

Sawbones Ep 016: Patent Medicines

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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 song Medicines by The Taxpayers plays]

Justin:

Hello, everybody. Welcome to *Sawbones*. It's a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm, uh, I'm your host, [yawns] Justin McElroy. One of them. Co-host. And... whatever.

Sydnee:

Uh, I'm Sydnee McElroy, and, uh, Justin, are you okay?

Justin:

Yeah. [yawns]

Sydnee:

You sound really tired.

Justin:

No, sweetheart. I'm really okay. Yeah, I'm a little tired.

Sydnee:

I mean, like, you're yawning a lot. Like, right into the microphone, too.

Justin:

Well, we've been, um, we've been-

Sydnee:

It's almost comical.

Justin:

... we've been doing... almost comical. [laughs] Sawbones: Almost Comical.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Uh-

Sydnee:

That's our new tag.

Justin:

We've been doing a... our- our musical that we're directing. It's opening, uh, tonight, uh, in Huntington, "It's A Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman," and we've been working very hard on it. And, uh, many tickets still available. Lots of great seats, so come on out to the new Huntington High School-

Sydnee:

Shameless plug.

Justin:

... Huntington, West Virginia, at First Stage Theatre.

Sydnee:

Home of: us.

Justin:

Home of us. Mi-

Sydnee:

That's their tagline.

Justin:

You know Michael Cerveris? He's- he's from Huntington. Love him as the Observer in Fringe. Boom! Huntington.

Sydnee:

So, you- you were saying how tired you were.

Justin:

Brad Dourif?

Sydnee:

Okay, no, go back to-

Justin:

Voice of Chucky?

Sydnee:

Okay, you-

Justin:

Huntington.

Sydnee:

... you're supposed to talk about how tired you are now.

Justin:

Billy Crystal... went to school in Huntington for, like, a year.

Sydnee:

Jennifer Garner? Well, that was Charleston.

Justin:

That's Charleston. But anyway-

Sydnee:

But close.

Justin:

So... okay-

Sydnee:

45 minutes down the road.

Justin:

... all right... okay, so, I'm tired. Ugh, I'm tired. I don't know, just run-down. You got anything in the old doctor bag for the, for the J-Man?

Sydnee:

Well, it's funny you should mention that because, um-

Justin:

Almost funny.

Sydnee:

Almost funny. Uh, because I've been, uh, using something myself that, uh, you know, it's... I- I would call it off-label use.

Justin:

O- okay, I'm into it, off-label.

Sydnee:

Um, but, uh, maybe you'd like to try some Kickapoo Indian Sagwa.

Justin:

Mmm, is that like Kickapoo Joy Juice from, uh, Li'l Abner?

Sydnee:

It's funny you should mention that, Justin, because that's exactly where that term comes from.

Justin:

Oh, right on! Uh-

Sydnee:

Uh, but it's- it's a real great pick-me-up! Or at least that's what it says on the bottle. It's also good for... well, pretty much anything. Headaches, leg amputations, tuberculosis...

Justin:

Well, if it says it on the bottle, I'm sure it's true.

Sydnee:

... broken arms...

Justin:

Uh-oh.

Sydnee:

... sleep...

Justin:

Uh-oh, that's a lot of things that it's good for.

Sydnee:

... female complaints...

Justin:

Female complaints. Um, Sydnee, that does not sound real to me. I'm not a medical physician, but that- that sounds made-up.

Sydnee:

Well, it is, Justin. It's... it falls into the category of what we commonly refer to as "patent medicines."

Justin:

Patent medicines. Now, these are medicines that have been taken before the patent office in, uh, uh, a country, and then given approval, I guess, for- for their use by a government body?

Sydnee:

Nope! Not at all.

Justin:

Not even close.

Sydnee:

Not in the slightest.

Justin:

Gave it my best.

Sydnee:

It's a total misnomer.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Patent medicines are not really patented. They're just trademarked. So, this is the name we came up for for this thing. You can't, you can't call your thing this because it's our thing.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So, that's it. The... patents weren't actually a thing, at least in the US, until 1925, and patent medicines in the US were around way before 1925.

Sydnee:

The phrase actually, um, comes from, uh, the late 17th century when they were marketing medical elixirs. So, basically, if you came up with some kind of medicine, uh, that was helpful for something, and you wanted to sell it to everybody, uh, you would go take it to, you know, your local royal, whoever-

Justin:

So, whatever king or prince is running around.

Sydnee:

Right, exactly. You-

Justin:

Duke, duchess...

Sydnee:

Whoever. Viceroy... is that a... that's a royal, right?

Justin:

Sure! Why not?

Sydnee:

Is that a butterfly?

Justin:

Both. It's both.

