Sawbones 424: Rufus Weaver and Harriet Cole

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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, everyone and welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And Sydnee, it occurs to me that I don't know what our episode is about. Normally, I would do a sort of, like, charming, dare I say, I mean, can I say, folksy? Intro that sort of, like, obliquely leads into your topic.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: I don't know what it is, though. It occurs to me.

Sydnee: Um, well, it occurs to me that you don't listen very closely because I ran this topic by you two days ago and said, "Do you think this would be a good idea?"

Justin: We're unpacking this here, is this what you're saying? We're going to unpack this here, right now?

Sydnee: But the problem is we were watching Love Island, and you can't pay attention to me when all those attractive British people are falling in love.

Justin: Yeah, falling in love. Falling out of love.

Sydnee: Having good chat.

Justin: Good chat...

Sydnee: Good banter, I mean, the bants.

Justin: The bants, good bants. I got a case of the bants in middle school. Oh, it was rough. It was a rough couple of weeks.

Sydnee: Good craic?

Justin: Not after the bants, no, actually—

Sydnee: No, not that— [laughs]

Justin: [crosstalk] ...quite some time.

Sydnee: Not that kind of crack, you know, the one with the I in there. I did mention— It's okay. You don't have to know anything about it. You know what? Maybe that's appropriate because this is a bit of a mystery.

Justin: Ooh.

Sydnee: A bit of a mystery. And I will say. I think that while the topic is more just about, like, this sort of historical mystery that is medical— that is also medical in nature. It does get into some slightly heavier things to think about in terms of what we know about history and who we know about and whose stories get told and whose voices are easily found in the annals of history and whose voices aren't.

It's not— I don't preface this to say that this is like a depressing episode, but we do get into— There are some heavier things to talk about. So I'm just letting you know that.

Justin: Okay, thank you. I appreciate that. May I be excused?

Sydnee: No, you can't.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Well, I think it's important when we're talking about these topics to remember people, specifically, in this case, black women, who get left out of historical narratives because they're being written and told by other people, largely white men.

Justin: Now I'm the guy who has to not hear the story about marginalized people. Now you've made me into the cat. Thank you, Sydnee.

Sydnee: I usually try to warn you not to make a bunch of jokes if I'm going to talk about something a little heavier.

Justin: Maybe you did warn me and it was during Love Island, so it's impossible to say.

Sydnee: But it's a mystery. And then there also are some heavier— There we go. That's my prefacing for it. I just like to let people know what they're in for.

Justin: I appreciate that.

Sydnee: Um... Thank you to Zach, who recommended this topic. I was not familiar with it, and I'm really excited that I've learned about it. It's the story of Rufus Weaver and Harriet Cole. So, we've talked about the controversy surrounding dissections, anatomical dissections, on this show before. Do you remember the doctors' riot?

Justin: Yes, I do remember that. We had a bit of a kerfuffle...

Sydnee: Kerfuffle.

Justin: Doctors were, uh, doing autopsies, and people thought it was evil.

Sydnee: Autopsies, not really— Dissections.

Justin: Dissections, yeah.

Sydnee: Because an autopsy would be for the purpose of, let's find out what happened to them, which you could do in a dissection. But I think the problem is that the dissection does not serve in any way the person who has, you know, whose body is being dissected.

Justin: That's true.

Sydnee: And it does not necessarily serve the family or loved ones. An autopsy could serve that purpose, right? Providing answers and closure. I think the problem with dissection throughout history has been it serves more our general medical understanding, it furthers our knowledge. It helps the students and the doctors and all the people involved. And that's a more, you know, abstract concept and it's hard when it's a person you loved to really care about those things.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: So, anyway, we've talked about the fact that it used to be considered immoral and it was also illegal to dissect a corpse for learning purposes, which led to, um... unsavory extreme measures being taken. So before it was legal anywhere, a popular thing to do was grave rob.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And we've talked about that. We've talked about grave robbers. We've talked about the ways people would go about it.

Justin: Mm-hmm. Different techniques.

Sydnee: Sometimes you would hire somebody to do it. Sometimes the medical students would go rob graves or the doctors themselves, the anatomists, whoever. And this also led to a number of ways that families would try to protect the graves of their loved ones to prevent them from being stolen. Again, there're like 17 riots because of all this stuff.

Justin: Yeah, people were really mad about it.

