the only doc in town— there was one doctor and four nurses in this town. Um, they had a—

Justin: Dr. Balto. The doc— the horse doctor. He's a—

Sydnee: This is not...

Justin: Dr. Balto— Balto was not a doctor.

Sydnee: It is so weird to me that you don't know this story at all.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: You know Balto's a dog, right?

Justin: I know Balto's a dog—

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: —but I think if you're remote enough, maybe he's the best doctor in town.

Sydnee: No. Balto was not... a doctor.

Justin: A dog-tor. [holding back laughter] If you please.

Sydnee: I can't with this. Is this gonna be like this the whole show?

Justin: I feel like it's got that kind of punchy energy.

Sydnee: Okay. Dr. Curtis Welch, only doctor in town. They've got, like, a little 25 bed hospital, four nurses. So, you know, they are not— it's not like a tertiary care center, state of the art medical technology. He's doing the best he can, him and his team, to hold this place together.

Um, so in the winter of 1924, Dr. Welch did not want to believe that a diphtheria outbreak was starting. It is December of 1924. He sees a couple kids who have a sore throat. One has tonsillitis. And he thinks, "Uh, probably not diphtheria."

And, uh... there are— there are several reasons for this. See, Nome, Alaska was not easy to get to in 1924, okay?

Justin: So he thought it less likely that it made its way there? Because it's more remote? Is that what you're saying?

Sydnee: Well, not necessarily that connection, but I'll get into why this matters. The seaport in Nome would ice over from November to July, basically making it inaccessible by water. Okay?

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Uh, the only way really to get to and from it was land. Um, and you could— this is actually— it's funny. You've heard of the Iditarod.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: What is your perception of what the Iditarod is?

Justin: It's like a race that is a dogsled race.

Sydnee: The Iditarod is the name of the trail.

Justin: Hmm!

Sydnee: And the Iditarod trail— it was actually originally a collection of different trails that, uh, people indigenous to the area that is Alaska had, you know, first traveled to get to different places. It was sort of, um, coalesced into what was eventually called the Iditarod trail, and was used during the gold rush.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: That is where that comes from. I know, I used to think it was a race, too. Which— I'm not saying that there aren't races along the Iditarod. Obviously there are. But it's the name of the trail.

Justin: So it's sort of like the doctor is Frankenstein, and that's his monster. That kind of deal.

Sydnee: Yeah, yeah. So, uh, Dr. Welch didn't want to believe that the first few cases of this tonsillitis that he saw that winter could be diphtheria, because, as I've already said, we're in a very remote, isolated location. Um, he just saw a couple cases. So his first reason is like, "Eh, well, it's pretty contagious, so... I would think if it was diphtheria I'd see a lot more cases." Right?

Justin: Right?

Sydnee: Just a couple. So probably not. And then the second reason is much more practical. This is why this remote location comes into play, and why I think I can understand and sympathize with the way Dr. Welch was seeing this. He had discovered a few months previously that the hospital's entire stockpile of diphtheria antitoxin...

Justin: Mm-hmm?

Sydnee: ... had expired.

[pause]

Justin: Yikes.

Sydnee: So, you're a small town doctor. You're in a remote location, inaccessible by sea. And only land, but still very remote, very far from any major centers. You see a couple kids with tonsillitis. It enters your mind that perhaps this could be this horrible deadly scourge, diphtheria.

Justin: Ugh, God.

Sydnee: But you know you do not have the treatment, and you also know how hard it would be to get the treatment there.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So I think—

Justin: You would definitely be incentivized, like, "Nah, it's probably not this, right? We can all agree it's not this."

Sydnee: 'Cause you know what that means.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: By January, however, Dr. Welch could not fool himself any longer. More children had become ill. One had succumbed to their illness.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: And he knew at that point what was happening. There were the tell-tale signs of a diphtheria outbreak. Um, he attempted early on in this to use his expired stockpile to try to treat one patient, um, to disastrous consequences, so he knew that was not going to be an option.

Justin: Oh, man. I can understand why you'd be tempted to give it a shot, but still.

Sydnee: Yes. So he put the whole town in quarantine, first. Everybody quarantined. And then he sent the following telegram, um, 'cause we were in telegram days.

"An epidemic of diphtheria is almost inevitable here STOP I am in urgent need of one million units of diphtheria antitoxin STOP Mail is only form of transportation STOP I have made application to Commissioner of Health of the Territories for antitoxin already STOP There are about 3000 White natives in the district." End of telegram.