Sydnee:

Learning things everyday. So, you would take it to your local viceroy and, uh, you know, give it to him. Be like, "This is great for that knee pain or whatever that you're having. Put this on your hemorrhoid." And then they would use it, and if they liked it and they thought it really did work, sometimes they would issue you a letter patent, which basically said, "You

can use my name in all of your advertising. You can go around and say, 'The king of Sweden loves, you know, Joe's Foot Powder.'"

Justin:

Joe's Foot Powder. Get it today!

Sydnee:

Great for foot problems. And hemorrhoids, apparently.

Justin:

And women problems.

Sydnee:

And women problems. Um, it actually originally was called nostrum remedium, from the Latin for "our remedy," so it was kind of-

Justin:

Not catchy enough.

Sydnee:

No. No, "patent medicines" was much better. So, you know, actually patenting the medicines would have meant that they had to disclose the ingredients. And, obviously, as you're going to find out, nobody wanted to tell anybody what was in this stuff.

Justin:

It's not good.

Sydnee:

No, it wasn't good. Um, but the- the idea was that if you could, you know, get the endorsement of- of some kind of royal person, somebody famous, and then tell everybody that they liked it, then you could convince everybody to use whatever your medicine was.

Justin:

So, Syd, if- if this was made up and they didn't have a lot of evidence to fall back on, how are they, how are they getting these into the hands of- of the people?

Sydnee:

Well, it's- it's really interesting because the history of patent medicines as you kind of dig in to it, you're really kind of studying the history of advertising-

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

... especially in the US. I think this is something you would be interested in, Justin.

Justin:

I love advertising. I'm very susceptible to it.

Sydnee:

Yeah, absolutely. If you ever want to sell anything, even if you just wanna prove that you can sell it to one person, try out Justin. And if you can, if you can attach adjectives to that product-

Justin:

Oh, man.

Sydnee:

... like "cheesy," "flaky," "crunchy," perhaps "new," or-

Justin:

I'm ba-

Sydnee:

... um-

Justin:

... I'm basically like a-

Sydnee:

... "improved"-

Justin:

... I'm basically like the farmers in Charlotte's Web. Just- just any word up there and I'm gonna take your word for it.

Sydnee:

[laughs] "Some pumpkin!"

Justin:

"Some pumpkin... spice latte."

Sydnee:

Justin's gonna buy that pumpkin.

Justin:

Yup.

Sydnee:

Or- or that pumpkin spice latte. [laughs] It's-

Justin:

Whatever. Yeah, whatever you got.

Sydnee:

It's whatever, it doesn't matter. Um, the... but when it came to patent medicines, it really initially did kind of mirror the, um, advent of, like, empiric, um, science and, like, the scientific method, seeking to find if there were, you know, ways to prove that something worked.

Sydnee:

So, you know, you would try something out, like, "I have this compound. I think it works for headaches." And so, you'd give it to a lot of people, and you'd realize that it did work for headaches. And so, there was some science initially.

Sydnee:

But at the time, we didn't... we had so many disease and so many problems, we didn't have enough of these medicines that actually worked for all of those different problems, right?

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So, you know this thing works for headaches. Okay, now you have, you know, cholera. Well, what else are you gonna try? You might as well try that thing that worked for headaches.

Justin:

Why not? It works-

Sydnee:

What else do you have?

Justin:

We know it does something in there.

Sydnee:

Right. We know it does something, so, let's keep trying it. And compared to the other, like, medical doctrines of the time, it kind of made sense, I mean, because we were talking about either, like, you know, occultism, or what they used to call the Doctrine of Signatures. I think this is pretty funny.

Justin:

Hit me.

Sydnee:

So, this was the concept of- of, uh, medical practice that nature would provide you with clues as to what could help you with different ailments.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So, for instance, this is the- the example I found: let's say you have a skull fracture.

Justin:

I do.

Sydnee:

You do?

Justin:

I meant to tell you earlier, actually, before we started, uh...

Sydnee:

Well, looks like I'm gonna have to go this one alone-

Justin:

Hey, I'm back. Okay-

Sydnee:

Oh!

Justin:

... whoo, all right.

Sydnee:

Medical miracle.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

You know what you must've done?

Justin:

What must I have done?

Sydnee:

You must have eaten some of this powdered walnut shell.

Justin:

That's exactly it! I had some powdered walnut shell lying around, uh, I thought it was blow, [laughs] thought it was cocaine, which I usually use to pick me back up after a- a down, a downturn-

Sydnee:

As a disclaimer, Justin doesn't really use cocaine.

Justin:

... and, uh, I just inhaled it... is that what I did? Did I inhale it-

Sydnee:

I- I think-

Justin:

... the powdered walnut shell? Or did I mix it in a tonic? Or-

Sydnee:

... uh, you probably mixed it something and-

Justin:

Some sort of tincture?

Sydnee:

Maybe a tincture, maybe a compound to put on your head. Maybe-

Justin:

Maybe a salve?

Sydnee:

Yeah, a poultice?

