

Sawbones 434: Pirate Medicine Chapter One

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Mary: Hello. Hello, welcome! I am Mary Smirl, and...

Cooper: [laughs]

[audience laughter and applauds]

Mary: Oh, hello. Okay. And that is Cooper McElroy. And this...

Charlie: And I am Charlie McElroy, the daughter of Sydnee and Justin. And this is—

[audience applause grows]

Charlie: And this is— and this is *Sawbones*.

[audience cheers and whoops]

[theme music plays]

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

[audience cheers and applauds]

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

[audience cheers grow]

Justin: Reemerging like the Chilean miners—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: ... for her first live show since February— no, March of 2020. The first live *Sawbones* since that time. It's Sydnee McElroy!

[audience cheers and whoops]

Sydnee: This is so surreal. [giggles] I—

Justin: Would you say— is it fair to say, “It’s been a weird week?”

Sydnee: [laughs] It has been. Well, it’s been a weird, however long it’s been since I’ve done one of these shows.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah, it has.

Sydnee: Yeah. But it’s been a weird week, and I know what you’re thinking. “Are you dressed as pirates?”

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: Um, yes, we are.

Justin: [simultaneously] Yes, we are.

Sydnee: [softly chuckles]

[audience cheers and laughs]

Sydnee: And I know what you’re thinking, “Why?” [pause] Why not?
[laughs softly]

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: Uh, we— the theme of this show— and we’re doing a whole series this tour.

Justin: Yes. This is our first time to do a three-part live series.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. About pirate medicine—

[scattered cheers and whoops from audience]

Sydnee: And, obviously, Justin is fancy this tour. What's fancier than Stede Bonnet? I don't know.

Justin: Yeah, nothing. That's what's fancier.

[audience cheers]

Sydnee: So, wearing cost— so, we're pirates. So, we're pirates for this.

Justin: So, we're pirates. I forgot my— I forgot my long white socks, so you're getting the ultimate calf show.

[audience laughter]

Justin: It's like, um—

Sydnee: [chuckles] But did you check out his calves, though?

Justin: Uh, thank you, Sydnee. Yeah. It's like a regular 4-H camp with all the calves.

[audience laughing]

Justin: The beautiful calves up on this stage.

Sydnee: He's got— he's got good— the man has good calves.

Justin: Thanks. That's marching band for ya.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

[audience cheers]

Justin: Heel to toe, baby! Heel to toe!

Sydnee: [laughs softly] So, I want to talk about medicine during the Golden Age of Piracy. And as I was reading about the Golden Age of Piracy,

one of the notes was— and this was, of course, before we figured out how to treat scurvy, which makes you wonder why it was the [through laugh] Golden Age of Piracy.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But that's what I want to talk about.

Justin: It does also raise the question of, "Who decided that was the Golden Age of Piracy?" Pirates? 'Cause it certainly wasn't people that were getting their good purloined, right? Like, this— they didn't look at each other and were like, "This really is the Golden Age. That— that was amazing." [laughs]

[audience laughs]

Justin: "Wow, they really robbed the heck out of us." [laughs]

Sydnee: So, during the Golden—

Justin: "It's all downhill from here! These are [through wheeze-laughter] really great pirates right now."

Sydnee: During the Golden Age of Piracy, uh, if you were lucky, you had someone on board your ship who was a surgeon, a barber-surgeon, had some sort of medical training. Maybe you didn't. Maybe the best you could hope for was somebody who knew a little Latin. Because a lot of the medicines, the labels would have been written in Latin. And if you didn't know that... too bad.

Justin: [wheeze-laughs]

[scattered audience laughter]

Sydnee: Often, there would be a medicine chest. So, that's sort of the mainstays. As we look at pirate medicine— [chuckles softly] the field of pirate medicine— the— [laughs] let's start with the medicine chest. So, if

you were lucky, you had one. Or two, if you were *really* lucky. And these would— and each one would contain different things.