Justin: I... so one million units, though... is that, like, actually one million doses?

Sydnee: No.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: No. That's not one million doses.

Justin: Okay. The dose would be some measure of those— some number of those units, right?

Sydnee: Exactly, exactly.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: He was estimating how many units he would need to control the whole outbreak, based on the cases he was seeing, the cases he thought he would see, based on the number of— as he calls attention to— white natives in the district, but I wanted to also call attention to the fact that the surrounding area... um, there were about 10,000 plus people in that population, around that— around Nome, Alaska. Um, and for some historical context, which really important to know is that a lot of the indigenous people, the native Alaskans who lived around that area had no innate immunity to diphtheria.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Your— and so, like, they had seen this play out in 1918 when the influenza pandemic burned through this part of the world.

Justin: 'Cause there was— 'cause of how remote it is.

Sydnee: Yes. And how— and the— the— the death toll was very high. And so diphtheria, the implications of an outbreak among this 10,000 plus native population was disastrous. I mean, there were some that predicted it could be 100% mortality. So the implications of this outbreak in Nome, Alaska are... very severe.

And he knew this. He knew what they were facing, and he knew that he had no way to get the— at the time, the only treatment. There were no antibiotics. There was nothing else. This is the only thing that works. All of ours is expired. I've got sick kids.

Justin: Picks up the big red phone—

Sydnee: What do you do?

Justin: —he keeps behind glass. He lifts the receiver to his ear and says, "Get me Balto."

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: And Balto's like, "Woof woof," which translates to, "I don't do that anymore. I've been out of the game for too long. There's nothing I would get back into the game for."

And then the doctor's like, "One of the kids is your son."

He's like, "I don't have a son."

And then his wife picks up the phone and she's like, "I do have a son, Balto. And he's in Nome, Alaska, and you're our only hope."

Sydnee: And he's like—

Justin: I haven't seen the movie, but I'm assuming.

Sydnee: "It's about family."

Justin: "This one's about *family*."

Sydnee: That's not exactly what happened, but you're close. But before I tell you what does happen... let's go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go.

[ad break]

Justin: Syd, you've teased me for long enough! When is this hero dog gonna show up?

Sydnee: Okay. [laughs quietly] So at this point, the mayor, uh, the public health service, the governor, everybody starts to try to get on the phone, start sending telegrams. I mean, it's the 1920's. I don't know, however you're gonna... gonna communicate.

Um, they start getting on the phone with each other and— like, "What... the heck are we gonna do? We've gotta get antitoxin to Nome, Alaska."

The initial thought, because some of you may be asking this question. You may in the back of your mind think, "Okay, so you can't get there by sea right now." Right? Because the port's all frozen. "Uh, what about air? We're flying planes in the 1920's."

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: "There are planes."

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: So this was brought up. And it's funny, because as you read— and I would encourage you— I don't really wanna get into all the intricacies of the— like, the travel methods to do— 'cause this is a medical history show, so I really wanted to focus on the medicine. Um, but it is a fascinating story, when you think about, like, the logistics of problem solving this, and the different players who tried to push different things, and what would've happened if they had attempted that instead.

But anyway, a lot of people said, "Well, we should just fly it there."

At that point, the only winter, like, of any long-distance air travel that had been attempted in Alaska was done previously that year. [laughs quietly] So that's how recently anybody had even tried to fly a plane. Because at the time, to fly a plane in those temperatures was still very difficult.

Um, not only could your equipment freeze over— and then, you know, you... crash— uh, but the pilot [laughs] would get really frigin' cold.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Which would make it hard to... to fly. So you had to try to find a way to troubleshoot the conditions, the weather conditions. Um, but then also the distance. Nobody had flown that kind of distance. And when we started talking about, like, where was— where was the serum? 'Cause, like, you had to get some to take to them.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Where was it? Initially, Seattle was their best bet.

Justin: I don't know have a map in front of me, but it seems like that's quite a haul.

Sydnee: It is quite a haul from Seattle to Nome, Alaska. Um... so the original thought was— and you found this all throughout this story— is the governor kept saying, like, "I don't think air travel's gonna work." But, like, all these other figures were pushing back. Like, "No." Like, the mayor was really in favor of air travel. Amundsen gets up in this.

Justin: [enthusiastically] Oooh!

Sydnee: And is like, "I think the plane's the way to go!"

Justin: My boy Roald Amundsen!

