

Sawbones 410: Cereal

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Justin: Just a heads up. This episode of *Sawbones* contains discussions of restricted eating and weight loss, so if that's not something you're into hearing, you may want to try one of our many other episodes. Thanks so much.

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

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to *Sawbones: A marital tour of misguided medicine*. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Every podcast, I think, is just like *Sawbones* in that they do the *Wayne's World*: five, four, silent count, and then point to the other person and start talking.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. And then you've gotta kind of do a little twist—

Justin: Scoop it.

Sydnee: ... but like, *scoop* the finger as you point.

Justin: Yeah, scoop the finger.

Sydnee: That's key. That's key.

Justin: I am in a—

Sydnee: We're in our basement.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But it's—

Justin and Sydnee: [simultaneously] ... *not* our basement. Isn't that weird?

Justin: Um, this is a normal podcast.

Sydnee: We are in our basement.

Justin: We are in our basement. It's true. [wheeze-laughs] It's where this to— McElroy studios— McElroy— the palatial McElroy Family studios is. Shh. [whispering] A small room in our basement.

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: Um, we're going to be— that's just one of many secrets. Close to the heart secrets that we will be revealing about things we care a lot about this week. Syd, isn't that right?

Sydnee: Justin, this— this episode— I feel like I could have come up with this topic and then just said, "Hey, why don't we make this one of those where you research something, and I don't have to this week, 'cause I'm so busy." I could have done that, but I didn't. I did it for you. This is a gift for you.

Justin: Wait a minute. You're letting me do this because you're busy, not because you think I'm great at it?

Sydnee: Um... no. It's definitely because you're great at it.

Justin: Oh, good. Okay. Whew!

Sydnee: Yeah. Uh, Justin, this—

Justin: What a relief.

Sydnee: This is for you. Um—

Justin: It feels targeted. It doesn't feel like— I know the kind of podcast that you do. And I feel like, just looking at the subject, it's more targeted.

Sydnee: You, uh— well, it is. It is perhaps more targeted. This is— okay, *you* are the one who inspired this not just because you love what we're talking about, but because of something you showed me.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: We're going to talk about—

Justin: Which is something that Dan told me about.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Sorry. I'm the host of a meditative cereal podcast called *The Empty Bowl*. And on our last episode, my cohost, Dan Goubert, who makes a blog called Cerealously.net, was telling me about a Grape-Nuts ad that, uh, he has always had an affinity for.

Sydnee: So, Justin showed me this Grape-Nuts ad. Which we *will* talk about Grape-Nuts, and I started thinking about, like, a lot of the health claims that cereal boxes make.

Justin: Are you going to talk about this specific ad, or should I detail what it is?

Sydnee: Uh, you can detail that ad if you want to.

Justin: It is— it is a box of Grape-Nuts, uh, literally holding up a human. [wheeze-laugh] A box of Grape-Nuts holding up a human man.

Sydnee: Yes, and it says—

Justin: What's the tagline?

Sydnee: It says it steadies a man.

Justin: Grape-Nuts steadies a man. Um, and it is literally just a box of Grape-Nuts. And it's like— I'm not going to say it's, like, homo-erotic, but it is, like, a sort of platonic— the Grape-Nuts have, like, gladiator sandals. [laughing]

Sydnee: Yeah. The Grape-Nuts have gladiator sandals, and, like, the Grape-Nuts arms and legs are *incredibly* defined. Like, so toned.

Justin: I mean, they're, like, the artist spent *way* too much time.

Sydnee: Like, the arms and legs on this Grape-Nuts box are... you know? They're hot. [laughing]

Justin: They're hot! It's a sexy box of Grape-Nuts! You heard it here first from my wife!

Sydnee: [holding back laugh] Okay.

Justin: Syd, are you telling me— are you really telling me right now that you're trisexual? Men, women, and boxes of Grape-Nuts?

Sydnee: [bursts out laughing] No, I'm just saying that this Grape-Nuts box is supposed to look fit.

Justin: Sexy!

Sydnee: So, anyway, I wanted to talk about health food— health claims on cereal boxes. Now, the most obvious connection— we've done a whole episode on it. I'm not going to— I'm not going to trudge through the swamps of John Harvey Kellogg's—

Justin: Bleh.

Sydnee: [chuckles] ... beliefs and practices.

Justin: One of our— one of our grodier— one of our grodier [through laughter] guests here on *Sawbones*.

Sydnee: Yes. So, if you— I mean, this is probably— it is important to mention as part of this story. Like, why is cer—why does cereal boxes have so many health— why is that a thing?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Why is that a thing? On cereal boxes especially is what we're going to get into. This is across all kinds of cereal. Like, the cereals that obviously don't look healthy have *still* tried to make health claims. But John Harvey Kellogg, who invented Corn Flakes and then tortured people into abstaining from sex and masturbation in a variety of horrible ways— and there's a whole lot of stuff out —

Justin: You've read the side of the Corn Flakes box.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [through laughter] Folks, you all— you all know this verbatim. Say it with me, "We're abstaining from sex and masturbation and tell them to avoid all medicine altogether."

