

Sawbones 412: Harry Beno: The Poison King

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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: [sing-song] Hello, everybody! Welcome to *Sawbones*! It's a marital tour of misguided medicine. And I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy. What was with that sort of...

Justin: Yeah, I don't know.

Sydnee: Sing-song-y... intonation?

Justin: I'm just so excited, because it is the MaxFunDrive.

Sydnee: It is!

Justin: The time of year that we come to you and say "Hey! We are destitute, and you're the only thing keeping us off the streets."

Sydnee: It's really more like "Hey, we need your help."

Justin: Maximumfun.org/join. We are part of a, uh, listener-funded network. That means that we come to you and say "Hey, could you pledge 5, 10, \$20 a month to help us make the shows that we make?" You pay for other stuff that you like, and this is no different. We just don't make you pay for it, like some of the big streaming subscription services, you know? We're more like a... pay—pay—what-you-can kind of deal.

Sydnee: Exactly, because we want everybody to be able to enjoy the stuff we make, but it really helps us out, if you do enjoy it, if you can give us a little bit of money every month, so that we can keep making our shows, making more of

them, and make them better. Improve our equipment, improve our research materials, give everything more time, all of those things re improved with your help.

Justin: There's gifts. So, like, \$5 a month, you get, um, a bunch of bonus content. Like, 15 days' worth of bonus content. We've recorded many bonus episodes over the years. One is a, um—uh, this year's is a special, uh—

Sydnee: Charlie is the—is the guest host instead of Justin, and she reads questions from uh, children in our listening audience, or children known to our listening au—children sent these questions.

Justin: It's great. It's fun. There's lots of great fun stuff on there. And there's other gifts, we're gonna talk about 'em in the middle of the show. But right now, we would ask you, this is our last episode of the Drive. If you haven't done it yet, this is your moment. Maximumfun.org/join. Thank you very much in advance. I know you're gonna do the right thing and give us your support, so thank you. Thank you for your support in advance.

Syd, who are we talking about this week? What's going on? What's happening in the big—big medical world out there?

Sydnee: Uh, Justin, I feel like that because we're all excited, it's the MaxFunDrive, we wanna—we—I don't know, it's a fun time. Maximum Fun... time.

Justin: The Maximum Fun time.

Sydnee: Uh, that this would be a good time to share with you a story that I have become familiar with recently, thanks to a listener, Roman, who sent an email with a story and some newspaper clippings, original newspaper—gosh, I love those. Is there anything better than finding an original newspaper article about the thing you're researching?

Justin: [deadpan] Oh, boy. Don't get me started on the delight of original newspaper clippings.

Sydnee: You used to have to go to the library and load that stuff up on a microfilm, you know, microfiche.

Justin: [with French accent] Microfiche. [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] And, uh—and scan through it, which I did enjoy. I—don't get me wrong!

Justin: Oh, yeah.

Sydnee: There is a—

Justin: [sarcastically] The sound of that machine whir—whir—whirring up? Oh, forget about it.

Sydnee: And it was dark, and calm. And you're, like—

Justin: Sexy.

Sydnee: —looking into the past through that screen.

Justin: Oh, boy.

Sydnee: I do miss that. Now, like, a lot of that's on computer. It's on your computer.

Justin: On the web. These kids today won't appreciate it.

Sydnee: So some of those articles, uh, Roman sent me. And that was a great jumping off point to learn more about uh, Harry... I am certain this is Beno. I want it to be Beano, 'cause I think—

Justin: I'm pretty sure it's Beno.

Sydnee: [laughs] But I wish it was Beano. Harry Beno, the Poison King. I tell you, when I sat down to write my notes, uh, I started composing "The Ballad of Harry Beno, the Poison King," which was the total wrong direction to go. It's still a work in progress, but...

Justin: Okay. Well, I'm looking forward to it.

Sydnee: May—maybe—maybe we could—maybe... I don't know. Maybe that's a stretch goal. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Yeah, we could put it up as bonus content.

Sydnee: As bonus content. We can—we can record “The Ballad of Harry Beno, the Poison King.” You’re gonna have to come up with music to it. I just have lyrics.

Anyway, we all set out—

Justin: What about this? [humming random notes]

Sydnee: No. No, it’s—I had a sea shanty in my head.