Sydnee: [laughs] Um, so a lot of people are arguing over how are we gonna get this serum there. There was a thought that they would, like, park a ship right outside where it was frozen, like get a Navy ship, and then fly a plane from there to Nome. You know— you get what I'm saying?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like, let it take off of the aircraft carrier and land in Nome, and so then you just gotta get the ship there, and... anyway, a lot of people felt that a— a mission by plane would be futile. They thought the plane couldn't make it. They— and they actually, like, took stock of what sort of planes were in Alaska at the time. They didn't even feel that there were planes... like, even if you could get the serum from Seattle to Alaska, they didn't feel like there were planes that could get it from anywhere in— you know, in Alaska to Nome.

Um, the planes wouldn't make it. There was no— there's, like, this whole story where there was no pilot that was certified to do this, but there was one guy who was like, "Well, I'll try anyway." [laughs] And the mayor was like, "This guy'll do it!" And they were all like, "Ehh, maybe not."

Justin: Yeah, he said it's fine.

Sydnee: Um, and the whole— as this story unfolds, the whole nation was just, I mean, completely focused on it. Like, it was being covered constantly in the media. Everyone was watching this in real time. Well, as much as you could at the time. [laughs] Um, as it unfolded.

So, the idea of using these trails where they had— you know, where dog sledding was done, like the Iditarod trail and such, to get, um, the serum to Nome, came back into play.

And it was decided that even though that could take some time, it was the only reliable method of getting this serum to the people who needed it.

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: Um, even though certainly air travel would be faster if it worked, nobody thought it would work. So a plan came together to— first they gathered all of the antitoxin, all the serum that they could find on the west coast, essentially, um, and sent it all to Seattle.

So you have to gather it all in Seattle first. And this is over a million units, just like he requested. And then they're gonna ship it from Seattle to Seward, Alaska, which is still very far from Nome, just for... you know. If you don't know Alaskan geography, which of course I didn't before I had to... look at it.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Uh, so they're gonna ship it there, and then they were gonna run it, basically, via dogsled, all the way up to Nome. However, as they're putting this plan together, they're realizing, like, "Man, this is gonna take quite a while," because the next ship, the Almeda, who was— that was gonna leave Seattle, just for the first leg of the journey, wasn't even gonna leave until January 31st. So we're in the middle of January. We're in the midst of this outbreak. Time is human life.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And you know that even though this is what— this is the plan, you know that it's not... it might not make it in time. And then at that moment, a hospital in Nenana, Alaska finds 300,000 units of antitoxin that they didn't realize they had. Still good, not expired. And says, "Hey, we got some. We could get that to Nome via dogsled." It's, like, 634 miles, still quite a way.

Justin: Yeah. Still is a haul.

Sydnee: Uh, but— and it's only 300,000 units, but the thought was, "You know what? That's enough that at least we can maybe keep people alive, keep those, you know, the— the people who are already sick, maybe save some lives, and the next batch will come in enough time to save everybody else." Right?

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So this is the plan, and this is the famous— and there are lots of— it's the 1925 Serum Run is now what is about to ensue. There are lots— the Great Mercy Run. There are all these names for this— this trip.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But basically, they had to put together a trail from Nenana to Nome, with multiple mushers— those are the people who drive the—

Justin: Got it, yes.

Sydnee: The humans. And many, many sled dogs, to take them across and carry the antitoxin with 'em. And you gotta imagine too, like, we're talking about glass vials wrapped and padded and trying to be protected, and then carried via dogsled in this incredibly, you know, grueling environment for long distances.

So, like, first of all you gotta make sure they don't break. Secondly, you have to warm it up periodically. [laughs quietly] So you gotta make stops periodically to make sure it doesn't, like, completely all freeze over. So it— it was a very dangerous, um, logistically difficult mission.

But... at the end of the day, 20 mushers and many, many dogs would be involved in this trip. They started on January 27th. Um, and you can— again, as you read the accounts of this relay, uh, almost every one of the mushers suffered in some way.

Justin: I'm sure, yeah.

Sydnee: I mean, frostbite, lost pieces of their face...

Justin: Oh, gosh.

Sydnee: ... like, were very injured. There was one— and who knows if it's true, but there was one account of one of the mushers when he arrived at his stop, they had to, like, pour water on his hands to get them to unfreeze from the sled where he was holding it. Like, he could not let go 'cause they were frozen to the sled.