Justin:

A poultice, perhaps? [laughs]

Sydnee:

Anyway, so, you can see where they would get the idea. Like, a walnut shell, I guess, kind of [laughs] looks like a skull, so, if your skull is broken, take some walnut shell. I think that's a fantastic, uh, theory. I- I- I would love to apply that to-

Justin:

If your eyes are broken, eat some grapes. Just like, a whole Halloween theme there.

Sydnee:

Right. If your [laughs] eyes are broken-

Justin:

If your eyes are broken, eat some grapes! They look like eyes!

Sydnee:

My teeth hurt! Here's some corn.

Justin:

Um, [laughs] yeah, I guess teeth kind of look like corn. Sure! Why not?

Sydnee:

I think more or less they look like corn.

Justin:

My intestines are broken. Eat some pasghetti.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Do you think in- intestines look like spaghetti?

Justin:

They're the closest I got, okay? Maybe if it's not... maybe not spaghetti. Maybe, like, egg noodles. Or tu- what are those tu- penne! They look like-like long penne pasta.

Sydnee:

Penne: found naturally in our environment. [laughs]

Justin:

Okay, all right.

Sydnee:

Go pick some penne-

Justin:

All right, smart guy. [laughs] All right.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

All right, smart aleck.

Sydnee:

Um, so, like I was saying, compared to this theory of medicine, it kind of made sense that, "Well, we actually have this thing we know works for something. Let's just try it for everything." And this was the idea behind a lot of patent medicines, was, "Hey, I've got something that does work for this one thing, and I am going to now market the heck out of it until everybody will buy it."

Justin:

So, how- how did they market it? How did they get the word out?

Sydnee:

So, one interesting way is... you know almanacs, Justin? [laughs]

Justin:

I- I do. I have them littered about. I hoard-

Sydnee:

We... our house-

Justin:

... I hoard them.

Sydnee:

... our house is just full of almanacs, everywhere. Almanacs. So, one way that they would market their product is... actually, that's where almanacs came from. They would create these almanacs 'cause people- people love facts like that. They just love reading-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

... you know, books of interesting facts, and-

Justin:

[laughs] Nerds do.

Sydnee:

[laughs] I do.

Justin:

Okay. Point taken.

Sydnee:

And they would use them as vehicles to just provide lots of advertisement for their products. So, like, every other page was an advertisement for, you know, whatever their stuff was.

Justin:

Dr. Jimmy's Good-Time Juice.

Sydnee:

Dr. Jimmy's Good-Time Juice, next to, like, the forecast for, you know, November of whatever 18-

Justin:

O- olden times.

Sydnee:

... 1882 or whatever. So that was where a lot of these almanacs first came from. The- the other way that they would like to, uh, market them are medicine shows.

Justin:

Ooh, okay!

Sydnee:

So, medicine shows... I'm assuming you want me to tell you more.

Justin:

Go on!

Sydnee:

The- [laughs]

Justin:

Look at how interested my face looks! You can't see this at home, but trust me. Find a... Google Image search for a really interested person-

Sydnee:

And that would be Justin.

Justin:

... and just imagine me doing that.

Sydnee:

That would definitely be Justin.

Justin:

Hmm!

Sydnee:

So, medicine shows were like... they were kind of like traveling circuses, um, except that the whole idea was just to promote, uh... either one or maybe a couple different guys would get together and promote several different patent medicines. Um, you would have all kinds of, like, different acts and performances that would, that would draw a crowd. So, just like a circus, you know, like, "Come down and see these people, you know, see the bearded lady," or whatever.

Sydnee:

But then, at the end, the big, the big moment at the end was really just this huge sales pitch for whatever your thing was.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

And that was actually, they s- that was the whole idea of, like, a skill in the audience.

Justin:

Oh, they'd have one person who kind of... "Oh, my arm's better! Thanks-thanks, Doc!"

Sydnee:

Exactly, and then would come out and, like, testify to how great it was. So, they were paid ahead of time, and then they would stand up and say, "Hey, I used Dr. Jimmy's Feel-Good Powder," or whatever it was.

Justin:

Dr. Ji- Dr. Jimmy's Good-Time Juice.

Sydnee:

Yeah, that. And, uh, "I'm... look how strong I am now!" And they actually... strongmen were one of the biggest... that was one of the biggest acts that they would use because then they could market their product and say, "Hey, remember those big muscly guys you saw earlier today? Guess what they eat!"

Justin:

Now, just so you know, this is still happening to you today, but it's happening with products like Hydroxycut, or Extenze. Like, this- this exact patter and this exact scam is being run on you today with- with a person sucking their stomach in and putting on some fake tan and saying that- that, uh, this- this fitness product works for them.

Sydnee:

That's exactly right. I think you should... you filled me in once, Justin, on one of the tricks that they use for the before and after pictures.