Justin: Okay. [humming random notes, voice breaks] [hums "Deck the Halls"]

Sydnee: That’s... no. That’s a Christmas carol.

Justin: Oh. Sorry.

Sydnee: That’s “Deck the Halls.”

Justin: Yeah. [stammering] Yeah. Now—I hear it now. There are some tonal similarities, just in the harmonics.

Sydnee: No, I had been listening to “Great Big Sea” when I... was doing my notes, and that—

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: —it’s like that sort of vibe...

Justin: Informed your... yeah.

Sydnee: ... was in my head as I started composing. Anyway, we set out as children on a quest to find our unique skills and talents, our place, our niche, where we belong in the world, what our contribution to human history may be.

Uh, Harry Beno, born in Muncie sometime in the mid-1800’s... I gotta tell you, for some of these people, it’s really hard to nail down [through laughter] concrete details. Even with news—original newspaper articles!

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, but Harry—I think that's because in the beginning of Harry's life, um, he was probably just doing the usual—usual stuff. Um, not necessarily making headlines, you know?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Not newspaper article fodder. Um, but then one day he was out on the road. He was sort of a wanderer.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Just sort of, um... wandering around the country, looking for... stuff to get into, I guess.

Justin: Poison?

Sydnee: [laughs] Not yet. He's not there yet.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Uh, he's out on the road. He's traveling. He's hungry. He stops at a farmhouse for a bite to eat, asks the kindly... kindly farmer's wife, "Could I have some chow?"

Justin: [wheeze-laughs] Is that what he says? "Can I have some chow?"

Sydnee: I don't know. I don't have a record of exactly what he said, so...

Justin: Okay. We'll go with that.

Sydnee: In my ballad, [laughs quietly] he says, "Can I have some chow?" Um, so he—he asks for some food, and the farmer's wife gives him some tea, and some—some cookies, or biscuits. The ar—a lot of the articles refer to them as biscuits, which I thought was interesting, 'cause they were—I mean, this is all, like, Midwestern, is where all this happened. So this wasn't overseas.

Anyway, so he got some biscuits. He ate it all, 'cause he was really hungry, okay?

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And then the farmer's wife comes rushing back in and is like, "Oh, no, no, no! Did you already eat all those cookies?"

And he's like, "Yeah, I was starving."

And she's like, "Oh, no! One of 'em was laced with strychnine!"

Justin: We've all been—wait. Why did she lace one of 'em with strychnine?

Sydnee: Uh, it was supposed to be put in the attic for the rats. [pause] I've heard several versions—

Justin: You shouldn't make those at the same time!

Sydnee: [laughs] I've heard several versions of this. This is the one that I enjoyed the most. There was another version—

Justin: Do you just put a M&M in that one and you're like, "This one is the... gotta remember. The one with the M&M—[wheezes]—is poison."

Sydnee: There was one version where he just found a piece of bread, and was hungry, and he ate the piece of bread, and it had been soaked in strychnine and left somewhere.

Justin: That's something. That's, like—

Sydnee: For the rats.

Justin: —at least I can see, like, something.

Sydnee: One way or another, here's Harry. He's eaten all these cookies, or the piece of bread. Whatever. He now knows it's laced with strychnine.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So these are his final moments.

Justin: Yeah. What does he—

Sydnee: I mean, imagine that feeling.

Justin: What does he do now?

Sydnee: Like, he's sitting there. And I was trying to picture, what's going through your head? Are you—is your life flashing before your eyes? Are you filled with regrets?

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: All the things you haven't done? Or are you just—like, was he sitting there just, like, satisfied? Like, "You know what?"

Justin: "I did it."

Sydnee: "I did everything I wanted to do on this Earth."

Justin: [singing half-heartedly] I did it my—[laughs]

Sydnee: "I feel good about it all, and I embrace my fate."

Justin: [singing] Floor cookies! I ate a few!

Sydnee: Maybe he got really drunk. I don't know. That seems like a good option.

Justin: "You know, maybe if I hadn't eaten so much floor bread, I wouldn't have ended up like this. But that's not a life worth living. I just love to eat whatever scraps of food hove into my field of view, like a golden retriever."

Sydnee: So he waited. And time passed.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: And he was okay!

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: And after about an hour, it seemed pretty clear. Harry was gonna live. Not only was Harry gonna live, he was *fine*.