Sydnee: There were riots all over the world over— But that's terrible. You shouldn't grave rob, right? Like, that's abhorrent. There's no excuse for that.

Justin: I agree. I agree.

Sydnee: And specifically, this tended to target families who did not have means, you know? The thought was, let's try to rob the graves of people who either won't be missed or who won't have the resources to do anything about it.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And so this usually led to robbing the graves of either black people or poor white people. And again, being dissected at this point in history, in the 19th century, was seen as sacrilegious, disrespectful. Like, you would not— It was a big deal, okay?

So eventually the law changed, and it allowed for certain circumstances for dissection. There were specifically, like, criminals who were put to death could be dissected. For a while people who died by suicide could be someone who could be— Somebody whose body wasn't claimed.

There were a variety of reasons why it was legal, but only under these circumstances, before we got to the situation today where we understand that donating your body is a willful act. You can decide it. You can decide ahead of time and you can do so in a manner that would be respectful of you and your family and all that stuff, right?

So with that all in mind— and I think it's just important to keep that sort of progression in mind because this is the story of a particular dissection that was performed and the person who we think is the subject of this dissection.

Justin: Oh, wow.

Sydnee: And we are not sure, because there are a lot of questions, maybe as many questions as answers in this story. So first of all, let's talk about the anatomist. His name was Dr. Rufus Weaver. He was born in 1841 in

Gettysburg and he became a doctor in 1865 at the Pennsylvania Medical College.

Now, he studied a couple of different places and he was about to pursue his major career where he would end up working the rest of his life as the chief anatomist at the Hanuman Medical College which is now Drexel University College of Medicine. But there was a tragedy in his life that occurred right as he had gotten this new position. His father died.

So his father, Samuel Weaver, died suddenly. There was an accident, some sort of railroad accident. And beyond obviously the loss, he was also presented with this new task. His father, prior to his death had been contracted by the Ladies Memorial Association to identify and remove the bodies of South Carolina soldiers from the fields at Gettysburg.

So, there were all these remains from the battle outside. No one knew who was who. And the idea was Samuel Weaver was going to go by the task of figuring out who everyone was and repatriating these bodies.

Justin: Okay. Not for science. This is for honorable burial.

Sydnee: Just so families can have their— Yes, exactly. So anyway, because his father passed away, the son stepped in to do this work. And this is sort of like the first way he makes a name for himself. Is that, like, it suits him well. Anatomy is his thing. He is not bothered, as many may be, by such a task.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: I mean, you can imagine that's a hard thing.

Justin: Strong stomach.

Sydnee: Right. And I would say probably like a very pragmatic kind of person to do that too. Not necessarily emotionally affected by it either.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And so he goes about this work starting in 1871 and he went on to identify the remains of over 3000 soldiers.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: Which again, using the forensic methods of the time must have been quite a feat. So after this, he settles into Hanuman to do what he really wanted to do. The thing he loved most: dissect things.

Justin: Dissect things.

Sydnee: Yes. He wanted to dissect things. At this time...

Justin: Repatriating bodies was just a side hustle. His real passion, dissecting bodies.

Sydnee: I mean, yes.

Justin: Okay, good.

Sydnee: That was his real passion. Towards the end of the 1800s, we are just seeing, like around this time, the laws are changing to allow for dissection at all, right? Like, we're moving into a time where you could dissect, again, the bodies of criminals or something.

But dissection is still controversial. It's still something that the average person in the public would not want to donate their body for or their loved ones. That was still sort of its view by the public. And so— And because the idea that it was legal at all was still newish, there weren't a lot of what we call prosections available.

Justin: Meaning?

Sydnee: Meaning, like, models that had been dissected of, like, maybe a specific part of the human body and preserved and displayed.

Justin: So sort of like—

Sydnee: So you could look at them.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Yeah. Because there are ways of preserving— We've been to the bodies exhibit. There are ways of preserving once you've done a dissection, preserve it so other people can look at it and study it. There weren't a ton of those available and they are hard, sometimes, to create depending on what you're doing. I've worked— Actually, I did an elective where I helped create a prosection.

Justin: Oh, how was that?

Sydnee: Um. Will it upset you if I tell you that I enjoyed the work?

Justin: No, it will nothing me because I know you and have known you for over two decades now. I am completely unsurprised. My opinion of you has not changed one iota, you'll be happy to hear.