So you had two, and one would be, like, your liquid medicines. And there would be, like, 100 to 150 little slots all labeled. And a clever thing that you would do is you would have multiples of each medicine, and you would put them at different places throughout the chest. And I know that doesn't sound clever.

Justin: No, it sounds confusing. [chuckles]

Sydnee: It sounds very confusing, and I'm sure it *was* confusing. Especially, again, if you didn't read Latin, but the reason for that is that if something got, like, broken, or, like, shot at, or— [laughs softly]

[scattered audience laughter]

Justin: With cannon stuff, [unintelligible] cannon stuff.

Sydnee: Yeah, like with pirate fighting. [chuckles] Then you would only break, like, one bottle of that tincture, and the other bottle was safe.

Justin: Oh, that's smart.

Sydnee: Yeah. And you would have another chest. So, you had your chest full of, like, liquid medicines, and you accepted that, like, you're at sea, there are storms, stuff is gonna break. So, you want another chest with, like, your dried stuff. With, like, your powders, and your herbal dried preparations, and with all your instruments. Those would sit over there.

Um, usually— I was looking through [chuckles] an extensive article about what containers were made of [through laughter] on ships that held medicine.

Justin: Riveting stuff!

[scattered audience laughter and whoops]

Sydnee: Like—[bursts out laughing]

Justin: That had to be a subscriber, right? You had to pay a subscription to get to that kinda info.

Sydnee: [laughing softly] Like, were they glass? Were they pewter? Were they ceramic? Were they porcelain?

Justin: That explains why I so frequently heard you this week just going, “Ooh! Huh!”

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: So, they often were glass, which seems like a bad idea. A lot of substances were caustic, and so it was necessary that it’s something that could, you know, hold up to the substance. But a lot of them were glass, which— so it was constantly a problem.

Justin: [scoffs]

Sydnee: If you— [laughs softly] With, you know, breaking. If you wanted to, if you *could*, you could get an animal bladder. And so, there were actually a lot of medicines that would be stored in, like, literally, like, the bladder of an animal.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And then just put it in there. They did have, like, paper for, like, lozenges and troches, and little things like that. But they also had these, like — I was looking at pictures of them. They were like make-up palettes, full of, like, um, some sort of, you know, salve, or ointment, or something like that. And it really did; it looked like these extensive make-up palettes that you could just pull out and be, like, “None of this is going to work.”
[chuckles]

Justin: [bursts out laughing]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: “I’m about to put all of it on you.” [laughs softly]

Justin: Yeah. I was thinking back to the fighting. They would be like, “Oh, no! They shot our nothing. Luckily, we have some nothing [through laugh] over here that works exactly as well as the other nothing.”

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: And these chests were vitally important. So important that if there wasn’t one on board, at times, pirates would refuse to sail. At one point— and especially refuse to fight. If there was any sort of, you know, encounter with... rival pirates— whoever you would encounter. If there was any sort of fight about to happen, if there wasn’t a medicine chest onboard— there was one case where they just abandoned ship. Everybody, just, like, forget it. [chuckles]

Justin: Never mind.

Sydnee: “If we don’t have that big chest of salves, [laughs] I’m out.”

Justin: [laughs] We’re doomed. We’re done for.

Sydnee: Um, actually, Blackbeard— that’s who I’m dressed as—

[audience cheers and whoops]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: ... once took hostages in Charlestown Harbor. This is in 1718. And what he said was, “I’m going to keep these people hostage until you give me a medicine chest.” That was it.

[scattered audience laughter]

Justin: Smart.

Sydnee: Which— right. But, I mean, it was sort of like— it was—

Justin: Sorry, it's smart to take hostages?

Sydnee: No.

Justin: You're endorsing that?

Sydnee: [chuckles softly]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: I'm not endorsing that. I— what I'm saying is that it was kind of an employer-sponsored healthcare plan.