Justin: No—no—no worries here. No effects.

Sydnee: Yeah. He was totally—he was totally okay. Which I know at this point, if you—if you, listeners, are like me, you may be thinking, "Well, maybe he didn't actually eat one of the ones that had strychnine—maybe, like, they—these were the fine biscuits, and the strychnine biscuit was already in the attic, and maybe this didn't really happen."

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Right? Like, don't—

Justin: It may have just been a story he came up with. [laughs quietly] I gotcha.

Sydnee: Yeah. Well, it could've been that, or it could've been that she was like, "Uh-oh! I think one of those had strychnine in 'em!" But actually it didn't. But that doesn't matter, because he had evaded death, and he'd found a new career path... all at once. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Poi—poison—poison-related.

Sydnee: He had entered that farmhouse Harry Beno, hungry for biscuits.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: And he emerged from that farmhouse Harry Beno, the Poison King.

Justin: Who could still go for a biscuit, now that you mention it. Thank you.

Sydnee: Who could still go for a biscuit. Well, almost. He wasn't quite the Poison King yet. He was still sort of wandering the country, like I said at this point. Just kind of, like, looking for—you know, looking for work, looking for biscuits, whatever.

Justin: [wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: Floor bread. [laughs quietly] Whatever he could find. And he actually, um, got arrested soon after this in Richmond, Virginia, for vagrancy. He would get arrested for vagrancy several times throughout his life. Um, and he spent ten days in jail.

And while he was in jail is when the idea solidified. Like, he was recounting the story to his cellmates, of eating the strychnine, and how he was fine, and how amazing it was. And it was through this that he had the—I mean, I guess, like, you get a lot of time when you're behind bars to contemplate.

Justin: Not a lot of great stories in there, you know.

Sydnee: So—so he was in—he was in jail for ten days. When he came out, he set out to a pharmacy to buy poison.

Justin: [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: So he went—

Justin: "Hi, could you direct me to the poison, please?"

Sydnee: [laughs] "I would like all your—all your finest poisons, good sir."

Justin: "The nasty stuff."

Sydnee: So he bought strychnine, but he wanted to—I mean, if you—if you're fine with one, maybe you can tolerate them all.

Justin: You're gonna go to town, might as well go in a Lincoln.

Sydnee: So, now, what exact poisons, I don't know. A lot of articles just say, like, "the deadliest poisons known to man, the worst poisons he could find, the—" you know, that sort of thing. I don't know—I couldn't find, like, an exact recounting of others, other than strychnine is definitely among them. Other *poisons*, I don't know. Um, but he bought a bunch of poisons, and then he... ate 'em.

Justin: [wheezes] Just ate 'em, gobbled 'em right up.

Sydnee: He ate 'em. Um, and—I mean, this is his story, by the way. This is, like—he is the source for this.

Justin: [suspicious] Hmm. Hmm.

Sydnee: So according to Beno, he bought some poisons, he ate the poisons, and he was... fine. So—so he knew he could do this, you know, eight shows a week. [laughs]

Justin: Okay, yeah.

Sydnee: At this point.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, he had—he had previously worked occasionally with, like, circuses as a laborer. Since he did sort of just travel about, he would sometimes hook up with, like, a traveling carnival or circus or something and work, just, you know, carrying heavy stuff or whatever.

And so he knew, like, from that experience, he knew the value of a good sideshow act. And he knew that this had that kind of potential. Uh, a guy who could eat lots of poison. So he started touring with circuses as a sideshow. "Come see Harry Beno, the Poison King, who can eat... poison." [laughs quietly]

Justin: If you like.

Sydnee: And then watches to see if he die—imagine that show! Because that's what it is. You watch a guy eat something...

Justin: And then everyone waits.

Sydnee: And then you just wait to see if he dies.

Justin: I feel like he's gotta have some other... bits.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: You gotta have something going.

Sydnee: You need a patter. [laughs]

Justin: You need patter. You need a song, maybe? A little song, a little dance, a little seltzer in your pants? Something.

Sydnee: [laughs] Well, I don't—I don't know at the—initially, he was just... you know what? He probably told the story. That was probably part of it, because the story seemed so entrenched, along with, you know, what actually happened, that he probably would eat the poison—he would sell you a ticket. You'd watch him eat some poisons. He would tell you about why he's not gonna die, and then eventually you'd realize, you know, an hour had passed or whatever, and he was still alive. And you figure, wow, it worked.