Sydnee: [laughs] It is important to— Especially at the time. Even now, but especially at the time, it was important to have real models of what things looked like inside the human body because we didn't have an easy way of looking inside the human body at this point, right? There are a lot more methods of seeing without actually causing death.

But at the time, if you want to look inside somebody's body, that was a dangerous prospect. So creating these prosections was one of the things that he really wanted to do, was dissect things. And he was in charge of the Anatomical Museum, which a lot of people had sort of taken the view up until now that the Anatomical Museum is full of sort of curiosities that you can come in and go, "Ooh."

Justin: More of a sideshow atmosphere.

Sydnee: And he really wanted it to be about learning. He really wanted to create a lot of things and also store things like, I don't know, like a kidney stone. So not just dissections, but things from the human body in a way that would help further the education of students and doctors. Okay?

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So he sets about filling the Anatomical Museum with bones and stones and organs and tumors and limbs. And there's lots of articles written about him, like talking about the beauty of different organs. I can see where... [laughs]

Justin: You and this dude should have hung out.

Sydnee: Well, I don't know. It's like a lot of historical figures. It's questionable sometimes. He wasn't much for documentation. I do, I empathize with that deeply. I'm not much for documentation.

Justin: You don't like to document things.

Sydnee: No, I don't like to write things down. I like to do things. I like to do things. But I am just a family doctor. No scribes for us. So we do have to write things down.

Justin: You should mention that a scribe is, like, someone who writes down your notes and stuff, right?

Sydnee: Yes. A scribe—

Justin: Because it sounds very old timey. "What was that last cut you did? Oh, Doctor McElroy, you do have a way with a scalpel. One moment, let me write all this down."

Sydnee: It is important—

Justin: "Oh, was that bon mot you just—"

Sydnee: [laughs] It is imperative in medicine that you document, not as sometimes you will be told, for billing purposes, but because it's important to communicate to future you as well as other medical professionals what you did and what you found and what you saw and what your patient told you.

So documentation is very important. However, it is also, um, it takes up a lot of time. And now that it's on the computer, for some of us, it can take up even more time. And so some medical specialties and maybe some family doctors out there too, just not me, are provided with a scribe, which is someone who sits in the room with you while you see patients and does your notes, records what's happening so that you can focus on doing it.

That would be delightful for me because I like doing things and I love talking to people and I love listening to people. I don't like writing things down. He didn't either. He didn't write much down. So a lot of— And it's important to know that because a lot of the accounts of like this whole thing are from other people. Because he didn't write it down.

Other people wrote about how he did the work he did. He just liked to do the work. And it's very delicate work, especially at this time. There wasn't an easy playbook for a lot of the stuff he did. There were manuals, I don't want to say that nobody had done this before.

There were manuals on dissection, of course, and there were methods that were known, but you had to approach everything with a little bit of maybe there's a better tool, maybe there's a better preservative, maybe there's something I hadn't thought of. You know, there were different substances to inject into, like veins or arteries, to sort of open them up, make them appear bigger so that you could see them more easily.

So, like, people were kind of trying different things out with like oil and lead and wax and resin and all these different things to try to find the best way to do this. And it would take a lot of time and a very delicate hand so that you didn't damage anything...

Justin: Of course, yeah.

Sydnee: ... as you're doing it. So the problem is he was doing all these different dissections, but there was one that he really wanted to do that he couldn't find a good model or information on how to do. So that was one thing he was looking for, right? Like, how have other people approached

this? There was no great anatomical dissection of the human nervous system.

Justin: Oh, that's tricky, because that's really, like, thin and there's lots of it.

Sydnee: Exactly. So...

Justin: You ever see the nervous system at one of those bodies exhibits? Holy crap, it's wild.

Sydnee: They're small.

Justin: They are.

Sydnee: They're delicate. They're hard to spot sometimes. I know that sounds weird, but as someone who took an anatomy class and part of my tests were to go in and look at labeled structures and write down, like, what's number one? What's number two? Sometimes a nerve is hard to find.

Justin: What's it look like?

Sydnee: Generally these thin, white, creamy whiteish, or whiteish-grayish, maybe cordlike, but they're very delicate. Like, some are thicker. It depends on what nerves you're talking about. Some nerves are thicker, almost like an old fashioned telephone cord, like with a corded telephone when you plug into the wall.

Justin: Let's be honest about nerves.

Sydnee: Some are really teeny.