Justin: [wheeze-laughs]

[audience laughter grows]

Sydnee: [through laughter] Of sorts.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Edward Teach was really invested in the health of his crew.
[chuckles]

[scattered audience cheers and whoops]

Sydnee: And was willing to [through laughter] take hostages for it. [Normally] I will say that— 'cause I was thinking like, "Wow, that's an expensive adventure." That medicine chest, in today's money, would probably be worth, like, 50,000 dollars.

Justin: Whoa!

Sydnee: Now that being said, I also think a lot of it wouldn't work. So, I don't know how we're measuring [chuckles] the worth. Now, if you didn't have a surgeon, again— once again referencing Blackbeard, you could always steal one.

[scattered audience laughter]

Sydnee: That was popular. Um, if you [chuckles] went and plundered a ship and took everything you could, you could also take their surgeon. That was just a common thing to do. Initially, when Blackbeard took command of the Queen Anne's Revenge in 1717, he made the three surgeons stay. Everyone else... I don't want to know what happened. "Everyone else leave [laughs softly] peacefully. You're fine."

Justin: I wonder if your ship is getting taken over by pirates, how— if you decide how kidnappable you want to look—

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: ... depending on your job satisfaction.

[audience laughter]

Justin: Like, "Yeah, you know what? I'm right by— there's nowhere else for me to ascend up the ladder here. I'm gonna just look super kidnappable [chuckles] and let them take me over."

Sydnee: [laughs softly] Now, the problem with that practice is that if you're going to steal surgeons [chuckles] from other boats, you have to make sure that, like, they know what they're doing. And you can't really quality control, right? You're not, like, interviewing people. You're not necessarily getting the best ones.

And at that time, the Navy had really loosened restrictions on who could be a Naval Surgeon. Prior to that, you would really do an apprenticeship. That was what medical training was. It would start at, like, 12 or 13 years old. You would do a six or seven-year apprenticeship with somebody who was already practicing, and then you would take a big exam. And it was pretty much the same, whether you were going to practice on the sea or on the land.

Well, at some point, especially the British Navy, was, like, “We need to make sure everybody— every ship has a surgeon.” And there weren’t enough to go around, so they really sort of like loosened those restrictions, and were like, “If you can sit for this 15-minute exam—

[scattered audience laughter]

Sydnee: ... you probably can do this.”

Justin: [bursts out laughing]

Sydnee: And that— and that exam would involve, like, “Are you a grown-up?” [laughs softly]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: “Do you know what surgery is?” [laughs]

Justin: [wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: I mean, [chuckles] and if you pass, then you could go be on a ship. And then, if, you know, a pirate stole you, then that’s what you get. [laughs]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: There was one passage that I enjoyed. Edward Barlow talked about this in 1672, the kinds of surgeons that you might get. [laughs softly] That might be aboard a ship. “The surgeons and doctors of Physic in ships many times are very careless of a poor man and his sickness. Their common phrase being to come to him and take him by the hand when they hear that he hath been sick two or three days, thinking that this is soon enough, feel his pulses, and when he is half dead, asking when he was at stool.”

When did he poop? That’s— some things never change. That’s what we want to know, right? You’re half dead; we’re checking your pulse and saying, “When did you last poop?” [chuckles]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: “How do you feel? How he has slept? And then giving him some of their medicines upon the point of a knife, which doeth as much good to him as a blow upon the head with a stick. [laughs]

Justin: [bursts out laughing]

[audience laughter]

Justin: That’s a remarkable amount of self-awareness.

Sydnee: I know. [laughs softly] “One captain once referred to the surgeon as “Someone to kill a man Secundum Artem.” Which means “according to science.” [laughs]

[audience laughter grows]

Justin: [bursts out laughing loudly]

Sydnee: Now, to be fair, and there was a hierarchy with this too. The onboard— the surgeon on the ship answered to the captain. So— which is it’s an interesting sort of medical hierarchy. ‘Cause at any point, the captain could come and be like, “Okay, actually, you have no idea what you’re doing, and you have to run the patients by me, the Captain of the ship, the pirate, before you do any medicine because it is very clear to me that you don’t know what you’re doing.”