Sydnee: Yes. So, that is— that is the kind of stuff that Kellogg did. And he was not; I would say, a great guy. I think that's pretty easy. Anyway, you can listen to that whole episode, if you'd like to, about the history of Corn Flakes. The point of Corn Flakes is that they're—

Justin: Hmm... What is the point of Corn Flakes? [wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: I don't know. I've never liked them, but a lot of people do. That's fine.

Justin: I can pour a bowl of sugar on them. I can mess around with 'em.

Sydnee: There you go. You put sugar on them.

Justin: To make them edible. I mean, it's, like, not tasty without it.

Sydnee: So, that was the point of Corn Flakes. Because they were bland and so they were obviously good for you. Because they were bland, and it wouldn't get you all hot and bothered.

Justin: But even the Corn Flakes that we have, like, that is in the stores. That— like, that was the innovation— was, the, like, sugar on the outside. Like, the fact that there is more sweetness. Like, *that* is the improved version of the original Cornflakes.

Sydnee: Yeah. The original Corn Flakes were just corn flakes.

Justin: Corn.

Sydnee: Just corn flakes.

Justin: Just corn flakes. Corn.

Sydnee: Just flakes that like puffed— like exploded pieces of... Anyway, also, he was into enemas. That's another big thing that he liked. But, um, this is not the only cereal that ever made these sorts of claims. Like, "Eat our Corn Flakes, it will calm your libido, and you'll be healthier overall."

That was, sort of, his thing. You need these bland foods to do that. Um, there were lots of cereals that did that. There's even a cereal that was classified as a drug.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: We'll get there. So, I found a great *Mental Floss* article that talks about— it was called "Masturbation and Mascots."

Justin: [snort laughs]

Sydnee: So, immediately, I was, like, "What is this article?" Um, by Michele Debczac. And, anyway, it details the history of cereal if you're interested in more. You probably know a lot of the mascot stuff. I didn't. I didn't get it. That's not part of this podcast. Some of the early stuff—

Justin: Did they talk about Pikachu?

Sydnee: I don't know. I didn't read all of the mas— I was mainly looking at the very beginning of it, covered some of this health stuff.

Justin: `Cause he— he is a thinly veiled anti-masturbation... `cause his arms are too short to reach. [snickers]

Sydnee: That's not true. You made that up. Okay.

Justin: [holding back a laugh] No, it's true for sure.

Sydnee: No, you made that up.

Justin: [chuckles] No, I read it. I read it... in a book.

Sydnee: Well, then is a Tyrannosaurus Rex too?

Justin: [holding back laughter] Well, that was made by ac—

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: That was made by Christ almighty, so I don't know. You're reading into that a lot. I don't know. I'm not a science person.

Sydnee: [through laughter] Anyway—

Justin: Let's get a paleontologist. Where are the Kratt brothers? [chuckles]

Sydnee: [holding back laughter] In terms of—

Justin: [holding back laugh] We'll get Bill Nye, the science guy, to tell us if T-Rexes are thinly veiled anti-masturbation.

Sydnee: So, the, uh, so the story starts with Kellogg. Or at least he was the one who popu— popl— popularized it, is the word there.

Justin: Come on. Our kid has ruined the word “popliare.” So, we have to, like—

Sydnee: Yes. “Popliare” and “regliare” are both a mess for us now. Um, but there was a guy named James Caleb Jackson. A really, like, religious, uh, vegetarian. Sort of strict, in the Kellogg sort of mold of like—

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: Like, abstain from things that might get you excited. Like, keep a very, sort of bland diet. Like, that kind of, you know, person. Who invented granola— who invented granola, but he called it granula.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: It was like little— I think it was actually, like, graham crackers that were, like, crumbled up into a bowl.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Like, pieces of stuff in a bowl, and he called it granula. Um, as like probably the first sort of cereal-ish thing, right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But Kellogg stole it and called it granola, which sounds better to us, I guess?

Justin: Yeah. Granola.

Sydnee: Granola instead of granula. ‘Cause granules... granula, but it’s granola. Anyway—

Justin: I had a— I had a Japanese cereal this week that a listener sent, and it was called Frugra. Fr— Fu-ga-ra.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: And it's like fruit and granola combined.

Sydnee: Yeah?

Justin: It had yams in it.

Sydnee: That sounds good. It was good. It was earthy but good.

Justin: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. Uh, and then he made Corn Flakes, and he got more popular. And Kellogg served his Corn Flakes to William Post.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: You know where this is going.

Justin: His mortal— mortal enemy.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. And Post— is there an episode of that show you like that *Food that Built America*?

Justin: [simultaneously] *Food that Built America*.

Justin: Probably, yeah. I think there is. Let's see.

Sydnee: How would you do that without covering how incredibly problematic Kellogg is?

Justin: [imitates host, holding back laughter] "So anyway, this guy was a real wild bird. And we're not going to get in— we're just going to pretend [through laugh] like he's not."

Sydnee: He didn't— I mean, listen. Listen to the episode. He did some bad stuff, guys. This isn't just like, "He liked bland food." Nah, I mean, he— there's some—

Justin: He's— he's— if I remember correctly, that episode is staged as a point/counterpoint between the two of us. Where I'm—

Sydnee: In the— In our book, that's how the chapters—

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: I think that's based on the episode where it's like, "Yes, but on the other hand."