Justin: Let's be honest about nerves. These things are probably the most faulty thing in the human body, which is incredible and immaculately designed. But nerves are the thing where, like yeah, I've— Actually imagine, "I perfected the design of the human body."

"Oh, really? Everything?"

"Yes. There's one issue that if you sit weird for, like, ten minutes, your legs don't work anymore for, like, another five minutes after that." That's one— Oh, and they hurt and tingle. It's just one bad thing about nerves. And we did invent one thing where if someone pinches you the right way, you'll blackout. But nerves are pretty good other than that.

Sydnee: And also, if you hit this one—

Justin: Maybe it's a Star Trek thing.

Sydnee: Uh... I mean, no, it's not really the— There are ways.

Justin: You know the Vulcan nerve pinch, and you've never taught me?

Sydnee: Also, like, if you hit your elbow, it will hurt so bad.

Justin: Yeah, the funny bone, right? Is that your funny bone?

Sydnee: Yeah. Like, you're really hitting a nerve there. Anyway, so, um, he couldn't find a good model of that because it's really hard to do. It's very fragile, very tedious. You can break them very easily while you're dissecting. I can attest to that. And he even toured Europe looking for one. Like, where are some examples—

Justin: "Someone, please!"

Sydnee: He couldn't find any great examples of, like, complete dissections.

Justin: He— You know what? He should have tried Five Below or Michael's. A lot of times if I can't find something, I'll check one of those. So he should have tried Five Below.

Sydnee: You think they would have had a complete dissection of the human nervous system?

Justin: You'd be surprised.

Sydnee: And I will say, like, what he was setting out to do was the cerebral spinal nervous system. Some of the nerves in our human bodies are so small, this would be impossible. So it's that specific part of the nervous system.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So anyway, he decided he had to do it. And his colleagues even thought he was like, this is ridiculous. They were mad about it. Why would you do this? This is going to waste time and energy. You're going to harm your eyes looking for these tiny things.

Justin: "Doug is not even sure they exist."

"I'm sticking by that!"

Sydnee: However, he went on to do it, and I want to tell you how he accomplished it. But first, we got to go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go!

[ad break]

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[laughter]

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[ad break ends]

Justin: All right, so how did this cat get a nervous system?

Sydnee: Okay, so in 1888, let me just tell you this part, and then we'll talk about how did he obtain this. In 1888, he set about it anyway. He had obtained a cadaver.

Justin: Wink.

Sydnee: He worked for— It was around six solid months and, like, reportedly ten-hour days. And again, all of this is second hand and sometimes much later information because he didn't always write a lot of things down. But, like, long days for months and months on end, to meticulously dissect out the entire cerebral spinal nervous system. He did— It was noted by him that it was actually even harder to mount it than it was to dissect it out— which I would highly advise as I'm talking about this, if you Google or, if you search you don't have to use Google. You can use whatever search engine you want.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: What are some of your other favorites, Syd?

Sydnee: Um... Ask Jeeves?

Justin: [laugh] I was hoping you'd say Ask Jeeves.

Sydnee: Dogpile?

Justin: Certainly not Dogpile! Lycos?

Sydnee: If you search for Harriet Cole nervous system, or if you look up Rufus Weaver nervous system, any of these, you will easily find that Harriet, the Harriet Cole is usually what it's named. You can look at this dissection and you can see why it would have been very difficult to mount as well as perform. Are you looking at it?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah, I can tell you're looking at it. Okay, so he was celebrated once this was done, it was such a huge accomplishment. Nobody had done it at that point. Even to this day, I will say people have tried to reproduce this perfectly, and even the ones that do the same thing or come pretty close have said they have no idea how he accomplished it. So it was written about, it was touted, it was toured, it went to the World's Fair.

Justin: It's a big achievement.

Sydnee: It was a big achievement. It was restored in 1960. There was another big article in Life and stuff about it at the time after it was restored, and it still hangs in the hall at Drexel's Queen Lane campus on display for anybody who wants to come look at it, and many people do.

So what is the other part of the story? So we have this story, and that's what, you know, initially, when you read, like, accounts of Harriet, we will call— That is what they named the actual object excel, like the framed— This is Harriet.

Justin: If you're reading mystery books a lot, you like a little Agatha Christie or Hercule Poirot books— Not or, Hercule Poirot's a Christie character, but there's like a hanging clue or like a thing about the story where it's like, "Well, wait a minute. What about this?" And I feel like that's the identity of the cadaver. Where did this body come from?