Justin: [laughs]

[scattered audience laughter]

Sydnee: Um, pirates tended to like their surgeons more than other sailors. They were more appreciative of whatever they could offer. They would, like, keep them in a place in the ship. You would store your surgeon— [chuckles]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: ... in a safer place and— where they were less likely to, you know, get killed.

Justin: They should put the medicine there.

Sydnee: Well, that would go there too.

[audience laughter]

Justin: Okay. [chuckles lightly]

Sydnee: The surgeon and the [through laughter] medicine.

Justin: If they have a better place for it that doesn't get shot as much...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Let's go and put it there.

Sydnee: And then, if there was some sort of, like, mutiny, the surgeon was unlikely to be murdered in the mutiny. [laughs softly] Or thrown overboard with the captain.

Justin: That's comforting.

Sydnee: Like, you'd keep them. You would just— they would just get passed along to whoever the new crew was in charge of things. We have done, on *Sawbones*, an entire episode about scurvy, but it's been a long time. So, I thought it was at least worth referencing. I mean, if we're going to talk about pirates. Things that plague pirates, obviously scurvy was one of the biggest issues.

Now, we know now that this is a lack of vitamin C. We didn't know that at the time. It was a long time, and a lot of bleeding gums before we figured this out. And like I said, for some reason, we consider the Golden Age of Piracy the time before we figured it out. [chuckles softly]

Justin: [through chuckle] Yeah.

Sydnee: So, because we didn't understand why people got it, there were some really weird ideas about how to fix it. Malted barley was a really common treatment. And the thought was that humans are held together by a kind of fixed air. [laughs softly]

Justin: [bursts out in wheeze-laughter]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: And, um—

Justin: Are you trying not to say farts? Or...

[audience laughter grows]

Sydnee: [through laughter] No, but it does sound that way.

Justin: It does, just a little bit, sound like you're trying not to say farts.

Sydnee: [through laughter] No, it's just that we're held together by—

Justin: `Cause if pirates thought we were just flesh held together by farts, I can see why they were so cavalier.

[audience laughter]

Justin: Life was cheap to that sort. Just sees us as a bunch of bags of farts.

[audience laughter grows]

Justin: It's twisted, man.

Sydnee: [continues laughing]

Justin: Puts it in a whole new light. Doesn't it?

Sydnee: You know, Justin, it has been a long week, and I don't— are we just flesh held together by farts? [laughs softly]

[audience laughter]

Justin: I hope not.

Sydnee: I don't know. [chuckles] But, because of that, the thought was that, like, fermented foods like malted barley might help replace [soft laugh] some of the fixed air that you are losing when you have scurvy, which is a lack of fixed air.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That's obviously not true.

Justin: This is before beans were commonly—

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: [chuckles softly] Beans were a treatment. [through laughter] That is a treatment.

Justin: Sorry, beans were a treatment?

Sydnee: [through laughter] Beans were a treatment.

Justin: Are you sure you're not talking about people held together by farts?

Sydnee: People— there must have been a lot— [laughs] there was a lot of gastrointestinal distress on a ship, you may imagine. [chuckles]

[scattered audience laughter]

Justin: Yeah, you don't want to let your glue out. [through laughter] I mean, come on.

[audience laughter grows]

Justin: Hold it all in. I need that body glue.

Sydnee: Obviously, the old favorites—

Justin: That's what happened to the peg leg people.

Sydnee: [laughing softly]

Justin: They let out too many farts, and their foot fell off, 'cause they didn't have enough farts.

[audience laughter]

Justin: And they had to get a stick.

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: Hey, listen. That's in *Pirates of the Caribbean 4*. If you didn't see it, that's your fault.

[audience laughter grows]

Justin: Okay? I almost fell off at three too. I heard about that scene.
[chuckles] Got it at Red Box.

Sydnee: [through laughter] It's either that or these are spoilers for *Our Flag Means Death: Season 2*.