Um, but, like anyone in showbiz will tell you... you can't let your act get stale.

Justin: No, no, no. I've—I've—I—hey, listen. You're telling me.

Sydnee: It's gotta stay fresh. If you're gonna keep selling tickets, and you're gonna keep finding, um, more people who like it nasty—[laughs quietly]—who are—[laughs] who are lookin' for a good sideshow where a guy eats a bunch of poison... and, like, I don't—I didn't find—'cause, you know, my mind was immediately like, "Well, was anybody verifying that it was poison?"

Justin: Yeah!

Sydnee: You know?

Justin: Yeah!

Sydnee: Was there, like—I don't—I don't have record of, like, a doctor standing there to, like, evaluate everything and be like, "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. This—" or a pharmacist. Like, "Yep, that looks like poison."

And then he would eat it, and then afterwards, like, examining him and saying, like, "He looks... fi—like, his heart's beating. He's... you know."

Justin: "He's fine. Not dead."

Sydnee: "He's... breathing still, you can see. He just talked to you." Um, so he could only eat strychnine for so many people before they began to lose interest,

so that—he realized at some point, you know, “Being the Poison King is all well and good, but I'm gonna have to up my game and find other acts, other things to do, to keep people interested.”

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And I wanna tell you what he did next.

Justin: Mm-hmm?

Sydnee: But first... I wanna tell our listeners...

Justin: Yes?

Sydnee: ... about the MaxFunDrive.

Justin: The MaxFunDrive is a special time of year where we do—we only do it once a year. And we come to you, and we say, "Hey. Do you like the stuff we make? Would you mind giving us some money for it? 'Cause that would really help us out a lot."

And we do use your contributions to, uh, pay for equipment, is one thing. Hosting fees. Um, we were able to pay uh, The Taxpayers for the use of their song, "Medicines," as the intro and outro of our program.

Uh, we pay our editor, uh, Rachel. We pay a social media team with Sarah Davis and Shannon. We pay, uh, our art designer, Sarah McKay. Like, we—we use your donations to pay a lot of really wonderful people, so you're supporting them in addition to our show. Um, which we really appreciate, and it's very meaningful to us. In addition to paying for stuff like... our kids' clothes. [wheezes] And food.

Sydnee: Absolutely. Well, and it helps—on the research end, for so out there who does research, you know sometimes articles cost money. Um, especially getting, like, original source material and texts. All that stuff costs money, and it makes it a lot easier for me to access a lot of good quality research so that the shows are always fun, but also even more informative.

Justin: And yes, yes, yes, yes, because I know it's all you care about, there are gifts. For \$5 a month, you will get, uh, a bevy, a flotilla, a cornucopia of bonus material.

Sydnee: So many hours.

Justin: Many, many hours. There's, like, 10 bonus *Sawbones* up there. Just go check 'em all out. If you've never listened to them, they're new to you! Uh, if you can pledge \$10 a month, you get the bonus content, but you're also going to get a beautiful patch of your choice, one of 35 embroidered patches, uh, designed by Maret Bondorew from Frog and Toad Press, and you can put 'em on your backpack or on your jeans.

Sydnee: Or your denim jacket.

Justin: Your denim jacket. Whatever you—whatever you want to do.

Sydnee: All those looks are in. It's so in right now.

Justin: Yeah, it's very cool. For \$20 a month, there is a MaxFun creativity pack, which has, like, modeling clay, and some cool pencils, and other stuff. Or a lovely, embroidered rocket hat. Plus, you get the patch and the bonus content. And at \$35 a month, there's a MaxFun messenger bag, and the creativity pack or hat, and the embroidered patches, and a letterpress MaxFun membership card. That comes at the \$10 level as well, I should've mentioned.

And, uh—and all the bonus content. So, there's, like, lots of fun ways to say thank you. If you are already a donor, we thank you. If you can upgrade to one of these levels, you will get all these gifts. If you can't go to the next level, we have a thing now called boosting where you can just say, "Hey. I picked up a new show," or "I had some fortune on the financial end of things. I think I'm gonna boost up a little bit."