Sydnee: Now, so—

Justin: Cereal. Fruit Loops. Think about it.

Sydnee: [laughs softly] Post thought this breakfast cereal idea had some, uh, legs to it. He— and he wanted to run with it. So, he created a lot of cereals. Grape-Nuts was among them, which is the inspiration for this episode. Um, and in addition to this ad that Justin has already told you about, which— by the way, I wanted to talk about, you— you described this great, um, hot, sexy Grape-Nuts box holding a man. [chuckles]

Justin: Steadying.

Sydnee: He's steadying him. That's what he says, "All of a real man's power comes from steady nerves and a clean, clear brain." Um, and then they talk— by the way, Grape-Nuts is written as Grape equal sign Nuts, which is very— I don't know.

Justin: Yeah, I don't know. I think that's just a typo—

Sydnee: I keep looking at it going, "Grape equals Nuts?"

Justin: ... typographical flourish.

Sydnee: Uh, it says on it, "It contains just the food elements nature has stored up in wheat and barley including the Phosphate of Potash, which"—or Pot-ash, I guess. Po-tash is how I would say it. "Which combines in the blood with albumin to repair and build up the cells."

I think that is a *wild* thing to put on a food. Who reads that and is like, "Yes, that is for me"? But he says, "It's food, not medicine." Don't— don't get in trouble here.

Justin: Don't worry about it.

Sydnee: I don't want to get in trouble for this. But it's called concentrated partially pre-digested food.

Justin: [bursts out laughing] Oh! Gross!

Sydnee: On the box. Who would want to— that's what's wild to me, like, this was in the ad! This was in the ad for it! Like, eat this predigested food, please.

Justin: It's like, "Oh, that's—

Sydnee: And the tagline in the bottom in quotes is, "There's a reason... for Grape-Nuts."

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: "There's a reason." Um, I looked at a lot of Grape-Nuts ads because Post was all about advertising the health benefits of his foods. That was a big part of it. There are tons of different ads that start off with, "How does Mrs. Burke stay as slim as her teenage daughter?"

Justin: Ehh.

Sydnee: Eh. Yes. There's a lot of— a lot that are, um— all the— most of the ones featuring women alone are, um, are sort of saying that this is a way to lose weight. Grape-Nuts is a way to lose weight.

There are lots— the other ones that feature women, they are moms, and they're feeding them to their babies. In this one, here's a baby eating some Grape-Nuts because it will help, uh, develop, like, their, uh, bones. "Vital minerals for teeth, bones, and blood."

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So that was a big selling point. And then for men, businessmen, they will be steady and—

Justin: By the box of Grape-Nuts.

Sydnee: ... their brains will work great. There was a— there was a whole other one, um, that was— uh, what is... "Meet Stan Jones, the 12 o'clock wolf."

Justin: [bursts out laughing loudly]

Sydnee: And it was— it was basically that by— like, he wasn't eating a healthy breakfast, so by 12 o'clock, he was a wolf.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Because he needed Grape-Nuts.

Justin: I mean, that's basically the premise of those Snickers commercials that are, like, "You're not you when you're hungry."

Sydnee: That's—

Justin: That exact premise. [chuckles]

Sydnee: You're Stan Jones, the 12 o'clock wolf.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: [laughs] Why does that tell?

Justin: [through laughter] It's really good.

Sydnee: It's really good, right?

Justin: It's really good.

Sydnee: And again, in addition to that, he would say, like I said, like, "Weight loss, dental health, give it to babies. It can fix an appendicitis, Grape-Nuts."

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Like, Post really took it and ran with it. Kellogg was like, "Corn Flakes are good for your libido. It— they will kill it because, like, who feels— who feels like sex after a box of Corn Flakes?" Post took it a step farther. Um, he also made a version, by the way, of Corn Flakes. His own— have you heard of Elijah's Manna?

Justin: Yeah, but only 'cause I'm me.

Sydnee: So, I had not. It's just— it was like Corn Flakes.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But it had a picture of the prophet Elijah feeding a bird on the box. And he got in a *lot* of trouble for that.

Justin: Why?

Sydnee: Because, church groups, they found it blasphemous. "Are you kidding me? Did you put a picture of Elijah on a box of cereal?"

Justin: I always used to wonder what manna was like. We used to hear about it a lot in Bible class, and it's, like, "I wonder if it's good?" Like, do you

think it was good? It's just food falling from the sky. Sounds dope. I wonder if it's good, though? Or if it's just like the protein bars in solitary, always just keeps you going?

Sydnee: Do you wanna know— I've thought about this. Do you really want to know what I've thought about?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Or is it— 'cause it's like a boring scientific answer?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: A lot of cultures have developed some sort of starchy base that they build their foods around.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Like, whether you add a sauce, or a meat, or a vegetable component. There's like a starchy base to it.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And rice, being a really well-known one.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Potatoes. Depending on where you live and what grew there. Um, you'll find, like, um, like, nsima, which I ate when I was in Malawi. It's, like, a starchy based— anyway, I always think manna is probably that.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: It's got a lot of calories. It's sustaining. Doesn't have a ton of flavor, but, like, it will keep ya going. And you can add things to it depending upon what grows around you.