Justin:

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. There's lots. I mean, there's obviously Photoshop, but, um, uh, a lot of times, they get, uh, super-fit people who've been in some sort of accident or let themselves go, that, like-

Sydnee:

Or just had a baby, or-

Justin:

... they just had a baby-

Sydnee:

... something where they- they had to put on some weight.

Justin:

And then they- they can snap back because underneath their... the blubber is a fit person that they can pretty easily shed 'cause there- it's all muscle underneath there.

Sydnee:

I think that's a great trick. I never would've thought of that.

Justin:

Yeah, it's pretty clever.

Sydnee:

So, when they were, you know, marketing these different patent medicines, they had to have a gimmick. That was the big thing. So, you've got this thing, and you can name it something, whatever, and you can have, you know, testimonies, and you can use your royal endorsement, but you've gotta have some kind of gimmick as to why this is such a great thing.

Sydnee:

Um, and there were kind of different categories this fell into. One of the biggest was, uh, exotic ingredients.

Justin:

Uh, give me an example of an exotic ingredient.

Sydnee:

So, uh, you could probably find a lot of this, again, today, uh, used in marketing. But, uh, Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root-

Justin:

Now, listen, I love his work in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. He is fantastic in *Tombstone*. I'm not sure if Val Kilmer gave me swamp root-

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

... I would ingest it, and I didn't even know he was a medical doctor, frankly.

Sydnee:

And you know what's, you know what's great about that is that it may as well have been Val Kilmer-

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

... because there probably was never a Dr. Kilmer. Rarely in any of these products that were marketed as "Dr. Whoever's stuff" was there a doctor. A lot of the time, it was a bunch of a guys in a warehouse printing out advertising circulars who made up a name.

Justin:

Um...

Sydnee:

And the swamp root sounded very exotic.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

So, the- the story behind it was that Dr. Kilmer would go around and collect these, you know, very, uh, rare roots that were found deep within exotic swamps all over the world and then turn them into this tonic, and you could take it and it would help your kidney health.

Justin:

But it would...

Sydnee:

Well, no, probably not.

Justin:

Probably there wasn't any even swamp root, right? That was probably made up, as well.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Justin:

I assume.

Sydnee:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. A lot of the time, the... whatever they're saying is in there isn't in there. That... no, that's important to know. There i- there are ingredients in these, but very rarely the ingredients that they're claiming, because, again, they don't have to disclose the ingredients at this point.

Justin:

It's all just dust, and water, and fruit juice.

Sydnee:

Sure.

Justin:

Why not?

Sydnee:

Um, and actually, I'll get to that. The- the- there's a lot of things, some of the stuff which we've covered before, which were actually in these.

Um, there was also the baobab fruit, which was a common thing to market because it sounds exotic. It sounds like something you can't get. I think it actually... you can actually get it in Maine.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

I don't know how exotic that is. But, uh-

Justin:

It's Maine!

Sydnee:

... but it sounded weird, and so that was very popular. If you didn't have an exotic ingredient, maybe you wanted to go the Native American route.

Justin:

I do!

Sydnee:

At the time-

Justin:

I'm ready!

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Take me down this path.

Sydnee:

All right. At the time-

Justin:

Lead the way, Sacagawea!

Sydnee:

[laughs] Hey.

Justin:

Hey!

Sydnee:

Relevant.

Justin:

Thank you.

Sydnee:

Topical.

Justin:

Topical.

Sydnee:

I like it. Uh, at the time, i- the Native Americans were still seen as... well, as exotic, as well, but it was really the concept of the- the noble savage was very, um, common at the time, and so they thought that-

Justin:

Like Iron Eyes Cody, the- the guy who cried when he threw trash? Is that an example of a noble savage?

Sydnee:

I- th- a much later example, but yeah.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Yeah, the idea that the Native Americans were in-touch with the world in a way that we weren't, so that they weren't civilized, as the... in the same manner as the Europeans, but that they understood nature and the way the Earth worked in a way that, you know, the Europeans didn't-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

... was the kind of concept. So, marketing something as being, um, related to Native Americans was very popular, and that's actually where Kickapoo Indian Sagwa comes from.

Justin:

And we still do this tod- I mean, it's so interesting to see these, like, these sort of cultural loops repeat, because, like, we still do this today. Like, how often do you see, like, in a, in a commercial or whatever, someone in, like, a small, rural community, or, like, a, you know, "These Tibetan monks have been using this secret for- for so long." Like, these are the same... it's the same scam!

Sydnee:

Exactly. "Look at where this natural spring water comes from."

Justin:

Right. Exactly.

Sydnee:

Uh, so the Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company was specifically to market, you know, this product, and then they had others, but the idea was that, uh... there- there really was a Kickapoo Indian tribe, by the way.

Justin:

Mmm.

Sydnee:

They had no relation to this company.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

It was out in, uh, Nebraska or something, I think. But they had, they had nothing to do with the people who marketed this. And it was, in fact, the basis for Kickapoo Joy Juice from Li'l Abner's comic strip.