And you can just kick in a few extra bucks a month if you're not ready to go to the next level above yours. We'll take whatever you can—whatever you can swing is amazing for us.

Sydnee: Yes. We really appreciate it. Every—every bit helps.

Justin: Uh, it does. At Maximumfun.org/join, is the—is the website to go do that. And, uh, if you you've held out, this is our last episode of the Drive, and it really sets the tone, and makes it possible for the rest of the year. This is our one chance. And it is your one chance. Because you'll probably forget in a little bit, so

do it right now. Maximumfun.org/join. Thank you sincerely, from the bottom of our hearts. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Sydnee: Thank you.

Justin: Uh, now, Sydnee, we were about to evolve...

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Harry Beano.

Sydnee: Beno.

Justin: Beno. Beno.

Sydnee: So, Justin, the na—what's the natural place to go?

Justin: It's really hard to not say Harry Beano.

Sydnee: I know. In my head, he's Harry Beano.

Justin: Beno. Harry Beno.

Sydnee: Um, so—okay. If you've been eating poison as a stage act, what's the next place you go?

Justin: Knife swallowing?

Sydnee: Mmm, you'd think so, but no. I guess you would think—

Justin: [crosstalk]

Sydnee: I don't know. Uh, you bury yourself alive.

Justin: Ahh, okay.

Sydnee: Yeah. So that was his next trick.

Justin: That makes sense, now. That tracks.

Sydnee: Yeah. That was his next trick. He, on June 28th, 1898, he was—and I should say, I don't know exactly when the first time he buried himself alive was. A lot of this is... like, there are sightings of him that pop up through, like, newspaper articles and things like that from the time period, so who knows when he first tried it.

Justin: My dad froze himself in a block of ice once.

Sydnee: Oh yeah?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But he—

Justin: To raise money for the Ronald McDonald House.

Sydnee: He did live to tell the tale.

Justin: We hope.

Sydnee: He's upstairs right now.

Justin: Unless it's a McElroy-shaped ghost.

Sydnee: I hope not, 'cause that ghost is watching our four-year-old.

Justin: [through light laughter] That's true.

Sydnee: Uh, so he—so he buried himself, June 28th, 1898, in the arena in Maple Grove—uh, go—hmm. Maple Grove Garden in Muncie. He stayed down in the coffin with no food or drink, nothing. He had a tube so he could breathe. So, he did have that.

Justin: Yeah, that's a little...

Sydnee: Is that cheating? [laughs]

Justin: Yeah, you need air? Gosh. What a wimp.

Sydnee: I don't know. So, he had a tube that would carry air from the surface, and he stayed down there eight days, and then he was dug up. That is a long time.

Justin: It's a long time! I mean, there's gonna be—it's not gonna be a good smell when that comes out. Let's say it that way.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] Mr. Beast did that, and I don't remember how long he was down there.

Justin: Not eight days, certainly!

Sydnee: I don't think he was down there for eight days.

Justin: I think he made it, like, 30 hours.

Sydnee: And he had stuff down there. He had, like, drinks and things. Anyway, uh, after a brief spell of confusion—that's what was reported, like, he came up and he seemed sort of... dazed. [laughs quietly] Makes sense.

Justin: I would think, yeah.

Sydnee: Probably all the dehydration and starvation.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, but then he ate a cracker and he seemed okay. And he won 100 bucks from the newspaper who bet him he couldn't do it.

Justin: Wow, impressive.

Sydnee: So—yeah. So, a good—a good trick. The weirdest part of this particular story, which is already a weird story—

Justin: Is he ate a lot of poison down there, but just for fun?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Just because he was hungry, and it's the only food he likes anymore.

Sydnee: [laughs] No. While he was down there—so, like I said, he had a tube for breathing, okay? Well, the other part of it is people were paying to come see him, so they could—

Justin: And drop—and drop jelly down the tube. [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: Well, they could talk to him.

Justin: Ohh, okay.

Sydnee: So they could talk to him down there and ask him how things were going, and he could prove he was still alive—[through laughter] I guess that was a big part of it was to say, like, "I'm still alive."

Justin: Although, you know, if it doesn't work out, good news is, you pop the tube out, he's down. That's—it's a—it's all good. It's very streamlined. Very efficient.