Um, as you can imagine, many dogs would sadly perish in this— in this very long journey. The longest distance covered in this trip was by Leonhard Seppala, um, and his lead dog, Togo. And they actually crossed, like— it was, like, 91 miles. Um, that was the biggest, longest. And Togo was known as, like, one of the best sled dogs at the time. This is important to know.

Um, and so he crossed a big chunk of it. There were— like I said, there were many involved. Um, and this whole time, by the way, as all these mushers are crossing to get there, what's also happening is you're getting a daily, like, um, case toll in Nome. So every day that this is happening...

Justin: Oh, gosh. The timer is— yeah.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Oh, gosh.

Sydnee: A couple more kids get sick. Um, you start to worry about the status of one of the children who already are sick. Uh, again, the media was covering it all. Um, and the entire time, you also had government officials who were arguing, like, "This is why we should use a plane! Kids are dying. What are you doing? Get over these dogs. We need a plane!"

And so you have all of this happening at the same time that you're just trying to, like— these mushers are just trying to get the serum there.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: You can see why they made movies about this. Um, the final musher— this is why it's about Balto. [laughs quietly] The final musher who carries it the last leg of the journey, uh, Gunnar Kaasen, was led by Balto. His team was led by a dog, Balto. The story is that he wasn't supposed to be the final musher.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: So he had a lot of trouble setting out because of the conditions and everything. And he was delayed in getting to his checkpoint, and the musher who was waiting at the checkpoint to take over for him had, thinking that he wasn't going to make it that night, had gone to sleep.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: And so as Gunnar arrives, he sees that the cabin is already dark.

Justin: So he thought he left?

Sydnee: Well, no, he figured he was asleep. But the problem is, you gotta wake him up, and then he's gotta get his team all ready. The— the way this relay was supposed to work—

Justin: It's the lost time.

Sydnee: —is that, like, each time was supposed to be— it's like a relay race. Literally, they were supposed to just hand the serum to the next team, and they take off. But I imagine— I mean, I've never been dog sledding, but I imagine that there's a lot involved with getting your sled all hooked up and getting everything on board and... you know. You gotta wake up. Maybe have your coffee. I don't know.

Justin: That poor guy. Aw, man! I feel kinda bad for that guy. Like, he had to tell his grandkids, like, "Oh yeah, I was involved with the serum run."

"Tell us what you did, papa!"

Like, "Uh, well, it was all very, you know— it was a long time ago."

Sydnee: [laughs] Before we get to the Balto controversy, this is another... there's so many parts of this where there seems to be, like— we're not so sure. There are some who claim that this musher, Gunnar, intentionally—

Justin: Oh, he just—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —oh, he was—

Sydnee: Blew past. [laughs]

Justin: Like, real quiet-like. "Aw, listen, I'll go ahead and just [wheeze-laugh] bring it on home!"

Sydnee: For the glory.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: I have no— I just— I read a bunch of different accounts. I have no idea.

Justin: [simultaneously] Ah, humans. We're the best.

Sydnee: This is not— my expertise is not this—

Justin: [simultaneously] We weren't there, folks.

Sydnee: —part of history. I just know the medicine. One way or another, he is the one who finished it. And, I mean, it was still grueling. What he did was still incredibly difficult. He, of course, like almost every other musher, suffered frostbite. He arrived—

Justin: He sounds like— he sounds like you and your dad on a road trip. Just like, "Ugh. I know we all have to use the bathroom very badly, but we just passed Charleston, which means we're basically at home at this point, so we should just go ahead and push the last 45 minutes... "

Sydnee: This is exactly—

Justin: "... with everyone having to pee their pants."

Sydnee: —this is exactly— yes. I can understand—[laughs] "I know I'm gonna lose these fingers, but... "

Justin: No! Folks, it's not a joke. If you're in a car with Sydnee and she's driving, you're like— if you're hungry or have to use the bathroom, do it, like, before two hours away from your destination. 'cause once you hit that two hour mark, she is not stopping again.

Sydnee: [laughs] This is true.

Justin: "I just hate to stop. We're so close."

It's 90 minutes away!

Sydnee: I like to make good time!

Justin: Yeah, I know.

Sydnee: These, uh, mushers and these sled dogs made good time. They arrived— so they set off on January 27th. They arrived on February 1st. That is when the final musher arrived.

Justin: It took 'em a month.

Sydnee: [laughs] Early in the morning on February 1st they thawed the serum, and by noon it was being administered to people who needed it.