Sydnee:

Um, there were also Dr. Morse's Indian Root Pills. They had a whole story for this one.

Justin:

Tell me. I'm... take me on a journey.

Sydnee:

So, Dr. Morse was a, uh, trained medical doctor in the United States, who then left for more exotic climbs, uh, traveled all throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, all over the world, looking for cures, looking for medicine, finally ended up back in his home country, lived with the American Indians for three years, learned their ways, got in-touch with nature, as they were, and discovered their secret roots.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Not, like, where they came from.

Justin:

Their secret plant roots.

Sydnee:

Like, actual roots. Like, in the ground. And then he took these roots and he ground them up and he made them into pills, and- and they were great for, again, for everything.

Justin:

Everything!

Sydnee:

Everything! Uh, there was no Dr. Morse.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

There's no... I mean, there's no evidence that anybody like that ever existed.

Justin:

I saw that coming, I gotta admit.

Sydnee:

Yeah. It's a theme. Uh, there were also, um... you know, one whole class of patent medicines we already did a show about, and that was the, um, like, radium-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

... the whole idea of, you know, radiation therapy and- and all those cures. But there was also electromagnetism. So, we discovered the idea of electromagnetism, and then, of course, we thought, "Well, I mean, we know what this is now. Let's make medicine out of it."

So, there were all kind of devices that were created that you could, like, put on, like, hats you could wear and suits that would attract electricity to your body.

Justin:

Perfect!

Sydnee:

Oh, perhaps you just wanna coat yourself in a cream that will make you more conductive to electricity.

Justin:

Yeah! Absolu- I've been looking for ways to be more conductive.

Sydnee:

You could... it could be, like, uh, generalized electromagnetism. So, like, the vio- violet ray machines, which would attract it to the whole body, and were good for-

Justin:

Nothing.

Sydnee:

... general health. Well, yeah. Good for nothing.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

But the idea is they were good for general health. There were also electric fezzes. Do you want-

Justin:

Fine.

Sydnee:

... do you wanna wear an electric fez?

Justin:

Uh, Electric Fez is the name of my, uh, my college jam band. Uh, we were terrible, and, uh, roundly disliked in the musical community.

Sydnee:

Did it cure your baldness?

Justin:

It did cure my baldness! That's the weird thing about that band!

Sydnee:

It did? Well, it did much better than the [laughs] electric fezzes of olden day.

Justin:

Yeah. Uh, yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, there were also, uh, some doctors who claimed that they could use radio waves to diagnose patients.

Justin:

Again... well, that's sort of true, right?

Sydnee:

I mean, as in, over long distances. You could send radio waves-

Justin:

Oh, golly.

Sydnee:

... long distances away- [laughs]

Justin:

Oh, no, old-timey people.

Sydnee:

... and they would penetrate a person's body and then you would get waves back that would tell you what was wrong with them. We're not-

Justin:

Absolutely no.

Sydnee:

... we're not talking about radiology here. Um, and, uh, I think one that's great is in 1913, there was, uh, John Brinkley, who called himself "the Electro Medic Doctor."

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

... and, uh, he brought this electric medicine from Germany, um, which was really just colored water, [laughs] and he would inject it to- into men who were having problems in the bedroom, and it was supposed to make them more virile. Uh, he actually later went on to-

Justin:

That had to have worked, though. That one had to have wor- I mean, that sounds legit.

Sydnee:

Well, maybe it was a placebo. But, uh, he would... this was, this was nothing compared to later when he started transplanting goat testicles into human men's scrotums, uh, to also treat their, um, impotence.

Justin:

Good job, Brinkley.

Sydnee:

Yeah, still not a good idea.

Justin:

Oh, did I have an eyelash? She pulled an eyelash off. Do I have an eyelash?

Sydnee:

No, it's gone now.

Justin:

Okay, good.

Sydnee:

Uh, so, do you wanna know what was really in this stuff?

Justin:

Yes, please! [laughs] I'm dy- I just drank two bottles of it-

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

... while you were talking. [laughs]

Sydnee:

Well, um, then I'm betting you're feeling pretty good-

Justin:

I feel great.

Sydnee:

... because most of these things contained opium, alcohol, uh, a lot of the cold medicines contained cocaine. So, basically-

Justin:

Groovy.

Sydnee:

... s- stuff that would make you feel something. I mean, the idea was that you can't sell a patent medicine... you know, like the colored water thing is not gonna work for very long. You need something that will have some kind of noticeable effect on the body, and the easiest way to do that is to give somebody alcohol, or a stimulant, or a narcotic.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]. 'Cause, yeah, you'll feel that.

Sydnee:

Yeah. A- and we already know a lot of the children's cough syrups were- were opiates, a lot of, uh, cold medicines were cocaine, or maybe just grain alcohol, I guess, 'cause-

Justin:

Yup, that'll clear it up.