Justin: I'm with you.

Sydnee: This is a side note, but I've thought about this. [laughs softly]

Justin: Oh, yeah. Yeah, and a gripping one. Um—

Sydnee: Anyway, he eventually changed it to Post Toasties.

Justin: There we go!

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Nobody's thinking that's blasphemous.

Sydnee: [laughs softly] Um—

Justin: Except, you know what, like, Kellogg's was not founded by John Harvey. Just to clarify. We understand this, right? John Harvey was the founder of Battle Creek and did all the sanitarium stuff.

Sydnee: Yes. Sanitarium. Yes.

Justin: Will Keith, his brother, wanted to keep their process of making cereal secret. John Harvey brought in Post and showed him how they were doing it while he was at the Sanitarium. And Post was like, "Oh, dunk. I'm gonna get out of here—"

Sydnee: I'm going to steal this.

Justin: "I'm going to get out of here and steal this." And then Will Keith was so mad about that, that he went on to found Kellogg's, the company that—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Will Keith Kellogg was the founder. John Harvey Kellogg was— didn't want to profit off of it, didn't want to add sugar or, you know, stuff that would help the cereal sell, so.

Sydnee: There is so much drama in the cereal world.

Justin: Oh, it's the best.

Sydnee: As I was reading this, sort of— and I am just trying to focus in on, like, the cereals that have made health claims through the years.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And there is so much of that.

Justin: Are you saying that cereal is a fascinating and captivating subject? 'Cause yeah... I'm with you.

Sydnee: Um, other companies, of course, have followed this trend. There a— there's one you may know, called Wheaties.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Do you know the story of how Wheaties supposedly came to be? Like how did they create their first Wheatie?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Um, this story is probably not true.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: But this is the—

Justin: By all— by all means, let's help it propagate.

Sydnee: A lot of— and you find this— it's interesting, the other place you find these, sort of like, "Ah, can anyone really prove that this is how it happened?" stories. Or when we talked about a lot of, like, supplements and naturopathic, homeopathic, or herbal, holistic, whatever genre we're in, remedies that we've talked about on the show.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: They have a story like this, right? Like, some sort of accidental discovery of, "I was at death's door, and then I ate a plant, and now I'm better."

Justin: So, my— my rationale for these stories— and there's several of them. And, like, I don't know if Wheaties is the one where they're like, "Somebody just dropped bran on a hot thing, and it made Wheaties."

Sydnee: This is it. This is the story. They dropped— there was a health clinician who dropped a bran gruel on a hot stove.

Justin: So, that— my theory on that is that is people telling that story to attempt to circumvent a patent.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: Or possibly a utility patent that Kellogg's or Post had, where it's like, "No, no, no, this isn't like your thing. We did— this just happened." Isn't it weird, Syd, that this accident just happened to happen, not at any other moment in linear time? [chuckles]

Sydnee: [laughs softly] Just then.

Justin: Just then. [holding back laughter] What's so bizarre is that nobody dropped bran gruel on a stove before this.

Sydnee: Until 1921.

Justin: Yeah. Weird. [wheeze laughs softly]

Sydnee: And when the Washburn-Crosby Company—

Justin: Crosby, Stills, Washburn. [wheeze laughs]

Sydnee: And then—

Justin: All your favorites.

Sydnee: Eventually this is General Mills.

Justin: Yeah. Gotcha.

Sydnee: And they initially— they originally called it Gold Medal Whole Wheat Flakes. It was later changed to Wheaties.

Justin: Yeah. It's a better name.

Sydnee: Um, rea— actually, part of the reason that they did is that it was a time where doctors were telling people that consuming too much white flour was harming their digestive tracts and they should eat less white flour, and so sales were dropping. And the mills needed something to... ya know?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Do what mills— they needed something to mill.

Justin: Got to mill.

Sydnee: And this was a great solution. Wheaties was the solution.

Justin: Answer.

Sydnee: Yeah. So, this is probably why they started pushing Wheaties.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Not because they dropped a bran gruel on a stove.

Justin: [bursts out laughing]

Sydnee: [laughs softly] Anyway, so— but the key was marketing, right? Like, I don't think— I'm personally, not a huge Wheaties fan. You can be. That's fine. We can disagree on the flavor.

Justin: You know what's good with Wheaties?

Sydnee: Sugar?

Justin: Little bit of sugar.

Sydnee: Yeah. That's, uh-huh.

Justin: Just a little sugar.

Sydnee: There's a— there's a theme here. Anyway, so they tied it to athletic performance, right? So, this is, sort of, that vague health claim, like, "Wheaties will make you better at sports." How? Well, sometimes they would say, like, things that were direct. Like putting an athlete on a box of Wheaties saying, "I eat Wheaties." It *implies* that Wheaties makes you good at whatever sport you play, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Um, but they would also say things, like, there's one ad where they talk about the heat-producing elements in Wheaties.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: And how these heat-producing elements will, uh— will help you be better at whatever you're doing. They introduced Jack Armstrong.

Justin: Is that a real person?