Justin: Yeah, these are spoilers for season two, where everybody's made of farts.

Sydnee: [continues laughing]

[ad break]

Sydnee: Obviously, blood-letting was popular for everything, so you would try that. Drinking seawater was a popular treatment that didn't work.

Justin: Bad.

Sydnee: Um, one of the treatments— this feels like something that is always going to be true. The captain would be like, “Well, it’s just that you aren’t working hard enough.” [chuckles softly]

Justin: [bursts out laughing]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: “You need to work harder on this ship.”

Justin: You got time to have gastrointestinal distress, then...

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: You got time to clean the posts.

Sydnee: Yeah! You need to clean the ship better with your gums necrosing [laughs softly] and your brain hemorrhaging. There were a lot of other things that obviously would make pirates sick other than scurvy. You had inadequate nutrition, you were getting sunburns all the time, just the heat, lack of clean water. There were, of course, a lot of illnesses like plague, and typhus, and cholera.

And the theory behind a lot of those sorts of things, something that would strike multiple people on a ship at once, at the time, it was thought that it was because of, like, bad air. It was a miasma theory of disease. You’re, like, inhaling something in the air.

And it was tied directly to something, like, you could smell. So, the thought was like, if you’re around something stinky, you’d get sick, and that’s why everybody’s getting sick. So, like, you don’t want to be around, like, garbage or corpses. That would be— [laughs softly] those would be things that—

Justin: Prevalent— both prevalent on ships.

[scattered audience laughter]

Sydnee: Well... could be. [chuckles]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, and also, because that was the theory of, like, why disease was happening, a way to combat that is to burn something that smelled— I was going to say “better,” but as I read about the different things you could smell, I wouldn’t say “better.” I would say, “different.” [chuckles]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: Something that smells other than what you’re smelling.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: As a treatment. So, like, because you could burn some tarred rope.

Justin: I don’t think that would be nice.

[audience laughter]

Justin: I haven’t seen that one at Bath and Body Works. [chuckles]

Sydnee: [laughing]

[audience laughter grows]

Sydnee: Or like— or like, gunpowder was listed, but that seems bad.

[audience laughter continues]

Justin: What if you went in—

Sydnee: Like, the ships— the ships made of wood. [laughs softly]

Justin: And you need the gunpowder. Like, what if the captain came in and found Jerry, like, burning all the gunpowder?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: The captain is like, "What are you doing?" And he's like, "Well, it stunk in here." [laughs]

[audience laughter]

Justin: "So, I lit all our gunpowder. I'm sorry, okay?"

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: "You don't want me to smell the bad stink, do you?"

Sydnee: [laughing softly] "It'll make us sick." Um, and there were specific things. Like, um, you could burn some frankincense. And you would do this, like, [chuckles] the way it was described was, like, a chafing dish of hot coals. And you could, like, burn some frankincense on there and then, like, hold it under your butt if you were constipated.

[audience laughter]

Justin: Oh! Okay.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. But you had to be careful with this because—

Justin: I would imagine.

Sydnee: [laughing softly]

[audience laughter grows]

Sydnee: For many reasons. But you can imagine if you fall asleep and you've got, like, a chafing dish of hot coals there. And again, you are on a ship made of wood.

Justin: Yeah. Not their favorite treatment, I would assume.

Sydnee: Yeah. There was a case where that happened, where somebody was trying to treat constipation. Something with a nice smell to combat a bad smell. To create a bad smell, [laughs] I guess, if it was constipation.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But they fell asleep. The ship caught on fire, and it was very tragic. And the captain rightly blamed it on the woman on board. [laughs softly]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: She didn't do it. Just that she was— you know, she was there.

Justin: Although I mean, if you want to get the bowels moving, seeing the ship you're on burn around you is one sure way to do it.

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: If that doesn't scare the crap out of you, nothing will.