Sydnee:

'Cause you... well, and you think about it, your cold's gonna go away, probably, so...

Justin:

Eventually.

Sydnee:

Eventually. Um, there were a lot of medicines marketing for female complaints. Uh, Lydia Pinkham's was the most popular one that somebody, you know, people may be familiar with, which was just alcohol. But when they're talking about female complaints, I- I looked into what this means, 'cause I thought they probably just meant, like, the same thing we kind of talked about hysteria, like-

Justin:

Just-

Sydnee:

... moody-

Justin:

... uppitiness?

Sydnee:

Yeah, or not doing what you say. That's not really what we're talking about.

Justin:

What are we talking about?

Sydnee:

We're talking about early pregnancy.

Justin:

What?

Sydnee:

A lot of these medicines were actually... they were marketed for female complaints, but that was s- that was a secret code for if you're pregnant and don't wanna be.

Justin:

So, like, very early, rudimentary Plan B?

Sydnee:

Exactly. So, well-

Justin:

That didn't work?

Sydnee:

... not- not- not Plan B. I'm- I'm... I mean, these are medicines that would induce abortion.

Justin:

Oh, my god.

Sydnee:

So, pennyroyal, tansy, Juniperus sabina, so, a lot of these compounds which had been kind of found to do this, maybe, anecdotally, so they began putting these in pills and selling them for "female complaints."

Justin:

Ugh.

Sydnee:

Uh, a lot of, uh... and then during the Prohibition area... era, this was, like, a- a way a lot of the liquors were sold, as medications.

Justin:

Mmm.

Sydnee:

So, you know, there were, like, herbs in them that they said would do stuff, but really you're just taking them for all of the booze. You know.

Justin:

Yeah. The only thing they treated is, like, Rough Day Syndrome.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Absolutely. But they're great for that.

Justin:

They're perfect for that.

Sydnee:

There was actually, um, the Prohibition officers would crack down on this stuff periodically, so there was something called Peruna that was a tonic that was [laughs] 18% grain alcohol. Um, they changed it to Jamaican Ginger, which was, uh, like, another va- variation of the formula that was... they were trying to, like, skirt the authorities with. They did that by adding an organophosphate, which you're not familiar with, but it's actually a really deadly neurotoxin.

Justin:

Oh, good! Oh, fantastic job, old-timey people! You did it again.

Sydnee:

So, it- it created this, like, uh, delayed neuropath- neuropathy, um, this nerve damage that these patients would get, and then they just named it something. So they said, "Oh, you've been drinking Jamaican Ginger. You got Jake Leg." [laughs]

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

I don't know why they didn't just stop drinking Jamaican Ginger! But-

Justin:

I have a condition. Yeah, my- my headaches are gone, but hachi machi, this Jake Leg, can't seem to shake it. Er, I can't seem to s- stop shaking it.

Sydnee:

Yeah, you can't- yeah, you can't stop shaking it. [laughs] No, you just can't feel it anymore.

Justin:

Just can't feel it.

Sydnee:

Um, the most famous of all this, though, and I'm surprised you haven't asked me about it yet, Justin.

Justin:

Syd, what's a- what about snake oil?

Sydnee:

There you go!

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

It's like you read my mind.

Justin:

Or your sheet.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Uh, snake oil is the most famous, obviously, of the patent medicines. Uh, so, Clark Stanley, also known as the "Rattlesnake King-"

Justin:

Oh, how could I get that nickname?

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

What do I need to do?

Sydnee:

Well, I think all you really need to do are publicly, um, take rattlesnakes, and, like, break them down and process them into, uh, an oil, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So, if you could manage to do that, then you can sell something called snake oil.

Justin:

Who was the, who was the worst criminal? The guy who knowingly lied, or HH Holmes, the serial killer that stalked the Chicago, uh, World's Fair, the Columbian Exposition? Who was worse? They were both there. Think about it. What if he had killed him and saved hundreds of people? Would that have expunged his crimes?

Sydnee:

[silence]

Justin:

Think about it.

Sydnee:

I have, I have no idea what you're talking about. [laughs]

Justin:

I just told you! I mean, what more context do you need? There was a serial killer at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, HH Holmes, right?

Sydnee:

Right, and so you think he should've killed Clark Stanley, the Rattlesnake King?

Justin:

What if he had killed Clark Stanley, the Rattlesnake King-

Sydnee:

Do-

Justin:

... and saved people from being exposed to the bad stuff in it?

Sydnee:

Do you really think that anybody can kill Clark Stanley, the Rattlesnake King?

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

His name is the Rattlesnake King.

Justin:

Oh, hell, you're right. There's no way. You can't bring him down.

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

You'd just make him stronger and angrier.

Sydnee:

Now, to be fair, he was later brought down by the authorities. [laughs]

Justin:

Okay, well, okay. *They* can bring him down. Fine! They have badges.

Sydnee:

They analyzed his-

Justin:

That's cheating.