Sydnee: I believe Jack Armstrong was the fake person.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: 'Cause they had, like, a— a— Jack Armstrong was this fictional, like, all-American boy who Wheaties made great at basketball, I believe.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: So, anyway, and Wheaties sort of started that trend of like, "Let's connect a breakfast cereal to... sports, performance, athleticism, achievement." You know?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Like that sort of general sense, you'll be stronger, faster, better, without saying specifically what it's doing to do that. You know what I mean?

Justin: Yeah. It's sort of health adjacent.

Sydnee: Yes. And that has perpetuated, right? We still look to Wheaties boxes for, like, the current athletic superstars.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I assume.

Justin: I guess.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: I haven't bought Wheaties in a little bit.

Sydnee: I think that's still happening. The next one I want to tell you about is wild, so I'm going to need you— like, let's take a little breather.

Justin: I wish I could go eat cereal 'cause I'm freaking starving right now.

Sydnee: I know. This is going to kill that urge. But first, let's go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go.

[ad break]

Justin: Grape-Nuts is the cereal I would eat, by the way. If I— if I could go eat cereal right now, you've driven me mad with desire for Grape-Nuts. By your intended call, I'm sure.

Sydnee: Well, I'm going to kill that with Shredded Ralston.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: You've never heard of Shredded Ralston, you told me.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: No. Okay. Ralston—

Justin: I've heard of Ralston Purina.

Sydnee: Okay. Yes. This was from the Ralston Purina Company, Shredded Ralston. And it was like a whole wheat cereal, right? Okay? And eventually, they would go on to make Chex and Cookie Crisp. So, like, Cookie Crisp is a good cereal. I like that one.

Justin: Oh, no. See, the pieces are too big. I don't— I don't enjoy cereals with big pieces.

Sydnee: Ralston was for the movement Ralstonism, which was created by Webster Edgerly. The reason that you had to— the reason this cereal was made is because they had a very restrictive diet. If you were a follower of Ralstonism— by the way, the word Ralston stands for: Regime, Activity, Light, Strength, Temperation, Oxygen, and Nature.

Justin: Whoa!

Sydnee: Honey, this is a *wild* thing. Um, and this food was created for followers so that they would have something to eat that would fall within the— it was, like I said, there were very few things— they had to stay away from—

Justin: Don't you love that when someone says, "You can only eat these things, and as luck would have it for, you know, just 30 cents a box, you can have these exact things." [chuckles]

Sydnee: Exactly. So, they made this cereal for people that the followers could consume. It is also important to note, incredibly *racist*, Ralstonism.

Justin: [sarcastically] What? Oh, my!

Sydnee: White supremacist movement, Ralstonism.

Justin: Oh, my!

Sydnee: Yes. Only— only white people could be—

Justin: I did not expect that.

Sydnee: ... included in the movement. Everyone else, he advocated for castration.

Justin: Oh, no!

Sydnee: Yeah. So, um, bad guy. Bad guy. Um, Webster Edgerly, who created Ralstonism, created Shredded Ralston and worked with the company that would go on to make Cookie Crisp. Sorry— sorry about that.

Justin: Hooray. Hooray!

Sydnee: Sorry about that one. And they made all kinds of cereals, by the way. I didn't realize how many, like, um, co-branded cereals.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So, that's another story. [laughs softly]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But, again, the point was healthy. This food— this cereal was created specifically to meet a dietary regimen for this group of people that was supposed to be the healthiest, most pure dietary regimen, right? Again, super racist also. Um, eventually—

Justin: I think I was going to say it was interesting when Ralston Purina was sold to Nestle—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: ... that it's now— that division is now called Nestle Purina.
[chuckles]

Sydnee: Yeah, get rid of the Ralston.

Justin: Just don't happen to have any relation to Ralston anymore.

Sydnee: You don't want anything to do with that. No, get rid of that. Um, eventually in the 50s, as you have noted, you know? It was, like, "We should sell this to kids." But kids don't want to eat it. Why don't they want to eat it? Sugar.

Justin: Sugar. Yeah.

Sydnee: They want sugar. It needs sugar. This is why we all add sugar to these things. So, uh, there's an easy way to get around that, though. The common idea at the time is that your doctor would advise you to give this to your kid. Because sugar is important for energy. [chuckles]

Justin: That is something that you see in a lot of, like, 50s and 60s cereal advertising—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: ... is like, "It's packed with energy!" Like, "To keep kids going." It's like, "You mean sug... you mean sugar? Right?"

Sydnee: Yeah, and that's it!

Justin: You mean sugar.

Sydnee: That was the way that your kid needs sugar for energy. And so, sugar is a good thing. So, give your kids sugar. [laughs]

Justin: Kids *don't* need sugar for energy. I, a man—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: ... I have a lot to accomplish in a given day. I need sugar for energy.

Sydnee: And as you move into, not in the 50s and 60s, but, like, in the decades to come, we would have studies that would come out that would help with this narrative, right? Like, not that sugar necessarily was good for you, but what was bad for you then? What did we come to understand as bad?

Justin: This is probably, I would guess, around the time where, like, fat became the enemy.