Sydnee: When— when they recovered the Queen Anne's Revenge back in the '90s, they found some medical equipment. Specifically, that Blackbeard's pirates would have used. Among them were pewter syringes.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: Do you have any idea where these syringes were used? Or what for? Or in what manner?

Justin: Why on—

Sydnee: Do you have any guesses?

Justin: Why would I have any— I mean, injecting drugs that we had.

Sydnee: Well, where? [laughs softly]

Justin: What? In your vein.

Sydnee: Sort of.

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: So, these would have been used to treat syphilis, more than likely.

[audience laughter grows]

Sydnee: Which was a common problem. And you would use— you would put mercury in these.

[audience exclamations]

Justin: Ah, please, hammer, don't hurt him. No. Don't. No.

Sydnee: [laughing] It would be a urethral administration. [laughs softly]

Justin: Stop. No!

Sydnee: Do you know that urethra— you understand what I'm referencing?
[laughs lightly]

Justin: Yeah, Syd. I understand. I'm 42 years old. I do know what that is.

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: And what's interesting is that there was a treatment regimen for syphilis that was, like, just eat mercury.

Justin: Oh!

Sydnee: And somebody was, like, "Not good enough." [laughs softly]

[audience laughter]

Justin: No.

Sydnee: [through laughter] Not for me.

Justin: No. You need to get right to the source.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Now, that would be a problem, of course, because mercury also is toxic. And so, people would have syphilis because we weren't actually curing it. They would have syphilis for a very long time. And so, you would see, like, the surgeon on board a ship over and over and over. And get those syphilis treatments with mercury in your urethra over and over, which could kill you with mercury over time.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: Grim!

Sydnee: They also found—

Justin: I thought you were going to say something funny.

Sydnee: No. It just—

[audience laughter]

Justin: And it turned blue!

Sydnee: No, you get kidney failure.

Justin: Oh, okay. Yeah, man. Woof.

Sydnee: Sorry. [laughs softly]

Justin: Yeah, woof.

Sydnee: There were also enema syringes. Is that funnier? [chuckles]

Justin: No?!

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: So, you could give enemas, or just to, like, administer meds directly [through laughter] to the source more quickly. [Normally] You can see that was a big theme. Like, there's something wrong with my "down there." I want to put the medicine down there.

Justin: Makes sense.

Sydnee: That makes sense. You know, I get that. But they found those. They also found porringers, which look like these little cups with, like, a tiny, fancy handle on them. Almost like a really fancy measuring cup if you think about it. But, like, they were used for collecting blood, for bleeding.

Justin: Oh, nice.

Sydnee: So, they found a whole collection of those. So, you could have—so, as you bled somebody, you could have nice little cups of blood. Paul Revere made these frequently. So, now you know that.

[scattered audience laughter]

Sydnee: That has nothing to do with pirates, but now you know that. [chuckles]

Justin: And they'd say, "Paul, what are these for?" And he'd say, "I don't know."

[audience laughter]

Justin: "They're to catch blood. Why, Paul?"

"I don't know, honestly, but people buy `em. As long as I keep printing inspirational sayings on `em, they keep flying off the shelves."

[audience laughter grows]

Justin: “I got some Groggu ones over there if you look. Those are hot.”

Sydnee: [laughing] What’s wild is that you could indeed— they’re called porringers, and some people *did* use them to, like, eat porridge out of. So, it’s like a dual use.

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: It’s sort of like, you know how— and you all do. You know how you have that bowl in your house that you use for popcorn? But, also, you use it [through laughter] to puke in.

[audience laughter and applause]

Justin: Yeah. I see you. Some people are looking at their neighbors like they are *strangers*.

[audience laughter grows]

Justin: There are some couples right now that are, like, “Huh?”

Sydnee: You have that bowl! We all have that bowl. [chuckles]

Justin: My bigger fear is that we *don’t* all have that bowl, and we just ripped the social fabric asunder.

[audience laughter continues]

Sydnee: [laughing softly] It’s the big one. You know, the big one!
[continues laughing]

Justin: Hey, folks! Take it from me, the J-man, keep it nonporous, okay? You want glass or metal. That’s it. Only acceptable materials.