Sydnee:

... his snake oil and found that it- it did, in fact, contain no snake. Um, mineral oil, red pepper, camphor, fatty oil, and turpentine. That was about it.

Justin:

Bad for you, though.

Sydnee:

Yeah, not good for you.

Justin:

Bad for you.

Sydnee:

Not good for you. Some of these medicines would include, like, laxatives or diuretics, again, just to produce some kind of effect so you could feel like they were doing something. Um, and, uh, eventually, um, they actually started to put things in there that could- could do damage. Like, uh, when opioids were banned from them, they- they turned it to, like, this, um, anti-inflammatory that caused, like, liver and kidney failure.

So, um, Justin, were you wondering what they cured?

Justin:

What did they cure?

Sydnee:

Everything.

Justin:

Perfect! [laughs]

Sydnee:

Yeah. Uh, William Radam's Microbe Killer actually said on the bottle, "Cures all diseases."

Justin:

Great job.

Sydnee:

And Dr. Sibly's Solar Tincture took it one step further.

Justin:

What did it say?

Sydnee:

"Restore life in the event of sudden death."

Justin:

[laughs] Nope!

Sydnee:

Absolutely not.

Justin:

Seems like an easy one to disprove.

Sydnee:

And, in addition, all the things that we always talk about it curing.

Justin:

All-

Sydnee:

Venereal disease, TB, cancer, cholera, neuralgia, scarlet fever-

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

... blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Justin:

How did these, uh, go out of fashion, Syd?

Sydnee:

Um, the- the main way, actually, in 1905, uh, a guy named Samuel Hopkins Adams published in Collier's Weekly an article called The Great American Fraud, uh, and it was exposing all of these, uh, patent medicines. And people kind of knew that, and muckraker journalists had been writing about it for a while. It's just this was the... kind of the big breakthrough article that everybody read and paid attention to, and it led to, in 1906, uh, the Pure Food and Drug Act, which required that you label, um, all thing- the ingredients in all of these products. They didn't ban any ingredients. They didn't say you could put this stuff in it. They just said, um, you have to tell people what's in it, and it kind of limited the, like, really wild claims that they could make.

Justin:

Um, so, that- that- that was the beginning of the end, I would assume.

Sydnee:

Absolutely. After that, um, in 1936, they started banning, like, alcohol and opiates and stimulants from these things, and a, and a lot of the... like I said, the- the really fraudulent claims were actually banned at this time.

Sydnee:

Um, there was one, uh, Morris Fishbein, who's the editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association, JAMA-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

... uh, who spent much of his career unmasking these frauds. And, uh, and so that was kind of the end of, um, medications. But that wasn't the end of the concept of patent medicine. It just moved to cosmetics.

Justin:

Oh, perfect!

Sydnee:

And- and you still see this today. Shampoos, uh, marketed as having, like, uh, uh, yang-yang... ylang ylang...

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Yeng li- you know what I'm talking about.

Justin:

Yeng ling... Yuengling?

Sydnee:

Ylang ylang, for your hair. Uh, bananas, mangoes, honey, all of this stuff... there's no evidence that any of it does anything, but there you go. Well, honey. We'll get into that some other time. But- but there's no evidence that it's going to make your hair look like the girl in the commercial.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Um, and then as you mentioned, Justin, even today, it continues in nutritional supplements, weight loss aids, and sleep medications.

Justin:

Which always are very careful to say in their ads, like, "We don't know. Maybe... it doesn't really cure anything." Like, I mean, it says in the ads, like, "It's not proven to actually help, so... I don't know. You got 30 bucks? Give it a shot."

Sydnee:

Well, exactly. And that's why you- you'll notice that they say a lot, you know, "This is not intended to diagnose or treat any disease." They have to put that because of all of these things we-

Justin:

'Cause they're fake.

Sydnee:

... we talked about.

Justin:

That's the main thing.

Sydnee:

Yeah, because they're f- they're fake. And I think my favorite, Justin, and you may have already mentioned it, is Enzyte.

Justin:

I have not mentioned Enzyte.

Sydnee:

Are you familiar with Enzyte?

Justin:

Uh, is that, like... is that, like, a- a penile- penile system?

Sydnee:

[laughs] It is, it is a pill for, again, for, uh, impotence. Uh, it's actually made of just some herbs and minerals and vitamins and that kind of stuff. But they originally made up a scientific name for it.

Justin:

Ah, 'cause people are dumb.

Sydnee:

It was Suffragium asotas, and excuse my Latin if I don't know how to pronounce that. Uh, and they claimed that that was Latin for "better sex."

Justin:

No. Uh, not... it's not?

Sydnee:

It is not Latin for "better sex." It's a... it's... the grammar is wrong, apparently, and what it really translate to, if anything, is, "Refuge for the dissipated."

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Yup. That about sums it up.