Sydnee: [laughs] Um, so he used the tube for talking to people. And one person—anybody could come—at this point, by the way, it was "Come talk to the Freak of Muncie."

Justin: [wheezes loudly] The Poison King, the Freak of Muncie.

Sydnee: Poor guy. This was—I didn't—I am not calling him this. He was known in part as the Freak of Muncie. Um, and one woman, named Grace, came every day while he was buried underground to lay flowers... on his grave.

Justin: I like that.

Sydnee: And talk through the tube to Harry, underground. And I don't know what their conversations were about, but...

Justin: "How—how is it in there today?"

"Pretty cramped. How are you?"

"Oh, above ground. You know, the usual." [laughs] "How's the weather down there?"

"I don't have weather. We've covered this, Grace!"

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: "It's a box!"

Sydnee: So, Harry and Grace—

Justin: "Oh, hold on! I'm pooping! Oh no! [voice breaks] Walk away! Oh, God, it's everywhere! Grace! [laughs quietly] Don't look at me like this, Grace! Move away from the tube!"

Sydnee: I don't think he told Grace that sort of thing. And the reason I don't think so is that after he was, you know, resurrected, um, him and Grace got married that same week.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: So, whatever—whatever transpired between the two while he was underground, it resulted in... love.

Justin: That is beautiful. That's a meet—that's a meet-cute if I ever heard one.

Sydnee: So, they would—so they traveled together for a while as he continued to try to find new—new, wilder, nastier stunts.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: To draw attention to himself.

Justin: "Harry Beno is back, and he's nastier than ever! Welcome, Muncie."

Sydnee: Um, the next—the next thing he started doing—so he was still eating poison. He was still—he buried himself alive quite a bit. That was actually a—that became a standard part of his act. Like, just at intersections and stuff, he just... buried himself there.

Anyway, he also began driving nails and shoemaker's awls into his skull... as a way to make headlines. Like, he would hammer a nail into his skull and be fine. And the crowd would go wild. Which would be—I mean, I will say, like, that would be a wild thing to see somebody do onstage.

Justin: Yeah. That would be something else.

Sydnee: Yes. And he did that. Um, now, as a result of this, he had many trips to the doctor. So these—these become part of his story at this point, is like, he'd do a stage show where he would hammer something into his head and live to tell about it, but then he'd have to go find somebody to, like, pull it back out? [laughs quietly] Um...

Justin: You'd think you would teach yourself that skill, right? Like, that is something that you would try to learn how to do.

Sydnee: I—I have—I... have accepted that over time, medical documentation has changed a great deal. Um, especially—and a lot of that is in, like, what I think of as a negative way. Everybody's so crunched for time, and the electronic medical record makes it so easy to just sort of, like, use templates and things, that a lot of the narrative art of medical documentation is gone.

Um, some people still do it. But, like, for the most part—that's how—I mean, doctors used to write, like, stories about their patients. Like—it would be like a journal of what—the encounters they'd had, and that kind of thing. That is certainly not the way a medical doc—you know, a medical documentation would be done today. Like a note that you would get generated while you were having an office visit. It would not look like they used to look.

Um, and so when I found this quote from Dr. J.F. Binnie in 1900, who saw Harry after one of his performances and dug a steel nail out of his skull [laughs quietly] for him, he said... and I just—I—gosh, I wish I could find this in a note today. You never would.

"Beno is a freak." [laughs quietly]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: "Either he is a man with nerve to suffer pain without flinching, or else his nervous system is so blunted as to be devoid of sensation."

So, this is one of the things that doctors started to theorize, is that for some reason he didn't feel pain.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: And he doesn't report, like, any of the stuff he did to himself hurting. So, I mean...

Justin: It's interesting, though. 'Cause, like, you would think... [laughs quietly] he—I mean, the poison wouldn't hurt, necessarily. Like, that doesn't really explain the poison thing, right?

Sydnee: It doesn't explain the poison. Nobody could ever explain the poison.

Justin: [quietly] If indeed the poison was real.

Sydnee: If that was real. I think—I think if you had asked most medical doctors, they would probably would say [crosstalk]—

Justin: He's eating chalk dust.

Sydnee: "He's not really eating poison, right?" But when it comes to the nails in the head, I mean, he really was hammering things into his skull and was totally fine, and was reportedly—

Justin: Which we've taken a pretty hard line here against, on the show.