Sydnee: Now, obviously, there was a lot of fighting that could have occurred in those days. A lot of what a surgeon would do on board would have to do with treating those sorts of injuries. The main way, if you have a knife wound, you're going to clean that. Well, you're going to dump some alcohol on it, so it's cleaning it. If you have something—some sort of projectile that's lodged in there— there was a lot of, like, digging things out.

At the time, we really didn't have a good understanding, of course, of infection. If something became filled with pus, and then, like, oozing pus, that was usually seen, like, as a good sign. That was part of the process. This is how healing occurs. [chuckles] If something wasn't oozing pus, you may intentionally try to, like, bl— you know, blister it or—

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: ... or put something caustic on it, or something to make it ooze pus because that was part of the process. And then, if, at some point, it was clear to you that things were going the wrong direction, bleeding was usually the treatment at that point. So, you get a bullet wound, it gets infected, you're getting fevers, you're really sick, so then we will bleed you.

At times this was overused. There was one Captain, at one point, who the surgeon— and again, this probably calls to the fact that some surgeons weren't properly trained. [laughs softly] Uh, who was just bleeding everybody on the ship until they died. [laughing]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: And finally, the Captain had to stop him and say, "I don't know anything about medicine, but this seems... [chuckles] this seems wrong."

Justin: This isn't working. [laughs lightly]

Sydnee: A lot of the times, surgeons would be quick to amputate because it was something that they could do. [chuckles]

[audience laughter grows]

Justin: [bursts out laughing]

Sydnee: There is so much of medical history that is, “Why did we do that?” It was something we could do. [laughs softly] And so, at that time, of course, in amputation, there would be no anesthesia. Things were not done in, you know, a sanitized fashion. You would try to be quick. Try to stop the bleeding as quickly as possible with some sort of hot iron to cauterize the wound. And then, of course, again, if they became infected afterwards, you just bleed them some more.

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: Um, I thought it was interesting there was a note as I was reading about— obviously, people would die at sea. That would happen. And if the surgeon couldn’t figure it out— and we’ve talked about a lot on *Sawbones* that through the years, the ability to do an autopsy or to do, like, anatomical dissections to learn about the human body has been morally ambiguous, depending upon when and where you are in history. There have been a lot— there have been riots over whether or not we should be able to do that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: At sea, it happened sometimes just because someone was really curious. It seems like the restrictions were a lot looser. So, a lot was actually learned by surgeons at sea who would be able to do these autopsies because they were like, “I have no idea what just happened.” [chuckles]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: And they would— and there was, like, you find multiple accounts of pirates actually saying, “Listen, I don’t know what’s going on. You don’t know what’s going on. So, after I’m gone, like, just open me up, buddy, and [through laughter] and figure it out, and tell somebody.” And you find a lot of accounts of that. Which I thought was really interesting because these are periods of time where autopsies on land were not being done or talked about openly.

Justin: And then their buddy next to them is, like, “And also, Doc, when that happens, you’ve got to call me ‘cause it’s wicked boring on this ship, and I would love to see you just dig around in Jake’s guts.”

[audience laughter grows]

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: “So, if you just call me up, I’m happy to get down here, no problem.”

Sydnee: Um, who you’re talking about at that point, if you need somebody to help you out, you’re probably talking about a surgeon’s mate. And this is a position on board that we haven’t talked about. So, you’ve got your surgeon, but you need an assistant, right? You need somebody to help them out because they’ve got a lot to do.

They’ve got a lot of people to take care of. They’ve got a lot of wounds to bandage. They’ve got a— they should be— especially all of the people who are ill or are injured, they’re *supposed* to be checking on every single day. Like, you did rounds. Like, surgeons would do their rounds on a ship, go around and check on everybody who was sick or unwell. And in one— there is one great— it was a fictionalized account, but it was based on— it was autobiographical.