Justin: And by noon o' five it was being rejected by people in the town that thought it was the... a full—[stammering]

Sydnee: The anti-antiserumers. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Just little microchips.

Sydnee: The anti-antitoxins. [laughs] Uh, so overall, the— let's talk about the two ends of this story. First the medical part, the part that I wanna focus on. Um, overall this was an incredibly successful mission. They got the antitoxin there, and the officially reported— and this is really hard to tease out— the officially reported death toll, um, was— I mean, some accounts said 5, 6, or 7. Much lower than you would have predicted based on what was unfolding in Nome.

So absolutely lives were saved. However, it is always important to note that there were a lot of native Alaskans in that surrounding— like I said, that— the 10,000 plus population that lived in that part around Nome who may have also suffered and lost people to this outbreak. That total will never— we will never know completely.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: But I do think it is fair to say that the serum undoubtedly prevented deaths. Um, and was enough to at least take care of people who were sick, at least some of them, until the final shipment could arrive. Because that is what would have to happen later, is a second relay with that big giant shipment out of Seattle would have to be brought later, and some of these mushers did both, if you can imagine that.

Justin: Sheesh.

Sydnee: Did both of these relays. Um, because they did. They called upon some of the greatest mushers of the time, and, um, they... just got right back out there and did the bigger, longer relay that would arrive mid-February with the rest of the antitoxin and, uh, get the outbreak, you know, controlled, and save a lot of lives that way.

Um, and there was still— like, with that second relay, same thing. All these people pushing the planes. There's even this account where, like, they did put some— they did put some serum on a ship and take it up outside the port and then, like, tried to fly a plane into Nome, but, like, the engines on the plane wouldn't work, and so everybody was like, "[faintly] Sorry... "

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] "[dejectedly] You're right— you were right about the... dogs. The dogs were the better choice. I see that now."

Um, anyway, the controversy comes in that Balto is— was hailed as the hero dog, because of being the one in the final leg of the journey.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: There is a statue of Balto in Central Park.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Because he was the hero dog who finished this journey.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: He— I believe there's also one in Anchorage. Uh, there's a movie that I saw, and that Teylor was obsessed with, about Balto. However, one, Balto was not the dog responsible for the brunt of the journey, right? There were lots of dogs involved in this, but many thought Togo should have gotten the glory over Balto.

Justin: Hmm!

Sydnee: Um, and secondly, there's also a little side note where some argue that Balto wasn't even actually the dog. [laughs] That it was a different dog, but that the name of that dog wasn't as exciting as Balto, and so they just said it was Balto. And, like, there are pictures—

Justin: [quietly] Doesn't make sense.

Sydnee: —with Balto in them, like in the media, like actual photographs that were taken at the time, but they were taken many hours later.

Justin: Ohh.

Sydnee: Because they arrived when it was still dark, so they waited til it was light to take—

Justin: Swapped them out.

Sydnee: So there's—[laughs] so there's this whole question of, like, not only are there people saying Balto wasn't the real hero, but then there are people who are like, "It wasn't even Balto."

Justin: Yeah. They got a younger, se— Balto's just younger and sexier than the other dog. I mean, he's a coverboy. I get it.

Sydnee: [laughs] They liked the name Balto, is what I read.

Justin: Yeah. It happens in podcasting too. I get it.

Sydnee: So I guess more recently there have been movies about Togo. Like, there was an animated film, *Togo*, that was just released in the last couple years, I believe? To celebrate the—[laughs] the dog who may have done more. Um, I think personally...

Justin: *Togo*, starring— sorry, sorry. *Togo*, starring, um... Willem Dafoe.

Sydnee: Whoa.

Justin: Is on Disney Plus.

Sydnee: There you go. Um, and I— you know, I think it's fair to say that all the dogs involved, Togo, Balto, and every other dog, probably—

Justin: Thanks to all the dogs involved, for sure.

Sydnee: —probably deserve, like, a lot of praise for this. Um, as well as all the mushers. And that was another part of the controversy, is that there were certain mushers who got more sort of coverage, and it kind of depended on your race whether or not you were lauded for your accomplishments, and all that.

And so, like, there—there was a lot of controversy as to who gets credit for this. Um, human and dog. Uh, I think that every human involved and every dog involved should get a ton of credit. I know reading this story I sat, crying, thinking [laughs quietly] "[tearfully] What an amazing feat! [laughs] What an amazing accomplishment!" As a— as a... planet, a society. Not just a species, 'cause there were dogs too. So, like, all of us.