Sydnee: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And reportedly not in pain, so... I mean, there's something to be said for that. That is unusual. You know, and so, I mean, did he have some sort of, like, insensitivity to pain syndrome? Perhaps. Perhaps he did. Um, he continued to do these acts and visit doctors. Because of these things, and especially the burying himself alive, he would occasionally—there would be an article written that he was dead, and it wasn't true. [laughs]

Um, he just was—you know, had buried himself again. Um, he was once buried alive at the Union Point, Georgia Corn Carnival. And, um, that led to widespread

rumors that he had died. His dea—like, people mourned his death in the newspaper and wrote obituary—but he had not died.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: He was still alive. Um, in Joplin, Missouri, once, he drove some nails into his skull and was fine, and started to go to a doctor, and then decided he'd learned his lesson about doctors, and went to a car mechanic instead to have 'em... [laughs quietly]

[pause]

Justin: [holding back laughter] Probably get—probably get a cut rate. I mean, right? It's gotta be a little cheaper than going to the doctor. Although some of these mechanics around here, let me tell you...

Sydnee: [laughs] Uh, in Joplin, Missouri, after he had driven some nails into his head, he decided, you know, the doctors aren't as good at doing this kind of thing. So he went to a mechanic instead to have the nails removed.

Justin: [laughs] Sure. [unintelligible] probably get a cut—cut rate.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Get a discount. [mumbling] Although, some of these mechanics... around here... I mean... maybe not. Some of these guys will charge you through the nose, let me tell you.

Sydnee: I—I just think it's because we don't understand anything about cars.

Justin: It's probably not a cut—actually, you know what? This time period, it's probably not car mechanics, is it? It's probably, like...

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: ... just cats that fix equipment.

Sydnee: Other... fix things, yeah. People who know nails better than doctors.

Justin: [laughs] Nobody knows nails better than doctors!

Sydnee: Um... and of course he was o—occasionally run out of places for vagrancy. Um...

Justin: Hazard of the—hazard of the trade.

Sydnee: He did—he would do, in some of these exhibitions, uh, he would—

Justin: Should've nailed himself to the ground.

Sydnee: —he would also—[laughs]

Justin: Can't haul me away if I'm nailed to the ground.

Sydnee: He would also let other people in the audience nail things into him. Like, there was one where a doctor actually, like, drove a nail into his arm while people watched, and things like that.

Justin: [hisses painfully] Fffirst, do no harm... unless it's for the LOL's, I guess? First, do no harm—

Sydnee: [simultaneously] I don't—well, I mean—

Justin: —unless you're onstage?

Sydnee: We definitely had the oath back then.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Um, but what was—

Justin: It's more of a loose suggestion than an oath.

Sydnee: But what was strange is that he would do this, and not... I guess, be in any pain. I mean, like, he would exhibit no pain. Um... but, uh—but—and in, like, not just his head. Like, this was, like, in his arm he let somebody do this. Um, yeah. Uh, and I should mention, later on, he did—there was one other poison that was eventually mentioned. Belladonna would be the beginning of his act. He would dissolve some belladonna in some water and drink it to, like, start things off before the hammers and nails came out. [laughs]

Justin: Maybe that just loosens you up a little bit.

Sydnee: So, uh, eventually, now—one thing that, as you may have predicted, all of this would drive a wedge in his marriage.

Justin: Um...

Sydnee: Um, in part because she probably was like, "I don't want you to, like..."

Justin: Die?

Sydnee: "... die?" Um, but also, she just thought he was so obsessed with fame and stardom and publicity, and that that was really all he wanted was to just do something wilder to get more attention. You know, and wasn't giving her enough attention. And then also, um, she once said that he slept all the time. [laughs quietly] Which I don't know if that's from all the poison and hammering things in your head.

Justin: [wheezy laughter] What do you—what do you—what do—

Sydnee: It makes you sleepy.

Justin: "What do you wanna do, go jogging?!"

Sydnee: Um, eventually—and, like, they would—they were sometimes reported as separated, but then also she'd pop up in hospi—like, reports that he was in the hospital and she was by his side, so I don't know. Tumultuous affair.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Anyway, uh, eventually... this is not shocking. The end would come after one performance, for poor Harry Beno, uh, in Kansas City. He was doing his act there and, uh, he had never listened to an episode of *Sawbones*.