Sydnee: Where did Harriet come from?

Justin: Where did Harriet come from?

Sydnee: Exactly. And I think that's the thing that it's really intriguing when historians take the time to go back and find that history. And certainly there are many who are doing this, not just the three who I will mention, who have— I have followed a lot of the work they've done to sort of piece together this other part of the narrative.

Elena McNofton, Matt Herbison, and Brandon Zimmerman, who are three researchers, historians. Two of them had worked at Drexel initially, which is sort of how they came in contact with it. I think their jobs have changed, but this is a mystery that all three have been involved in trying to solve, trying to find some sort of primary sources or something from that time period that might help them unlock. So we know that now we use the name Harriet to describe this person. Again, it's sort of become like it's the name of the dissection, as well as the name of perhaps the person.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: The initial work, when it was displayed and taken to the World's Fair and all that, they didn't talk at all about that. There was just no mention in those early records of who this might— Whose brain is this? Whose eyes are these? There was just no mention of any of that.

They first time they even— All they talk about is Weaver. The first time they even mentioned that there was someone is in 1902, so years after it was performed, 1888 is when it was done. And they mentioned someone named Henrietta and say this was a 35-year-old person named Henrietta who the nerves belong to.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And that's about it.

Justin: All right.

Sydnee: Not much else. In 1916, there's another article, and in this they do name her, but again, her name changes.

Justin: To?

Sydnee: Harriet Cole.

Justin: Well, that's weird, because that's the name of the dissection.

Sydnee: Well, that's why we named it that.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: But it is not clear in 1916 where this name came from. Where did the person who is talking about it, where did they get it—

Justin: We're talking about, like, some, what, 20 years after the dissection originally? Huh.

Sydnee: Yeah, longer.

Justin: Yeah. I'm not a—

Sydnee: So anyway! And still, if you read these early descriptions, there's a sort of implication that whoever this person is, Harriet Cole, in this 1916 example, she was elevated to greatness by Weaver. It doesn't really matter because the important part of her life...

Justin: Her humdrum everyday life, she got the chance of a— I was going to say lifetime, but that's not technically accurate. She was brought to cultural relevance.

Sydnee: The important thing about her is this. And it's sort of, like, the way it's worded is almost like this greatness was thrust upon her.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Sort of insinuating that it wasn't her choice. Now, all that being said, in 1960, when they did the restoration of the work, that is where you see the myth sort of cemented and the story changed somewhat. So in Life magazine, they talk about the guy who's restoring and they talk about Rufus Weaver and they talk about the work and Drexel and all that, but they also talk about a 35-year-old black woman named Harriet Cole who worked at the college as a housekeeper. She cleaned the floors.

And the way they talk about her is that she was fascinated. She would peek around the corners to look at dissections and listen in on anatomy lectures and was very intrigued by all of this. So much so that she had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, she knew that she was very sick and that there was a chance she could die, and so she went to Rufus Weaver and told him that she would like to donate her body to him upon death so that he could create one of these dissections using her body. And this is really important to the story at this point because it's a gift, then.

It is a noble act for science, which is how we view, again, giving your body to science today is viewed as something deeply noble and honorable and to

be respected. And so this is how it was cast. The problem is we don't actually have any record to say that that is true.

So, these three researchers that I've mentioned have gone back and looked through and it's really interesting because if you go to the Drexel University Legacy Center archives and special collections, you can go and look at all this online. They will walk you through what they know about Harriet, which is always in quotes because we don't know for sure if it was Harriet, and what they think at this point.

So, we know that there was someone named Harriet Cole who lived in Philadelphia in the 1880s. Okay? They have gone back to historical records and they found that there was this woman that existed. She was a domestic worker.

Justin: Okay?

Sydnee: We know that. So she would have cleaned. We know that. And at the time of her death in 1888, which was recorded as being from tuberculosis. So again, this all sort of fits that her body was, her final resting place was at the Hanuman Medical College, which would again— and I know that seems like why would her final resting place be at a college? Well, that is the way you would have worded it at the time. If someone did have their body… well, we won't say donated. If someone's body was unclaimed and therefore available for dissection.

Justin: I understand.