Sydnee: Fat and cholesterol was the enemy. I mean, look at the food pyramid. You have a giant, like, cereal base on the [through laugh] food pyramid. I mean, if you're talking about grains.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like, forget that there's sugar in there. There's grains! You need these. This is good. And so, like, a breakfast of bacon and eggs would be, like, the worst thing you could eat in, you know, this dietary era.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, you know, that's what all the doctors were saying. Fat is bad for you. Cholesterol is bad for you. Grains are good.

Justin: These cheaply produced, uh, easy to produce, uh, cash crops are really where the money is at.

Sydnee: Exactly. Exactly. And, I mean, you can get into— I'm not going to get into, like, there are *many* books written about who paid for these studies.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: And who promoted these ideas. And hopefully, we're all at a point where we realize that, like, we need all kinds of foods, you know? [soft chuckle] We need protein, and we need grains, and we need sugar, and we... you know? We *need* all of these things in moderation.

But, um, cereal would continue, at that point— and this is, I feel like, as we move into the decades of cereal that we ate as children, to be colorful [soft chuckle] and sugary. And generally, something that you would not look at and think of as a health food, right? Like, I don't ever remember looking at a box of, you know, Captain Crunch was my favorite, and thinking, like, "I'm eating a health food."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Right? Um, but what's weird about that is, like, even in that time, cereals were still making those kinds of health claims. Like, even though we were looking at cereals that you wouldn't necessarily assume were healthy. Things like vitamin D were often promoted.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Like this is— and, like, you can use certain language, like, "Good source of..."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: This... yeah. [soft chuckle]

Justin: “Part of a complete breakfast” has always been my favorite one.
[quiet laugh]

Sydnee: “Part of a complete breakfast,” that’s a good one.

Justin: It’s like— it’s a bowl of cereal with an orange, and a glass of milk, and some toast, and— [chuckles]

Sydnee: With the fear of high fructose corn syrup that arose, um, that was a popular thing to put on cereal boxes.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: “We don’t have that. No high fructose corn syrup.” Don’t pay attention to how much sugar is in this box.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Because we’ve put this claim on the top that sounds, you know, very healthy. So—

Justin: It’s like when you see bags of rice advertised as gluten-free. Like, yeah. I mean, yup.

Sydnee: The— another thing they would do is say, like, the main ingredient, like, it has more whole grain than anything else. Like, “Whole grain is the number one thing.” That’s the—

Justin: Oh, yeah.

Sydnee: But, like, one way to get around that is that if you have a bunch of different sources of sugar in it, then each one of those sources is counted separately.

Justin: Right. Because they— you have to list the ingredients in the frequency with which, or the proportion in which they appear.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: So, your first ingredient is the one that is most prevalent, but if you divide the sugars up, then maybe it doesn't shake out like that in the list.

Sydnee: Exactly.

Justin: So, you might see them advertise like, "Whole grain is the first ingredient." Like, I've seen that, like, word marked on boxes before.

Sydnee: Um, some will say, like— like, Applejacks used to say, they have fiber. It's like, yes, that is true. There is some fiber in there. [holding back a laugh] That is true.

Justin: That's true.

Sydnee: Or, like, Cocoa Krispies, uh, for a while said that they "Support your child's immunity."

Justin: [burst out laughing loudly]

Sydnee: 'Cause of the vitamins in there.

Justin: Yeah. There's vitamins.

Sydnee: So, there. They got vitamins and antioxidants. [through laughter] So, it supports your immunity, Cocoa Krispies.

Justin: Yeah. Cocoa Pebbles, though, immunosuppressants. [holding back laughter] Weirdly, no one knows this.

Sydnee: [soft laugh] Um, which, you know, like I said, like, you would not— you would not look at these foods and think of them as health foods. And I don't even think at that point, when I think about, like, my parents giving me cereal, I don't think my parents were under the impression that I was eating a health food.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: But the cereal boxes continued those claims. And especially as we move into the 90s and 2000s, 'cause that is when you started to get, sort of, the rise of— first of all, concerns about sugar, right? Secondly, the organic food movement, fear about preservatives, fears about, as we've talked about on previous episodes, artificial colors, and artificial flavors. All of that starts to come into play as we move into the 90s and 2000s.

And so, I think that, like, some of these cereal boxes are probably making these claims to compete with the rise of cereals that are, like, made to be health food products. You start to see, specifically organic cereals and organic foods of all kinds, come into play for kids, right? Like, now you can find all those aisles.

Every food you get at the grocery store, there's an organic for— I mean, like, for kids. Obviously for everything, but for, like, kids specifically. But then you see stuff like Special K and Kashi, which are, like, these are healthy cereals that are now out there for you to eat.

Justin: Do you know the one I used to love is Kenmei Rice Bran. They don't make that anymore. That was really good.

Sydnee: Um—

Justin: I like when the Special K has chunks of chocolate in it. And they're, like, good... Special K? Still, right? [holding back laughter] We're fine. It's just literal chunks of chopped-up candy bar we threw in here. This is fine.

Sydnee: [soft laugh] It's really wild too, because, I mean, I would treat myself to Special K sometimes. As, like, a dessert because it's, like, there are some of the Special K flavors that are *delicious*.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And they— they have a lot of sugar. And that doesn't mean you shouldn't eat them, but we're still—

Justin: Right. This is the thing.