Sydnee:

Which, I guess, is accurate. [laughs]

Justin:

Now, Syd, something I thought that was fascinating when you were telling me this is that, uh, when you were researching this topic, is that some of these things that are patent medicines or started as patent medicines are still, like, on the market. Like, you can still get them.

Sydnee:

Oh, absolutely. Um, Luden's Cough Drops is one that- that, you know, a lot of people still use. Those were originally a patent medicine. Goody Powder? A lot of my patients use that. And maybe that's a regional thing, but I have a lot of patients who use that, and that was a patent medicine. Phillips' Milk

of Magnesia, uh, Bayer Aspirin, Bromo Seltzer, I mean, a lot of these medicines are still around today.

Justin:

That doesn't necessarily mean they're fake, right? It just means that-

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

No, it doesn't mean they're fake. No, I mean, Bayer Aspiring obviously has a use. It has lots of uses. But, uh, when it was first marketed, it was a patent medicine, and it was marketed for many more things than it actually does. Vicks VapoRub.

Justin:

Uh, didn't you say... oh, Vicks VapoRub is fake?

Sydnee:

No, again-

Justin:

That's fake, though, right?

Sydnee:

No, again-

Justin:

I mean, come on.

Sydnee:

... it's not fake.

Justin:

Come on.

Sydnee:

It just doesn't... I mean, it makes you feel better, doesn't it?

Justin:

I guess. You know-

Sydnee:

But then they... I mean, you know, when you're sick and somebody rubs it on your chest-

Justin:

My mom never did that.

Sydnee:

I'll do it.

Justin:

Okay. I appreciate that. We'll give it a shot.

Sydnee:

I'll rub that on your chest next time you're sick.

Justin:

Thanks, sweetie. I appreciate it.

Sydnee:

Yeah, it makes you feel cared-for. My mom used to put it on a, um, a handkerchief-

Justin:

Aw.

Sydnee:

... and I would inhale it. It made me feel good.

Justin:

That's sweet.

Sydnee:

There were also some that are no longer sold as medicine that were originally.

Justin:

Like what?

Sydnee:

Well, 7UP-

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

... Coca Cola, Dr. Pepper, [laughs] Pepsi, tonic water, Angostura Bitters.

Justin:

That would make se- okay, Angostura Bitters, I don't know, they just... that- that would get you a little drunk 'cause those are alcohol. But I- I guess a lot of these are caffeine. Once people were onto the caffeine game, you couldn't market... that would give you a pick-me-up, especially if you weren't doing caffeine every day.

Sydnee:

Absolutely.

Justin:

You know, that would, that would make you feel a bit better, I guess.

Sydnee:

Yeah, a lot of these things were marketed as medicine and then when they realized, like, "Well, we can't market this as medicine anymore, 'cause it's not. We'll just sell it because it tastes good."

Justin:

Why not? Treat yourself. Um, so- so that's patent medicines. It's a pretty weird, pretty weird subject. It's-

Sydnee:

It's- it's wide-ranging. We've hit on a lot of these things.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

You know, a lot of our other episodes have kind of edged into this, but it is a whole category and it's really interesting, um, to read about, so... So I thought we should sum it all up, what it is.

Justin:

Thank you to everyone who has, uh, been listening, and tweeting, and sharing our program. We sure appreciate it. Uh, if you wouldn't mind heading over to, uh, to, uh, iTunes, you can, uh, head over there and give us a review on, uh, on our iTunes webpage. I'm currently, uh, without my P-my- my- my Macintosh computer, so I can't, uh, say thank you to everybody who did that this week, but I really... we really, really appreciate it and that really helps us out.

Justin:

So, uh, thank you so much for- for, uh, sharing the show. Please tweet about it, @Sawbones. Uh, and don't start it with @Sawbones 'cause then only people who follow us already can see it. You gotta put it in the middle there somewhere. Anyway-

Sydnee:

You can tweet at us, too, @JustinMcElroy-

Justin:

She's @SydneeMcElroy, S-Y-D-N-E-E. Uh, also wanna encourage you to head over to MaximumFun.org. There's a ton of other great programs, uh, that you can listen to and enjoy. Like, um, *Wham Bam Pow; Jordan, Jesse, Go!; Bullseye; One Bad Mother-*

Sydnee:

My Brother, My Brother, and Me.

Justin:

Oh, that's... thank you, you're too kind. And, uh- [laughs]

Sydnee:

I'm partial.

Justin:

... there's forums there, so you can go chat about our show and all the other great programs.

Sydnee:

We'd also like to thank, uh, *Stuff You Missed in History Class*, for the great shout-out.

Justin:

Yeah, thank you so much to them and thank you to The Taxpayers for letting us use their song, uh, "Medicines," uh, as our intro and outro tune. We sure appreciate it. And, uh, thank you to you for listening to another episode of Sawbones. We'll be back with you next Friday. 'Til then, I'm Justin McElroy-

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

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

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