Sydnee: Because that's the other thing at the time. If you died and nobody claimed your remains, you could be, by authorities, given to an anatomist, given to a medical school. Okay? That was okay at the time. So we have this sort of, like, this fits perfectly. Right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: This makes a lot of sense. Okay. We know that a woman fitting this description existed at this time. We don't know that she worked at the

college, but we know she did do the work that we're saying that Harriet did. We know that her body did end up there.

So this all seems to fit. She died of tuberculosis. She was the right age. All of this would make sense. The part of it, though, that doesn't make sense is that at this point in 1888, almost no one donated their bodies to science. Almost no one donated their bodies for dissection.

Justin: So it wouldn't necessarily have occurred to her, like, I should do this because it was so uncommon.

Sydnee: It was incredibly uncommon. It was still something that was often feared by the general public, because even just the idea that would happen to you, there was a lot of sort of like spiritual concerns over what that would mean for your soul if that happened to your body. And so, it would not have at all been common.

Moreover, the only people who did, like if you go back, not so much necessarily in 1888, but into the years following that, in the early 1900s. If you go back and look at the kind of people who did intentionally donate their body to be dissected, knowing that that was what was going to happen. If you look at people who did that they were almost without fail wealthy white men.

Justin: Mm. The legacy.

Sydnee: Very commonly, men who worked in medical science fields.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And even more commonly, people who believed in phrenology.

Justin: Mm. Okay.

Sydnee: Because they wanted you to look at their amazing brains.

Justin: [laughs] I love it. "You got to get a look at this thing. It's amazing."

Sydnee: This is so— The toxic masculinity of like, I need you to see how awesome my brain is. Like, that's fine. You can learn or whatever. I just want you to see how great my brain is.

Justin: I'm the guy that invented paper clips. So, yeah, I think you want to get up there and take a look around because what is going on with this thing?

Sydnee: So it's just… it is very suspect.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: I'm not saying it's impossible. All things are possible.

Justin: You're not not saying it's impossible.

Sydnee: I'm just saying it is incredibly suspect to believe that, um, let's say that the Harriet Cole we found record of existing is the Harriet Cole whose body Rufus Weaver dissected and created this display of the human nervous system. Let's say it is the same person.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: The idea that she did that willingly, that she donated her body to do so, is very difficult to digest. We have found no record of that donation. We have found no proof that she worked there. So those are both problems. But I think what it highlights is that the focus in this story initially was just on him. And this allowed this giant hole in history to happen where because no one was keeping account of her, of who she was.

And I can't even attest for certain. I keep saying her. I don't know for sure that it's a woman. You can't do by the way, I thought about this. Can you, like, test the DNA? Can we go in? Because there's biological material in there. Because of the lead paint and things that were used to preserve it, the DNA would be so degraded, it would be very difficult to find anything there, and you might destroy it.

And so no one really has an interest in paying for that or even thinking there'd be anything to find, right? Because even if you did figure out it's a woman, then what?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I don't know. That doesn't help us that much. So her story could have been told if it had been preserved alongside his, right? You need that account because if you let all that time elapse before you go back and consider who that was, you missed the opportunity. Is there a record where she was employed by the college? We don't know. We can't find it.

Is there a record of her donation, of any record of them interacting? Did we ask him? Did anybody say, did you know Harriet Cole? What's her name? Did anybody ask? Was there interest? And I think that it's really amazing and cool when you see historians doing this kind of work because informing us about the past and who was left out of it hopefully inspires us to stop leaving people out in the history that we're creating today and to make sure that everyone's voices and everyone's accounts and everyone's perspective is represented in the histories that people will read 100 years from now.

I found it a very, um... I mean, it's a sad mystery. It's, you know. It's sad to think how often, especially black women, are left out of the narrative of history. And hopefully by recognizing that and learning from that, we do better, right? We fix that and make sure that that's not the truth in the future.

So I would encourage you, if you're interested in that, like I said, the three historians I mentioned have done a ton of work, and you can go to the Drexel archives and read about all the work they've done to try to piece this together, to try to tell us more about Harriet Cole, who was she?

And let’s know her for more than just this amazing gift that students were given for years. Let's recognize who she was and recognize if maybe it wasn't a gift and reckon with that.

Justin: Well, thank you, Sydnee. Thank you for sharing that story with us. And thanks to you for listening. I sure appreciate you being here. Thanks to

the Taxpayers for use of their song Medicines as the intro and outro of our program. And thank you to you for listening. Hope you enjoyed yourself and I hope you'll 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]