Sydnee: ... marketing these things as like—

Justin: Let's make it clear. We're not shaming any of these foods.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: Everything in moderation. It's the marketing that is lying to you. And saying, like, "You should eat a lot of this. This is good. This is good stuff. Good for you."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Yes, and I think that it's... okay, then this leads into the story of cereal as a medicine. Cereal that was, uh, branded a drug for a while. This is exactly why food is food and drugs are drugs. And [chuckles] when you put these claims on cereal boxes and lead people to believe, like, you need to eat this, add this to your diet 'cause it's a health food. Not you should or shouldn't.

You know what I mean? Like, if you're already eating, you should also eat this because it's good for you. Um, Cheerios, which has been around since 1941.

Justin: Classic. Classic cereal.

Sydnee: Yeah. Cheerios got in on this trend with the claim that they could— everybody knows this. What do Cheerios do?

Justin: They lower your cholesterol.

Sydnee: Exactly. They lower your cholesterol. Everybody— I feel like this is one of the most well-known claims that a food has made, right?

Justin: Everybody knows this. Yes, this is law. This is the way.

Sydnee: Right. And there was a clinical study, that they would talk about, [chuckles] that showed this. That two servings of Cheerios a day would lower—

Justin: That's a lot of Cheerios. [wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: A lot of Cheerios. Would lower your bad cholesterol four percent in six weeks, in parentheses, "As part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol."

Justin: [bursts out laughing loudly] So good.

Sydnee: So, they marketed it this way. And, I mean, that is my— like, when I think of Cheerios, I still think of it as healthy.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I used to take a bag of Cheerios with me to snack on all day in high school. I thought of Cheerios as, like, a healthy snack.

Justin: I will say if you're someone that pays attention to sugar content, you could do a lot worse than standard Cheerios. They are not— besides the fact that they're oat, and that makes them good and better than most all other cereals. 'Cause, it's more expensive to do oat cereals.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: So, you're seeing a lot of cereals move into, like, corn and rice 'cause it's cheaper to produce than oat. For example, did you know that, uh, the Monster cereals used to be oat-based? So, if you think the Monster cereals used to taste better than they do now, [inflection] they do. It's not your brain playing tricks on you.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: This is a bad, substandard, bad version of the cereals 'cause it's not oat-based anymore.

Sydnee: These are— I should note, these are your flavor opinions.

Justin: Yeah. What else is there? I mean—

Sydnee: Well, I'm just— we're not making health claims.

Justin: I would say I'm a professional cereal reviewer.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: So, like, I would say it's more like flavor law.

Sydnee: But you're basing it on, like, the taste and flavor of the cereals and not how good they are for you. Because the idea of like— we're talking a lot about foods that are healthy and unhealthy.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And, instead, that's not really a concept we should discuss. Foods aren't inherently healthy/unhealthy.

Justin: Yeah. So, why are you on my—

Sydnee: You need a well-balanced array of foods that provide your body with all of the things that it needs.

Justin: Why are you getting on my case in saying that the Monster cereals were better before they were all corn? Like, this is the truth.

Sydnee: Well, no, I was just clarifying that you mean— you mean flavor, not some other factor.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. Okay. I was just clarifying that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: But I'm saying Cheerios are lower in sugar than a lot of other cereals.

Sydnee: Yes. Sure.

Justin: [emphatically] This— that was my whole point.

Sydnee: That's fine. No, that's fine.

Justin: And I was talking about how the Monster cereals used to be better, now they're bad!

Sydnee: However, in 2009, this claim from Cheerios got them into trouble.

Justin: Oh. Why? [through laugh] I mean, I can guess.

Sydnee: Because the FDA doesn't like it when you put a medical claim on your food packaging.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Which is why Grape-Nuts knew, all those many years ago, to say [through laughter] this is food, not medicine.

Justin: This is food, not medicine. What does it do? It, um, steadies a man. Come at us.

Sydnee: [through laughter] That was, uh... yeah, it's got phosphate of potash. [normally] Um, food and drugs are regulated very differently. We've talked about that. I mean, you know that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: We've talked about that on the show a lot. And if Cheerios wanted to bring a new drug to the market, [soft laugh] you know? If Cheerios was a medication, you know, that General Mills was introducing, then they had a whole process they had to go through.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And they didn't do that, of course. 'Cause, it's cereal. Um, so basically, the FDA said that you're marketing your cereal as a medicine, and either— you have two options. Either pull it from the shelves and go through the process of getting it approved as a—

Justin: As a medicine.

Sydnee: ... as a medication or change your packaging because you can't— right now, you're marketing it as a medicine, but it is regulated as a food and that doesn't fly. Um, the result was that, as you can imagine, people started suing because they, you know, "Well, I ate Cheerios, and I still had— I still have heart disease."

Justin: What you—

Sydnee: "I ate Cheerios, and my cholesterol is still high."

Justin: The way a lot of people get around this now in cereal packaging, is they will have, uh, like, text describing the theoretical value of certain ingredients or whatever, like whole grain. Talking about why whole grain is so important.

And then, like, new paragraph: "This has whole grain in it." So, I don't know. [chuckles] What do you think? Like, they don't say, "This cereal does this." They're saying whole grain does this thing. By the way, whole grain is in this cereal. So, it's like, they're not drawing that direct connection anymore.