Justin: Podcast hadn't been invented yet.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. And so he—he did indeed... he didn't drill a hole in his head, but he... punctured a hole into his head a little too far that time.

Justin: Aww.

Sydnee: Yeah. And after a course in the hospital, he did, indeed, pass away.

Justin: [quietly, with sarcasm] I assumed he'd die peacefully of old age at 90. This is wild.

Sydnee: No. He died from hammering a... an awl into his head.

Justin: Ah.

Sydnee: Yes. Um, the—one of the newspaper headlines was: "Man with Sponge Head Passes Away."

Justin: Tasteful. [wheezes loudly]

Sydnee: Uh, they called him Be—

Justin: [crosstalk]

Sydnee: —Beno the Wonder. Beno the Wonder has died.

Justin: You think that's what they'll say when Mr. SquarePants dies? [pause] "Man with Sponge Head Passes Away"?

Sydnee: Why would SpongeBob have to die? [laughs]

Justin: Why did SpongeBob have to die? I ask myself—

Sydnee: [through laughter] No! I mean, why would—why—[unintelligible]

Justin: [simultaneously] I ask myself that every day, Syd.

Sydnee: Like, we could just, like...

Justin: 'Cause he's mortal, honey. I'm sorry to be the one to break it to you.

Sydnee: No, he's—but he's fictional. We could just keep him alive forever. There's no need to kill him off.

Justin: Yeah, but eventually the story has to move forward. You know what I mean?

Sydnee: [laughs] I don't think the story of *SpongeBob* needs to move forward. Are they even making *SpongeBob* anymore?

Justin: Probably, yeah.

Sydnee: Um... I will say, after he died, of course, doctors wanted to examine him to try to figure it out. And, like, they couldn't find anything specific that would've explained the poisons. Um, but they did notice that his skull was thicker than the average human's, at least based on their measurements at the time, so maybe that was why he was able to drill—like, hammer so many things into his skull without harming himself, until he finally took it too far. Um, but they did note that. And he did have multiple holes in his skull. So, like, he was doing it. That wasn't a trick. Who knows about the poison, but that was not a trick.

Um, the *Minneapolis Journal* wrote after he died: "Many a man has said that if he could see Beno puncture his head with an awl, he would not take a ticket to a public hanging. Surely a life like this has not been lived in vain."

Justin: I don't exactly understand all the ramifications of that statement, but God bless ya, Beno!

Sydnee: I don't know if—if, like, at the time it was a big problem that everybody wanted to see public hangings, and so there was a, like... maybe—

Justin: A kinder, gentler version of that was watching Beno put holes in his head.

Sydnee: Well, maybe don't do public hangings!

Justin: That's another option.

Sydnee: Instead of, like, trying to decrease demand for tickets to public hangings. [sighs] Anyway. Um, I just want to note, in addition to—Roman sent me some original articles and, you know, that was a great jumping off point. Because there are—there are some really fun newspaper articles from the time period that you can read, uh, about Harry Beno. But there is also a chapter in a book called *Wicked Muncie* by Keith Roysdon and Douglas Walker, and that gave

me a lot more context for Harry Beno's life, 'cause the newspaper articles are little snapshots, but that sort of gave me a better summary.

Um, and it has a lot of other wild stories about Muncie!

Justin: Who knew?

Sydnee: So, if you wanna know about... some weird stuff that's happened—

Justin: In Muncie.

Sydnee: —in Muncie through the years... every—I think a lot of towns have that sort of—like, you could do the same about Huntington. You could collect a number of wild stories about the history of Huntington. So, if that's the kind of thing that floats your boat, at least this chapter was very enjoyable.

Justin: Thank you so much for listening to our podcast, and thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song, "Medicines," as the intro and outro of our program. And I want to make one last pitch. This is our last plea to you of MaxFunDrive. If you haven't done it yet, please. We have a very ambitious goal that is seeming very far away right now, but we believe in you.

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Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Some—some of it's great. I'm hit and miss, but...

Sydnee: Well, and you're listening, so you must think it's at least, you know...

Justin: Passable.

Sydnee: ... okay. Thank you.

Justin: Thank you. Thank you to you for listening. Be sure to join us again next time for *Sawbones*. 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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