Justin: We used to do great things!

Sydnee: Like this.

Justin: Like this.

Sydnee: Like this amazing serum run. I mean, it really is an incredibly story that saved a lot of lives. Um, and after this they would find ways to, like— actually there was— like, the Kelly Act was passed, which would allow for private air companies to do mail delivery, and so you would have more, like, planes delivering things around Alaska in the years that would follow this, so that remote areas would not be cut off from resources in times of crisis, um, so easily.

But, uh— but these— these mushers and these dogs saved a lot of lives, and it's an amazing story. And I don't think when I watched the movie *Balto* as a kid that I had any idea of, like, the... the context. You know? I mean, I think understood, like, the dogs are saving sick kids, but I don't think I really got this whole story.

Um, and, uh— and of course over time the antitoxin that was treating people would be refined, because it wasn't— you know, it wasn't a perfect treatment. There were some side effects, there were some risks to it. Obviously not as many as diphtheria, but it would be refined into a toxoid vaccine, which is the vaccine that we receive as children today. Hopefully you all do. And prevents diphtheria completely, so we don't have to wait until you get it and treat you for it. We can give you the vaccine and you don't get diphtheria, and we can just let those dogs chill.

Justin: Thanks, dogs.

Sydnee: And the mushers.

Justin: Um, the dog that played Togo is named Diesel, and he's a direct descendant of the ori— of Togo.

Sydnee: Really?

Justin: The real original Togo. [wheezes]

Sydnee: You should read— I mean, it's a fascinating, like— you should read, like, accounts of all the different— 'cause you can read details of each musher and the journey they took, which leg of it was theirs and what happened to it, and the dogs that were part of the team, and— I mean, there's— there's a lot of dramatic account of all that part of it.

I didn't wanna get— you know, I didn't wanna get in the weeds too much with... dog sledding. I wanted to focus on the medicine part. But, um... but it's an amazing story.

Justin: Oh, *Iron Will*! That's another one. That was a Disney movie that was about this, that was about this— this run. Um, it had David Ogden Stiers in it.

Sydnee: There are a lot of— I mean, there's a lot of, uh— a lot of movies and books, I believe. I mean, I think—

Justin: Oh, no. *Iron Will*'s about a dogsled race. Balto is about this original story. Got it, yes. And of course *Sled Dogs*, that is a Cuba Gooding Jr. picture, um, that is in no way related to this whatsoever. It's just, uh, completely separate.

Sydnee: It's a— it's a really amazing story, whatever you, uh... I don't know. I do think it's interesting to hear, um, like, the accounts of the different mushers arguing about the better dogs and things, um, from the time. Because you can tell that it's, like, very important to them that the right dog gets credit for what they were able to do.

Justin: Yeah! Why not?

Sydnee: Which is why I say at the end of the day, like, how about we just, like, let all the... all the dogs be celebra— let's celebrate all the dogs, is what I'm saying.

Justin: All dogs go to heaven. That should be enough for them.

Sydnee: Celebrate— Fox, by the way. That was the name of the dog that may have actually been in the lead.

Justin: Oh. Shoutout. Shoutout to Fox.

Sydnee: Instead of Balto. But, like, that's— I don't know. No one knows. But—

Justin: Hey, listen, we could be here all day talking about how great dogs are.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: But instead, I'm going to say thank you for listening to this episode of *Sawbones*. We hope you have enjoyed yourself. Uh, if you could share the show with a friend, that's cool. We would love if you would do that, or leave us a rating or review on the podcasting platform that you, uh— of your choice. Um, that is another great way of supporting our show.

We also have some merchandise if you go to mcelroymerch.com. M-C-E-L-R-O-Ymerch.com. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song, "Medicines," as the intro and outro of our program. And thank you to you for listening! We really appreciate it.

Um, oh, that, uh— the fundraiser's still going for Naloxone. If you go to bit.ly/sawbones... sawbonesnaloxone? Is that right? Bit.ly/sawbonesnaloxone. You could help buy some for our community, and we would very much appreciate it. Several of you stepped in to support that, and—

Sydnee: Yeah, thank you so much if you've donated to that fundraiser. I super appreciate it. It really— it's lifesaving.

Justin: You're saving lives, directly. Uh, thanks to— thanks to you for listening, and we will be back with you again soon! But until then, 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]

[chord]

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