The author really had these experiences, and then kind of wrote, you know, fiction about it. But the author was named Tobias Smollett, and in 1748 he published *The Adventures of Roderick Random*. Roderick “Rory” Random. And—[chuckles]

Justin: RRR.

Sydnee: R, yes. [laughs softly]

Justin: Okay.

[scattered audience laughter]

Audience member: [distantly] Arrgh!

Sydnee: Oh, that sounds like—[laughs]

[audience laughter grows]

Sydnee: It sounds like a pirate joke.

Justin: Argh. Yeah.

Sydnee: Are you making a pirate joke?

Justin: Yeah. And also talking about my favorite movie, *RRR*.

[scattered audience whoops and clapping]

Sydnee: So, this is an entire account. So, Tobias actually did work as a surgeon's mate. He actually witnessed a lot of these things, and then he sort of made up this, uh, Random who went through these things. And then he could use him to tell the story of everything he experienced.

Justin: It's like Not Me for *The Family Circus*, right? You just make up a character that—

Sydnee: Is that a character on *The Family Circus*?

Justin: You guys don't read a lot of *Family Circus*. Pretend I didn't say anything.

[audience laughter]

Justin: Rachel, edit that out. Rachel, edit that out when I referenced *Family Circus*. Thank you.

Sydnee: That's the one where they call them meat bulbs?

Justin: You guys aren't laughing. You heard that, right?

Sydnee: [bursts out laughing]

Justin: Meat bulbs? Are you kidding me with this stuff? Rachel, edit that out.

[audience laughter grows]

Sydnee: Meat bulbs. [chuckles] So he wrote— and this is one thing that, uh, that could happen on board. This would be a duty of—

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: ... of one of the surgeon's mates.

[audience laughs and cheers]

Justin: Sorry. [laughs]

Sydnee: So, for one account, "At a certain hour in the morning, the boy of the mess—" Okay, the boy of the mess. [laughs softly]

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: You're going to need to know who that is first. So, the boy of the mess would generally be someone who would also, like, hand people stuff in the dining room. [chuckles] So, like, you know, the Captain's dining, and he would, like, hand them whatever they need. He'd refill their glass or hand them, you know, silverware or whatever. So, the boy of the mess.

But also, the boy of the mess had this duty, "At a certain hour, the boy of the mess went 'round all the decks ringing a small handbell, and in rhymes composed for the occasion, invited all those who had sores [laughs softly] to repair before the mast where one of the doctor's mates attended with applications to dress them." So, that's right. He would go around and ring a bell and recite poems about coming to get [through laughter] your wounds dressed.

[audience laughter]

Sydnee: And I—

Justin: And he was a mess boy?

Sydnee: And he was a mess boy.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: And I was thinking, Justin, right now, I feel like you would be the one to walk around ringing a bell and reciting poems about getting your wounds dressed. Do you have any ideas? [laughs] About—

Justin: You want— you think I should be the mess— you think I would be a mess boy on the ship?

Sydnee: Yeah, can you be the mess— can you give me some? I thought— give me some wound poems.

[audience cheers and whoops]

Justin: Is there like— I don't— Okay. What? Is this the end of the show?

Sydnee: This is the end of the show. I want you to give me a mess poem. You've got, like, a minute to give me a mess poem. [laughs softly]

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And then we gotta go away,

Justin: [singing] Mm-mess mess boy, mess boy, hear his sacred call.

[audience laughter]

Justin: [continues singing] Mess boy, mess boy, he's here to help you all. If your wound is dirty, and you don't feel too flirty. Bring it to me, the mess boy!

[audience cheering and applauding]

Justin: Thank you very much. Thank you so much for coming. Thank you to The Taxpayers for the use of their song “Medicines” is the intro and outro of our program. Thank you to the Taft Theater. Thank you to Cincinnati. Thanks to much— to you for listening. Until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I’m Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And, as always, don’t drill a hole in your head!

[audience cheering and applauding]

[outro plays]