Sydnee: Which is exactly what— so, Cheerios did change their packaging. I don't know. I haven't bought a box of Cheerios recently, so I don't know exactly what it says. I know that that is still in my head, that Cheerios lowers cholesterol. That, that is still—and, like, they made that case.

General Mills made the case, like, "No, there are *many* studies on soluble fiber that talk about the health benefits. Like, we don't have to rehash that,

because there— it's out there." Um, but either way, they changed the packaging, 'cause it wasn't worth all the— all the legal headaches.

Um, but there was a paper published in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing 2019* that looked at, like, kind of, a meta-analysis. Well, not meta. Four different studies. Looked at several different studies on nutritional claims on cereal boxes. And, um, it was *wild* because this 2019, out of 633 different breakfast cereals, 460 had some sort of health claim on them.

Justin: Whew!

Sydnee: So, this persists to this day. I just think that's interesting, and you can— we could all debate. I mean, I think the idea of, like, again, there are so many different, um— they're not all medical professionals, but they have varying degrees, who will try to tell you that they have the *exact* way of eating that is best for everyone. And I think we have talked a lot on this show about, like, that's not really— there is no one thing. You know?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: You need to eat a wide variety of foods to give your body all the different things that it needs. So, you know, I don't want to quibble with every single one of these health claims.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: The larger point is that cereal is still marketed, quite often, for its health benefits. [laughs softly] Which I think is a wild legacy of those early, you know, Kellogg's, and Post, and people making cereals in the beginning, that cereal still has that. When, you know, for me, cereal is delicious, and I love it. And it's more of a treat, is what, like, I think of cereal. Like if I'm gonna eat a bowl of Captain Crunch, it's, like, a treat for me.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But it's not marketed that way. It's not marketed as a "Treat yourself." It's marketed as a health food.

Justin: I would be willing to bet that Captain Crunch... sorry, sorry, Cap'n.

Sydnee: [laughs lightly] Cap'n.

Justin: Cap'n Crunch. Captain Cornelius Crunch is not currently marketing his product as a health food in any way, shape, or form.

Sydnee: Well.

Justin: I would have to call you on that.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: There is no way. There's just no way.

Sydnee: [through laughter] I don't know! Look at— pull up a picture of a box of Cap'n Crunch.

Justin: I'll just pull one of the many I have underneath my desk.

Sydnee: And, let's see, are there any— *any* claims on it?

Justin: Okay. Find, uh, "Crunchatize me, Captain" is what I'm seeing on this current box art. That's not a health claim. I mean, crunchitization has been proven to improve levels of pleasure and satisfaction.

Sydnee: What are the— what's in the small— what's in the small print?

Justin: "Sweetened corn and oats cereal... Crunchatize me, Captain." What? "Enlarged to show texture"? You have no point. What's the point?

Sydnee: Okay. I just wondered.

Justin: "Giant-size," that's 'cause I'm looking at the Giant-Size box now. I have not seen the side. And, no, they're advertising great flavors. Oh, they're following on social media. That's all good. No, see, it's just fun. It's just a fun treat for kids.

Sydnee: Okay. All right. There we go. Well, then my favorite—

Justin: Cap'n Crunch is on the level. He knows what he's—

Sydnee: My favorite cereal, Cap'n Crunch—

Justin: ... is a straight dealer.

Sydnee: ... is going to tell you exactly what it is.

Justin: Clean dealer.

Sydnee: A delicious cereal.

Justin: Yes. And that's— and that's it.

Sydnee: And don't get up with those "Oops, All Berries" nonsense.

Justin: Now, Honey Nut Cheerios. Right there on the box.

Sydnee: What does it say?

Justin: "Can help lower cholesterol as part of a heart-healthy diet."
[through laughter] So, they have softened that language quite a bit.

Sydnee: Yeah. So, anyway, I— again, I just think that it's fascinating that we have continued to market cereals, in many, not all, cases, as a health food.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I just think that that's an interesting legacy that— that continues from the early days of cereal. And those early claims, of it being a health food, weren't backed by any sort of science or evidence, to begin with.

Justin: Mm-hmm. They, uh, I also— one that you see a lot on cereal, which I get a huge kick out of, is fat-free.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Don't worry. Corn... uh, Frosted Flakes says that on the Kroger description it says, "It's a healthy fat-free cereal."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: And right above that, it says, "Crunchy Flakes of Corn Sprinkled with Sweet Frosting."

Sydnee: [soft laugh]

Justin: Use your noodle, Kroger! [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, they're not lying.

Justin: They're not lying.

Sydnee: It's not lying.

Justin: Well, they *do* say it's healthy, Sydnee, which is pretty subjective. But it's also not something you can sue somebody over, right? Like, healthy.

Sydnee: Healthy is very subjective.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So. But, at the end of the day, uh, cereal can be *part* of a healthy diet. [laughs softly]

Justin: Thank you so much for listening to our podcast. We hope you've enjoyed yourself. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song. "Medicines" is the intro *and* outro of our program. And thanks to you for listening.

[outro plays]

Justin: That's going to do it for us this week. Until next time, my name is Justin Mc Elroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee Mc Elroy.

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

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