

Sawbones Episode 87: The Gut Hole Romance

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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*, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I am your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

Sydnee, I don't wanna do the podcast.

Sydnee:

Oh. Why?

Justin:

I'm hungry, Sydnee.

Sydnee:

Oh. Okay.

Justin:

I'm hung-ee.

Sydnee:

Um. Why didn't you eat something before?

Justin:

It's 9:30. It's too early to eat for me. I gotta, I gotta wait til late.

Sydnee:

Justin-

Justin:

So I'm feeling great.

Sydnee:

Justin doesn't eat any of his meals at appropriate times.

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

He eats like, some meal that is cereal that he eats at what, like 11:30?

Justin:

Hmm. At night?

Sydnee:

AM.

Justin:

AM. Yeah. That's like a brunch cereal.

Sydnee:

That's it though. That's not a ... No, that's not brunch. That's not breakfast, that's not lunch, that's not brunch. That's not anything.

Justin:

It's not about meals, Sydnee.

Sydnee:

That's just a bad job.

Justin:

Sydnee, it's not about meals. It's about energy. Food energy. And see, let me tell you how food works ...

Sydnee:

Oh you're gonna ... Okay. Well please, by all means.

Justin:

When I wake up, when I wake up, that's just wake up energy, okay?

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Justin:

So I just have regular energy.

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

And then after that, I um, drink coffee. So then I, I'm fueled by coffee energy, and that gets me to about 11.

Sydnee:

It's caffeine, but okay. Caffeine, yeah.

Justin:

11:30, 11 to 11:30.

Sydnee:

Okay.

Justin:

And then I need like breakfast energy, like cereal energy to get me up the hill. So you eat the cereal and then it turns into food energy and you use that to like, really revv your motor and get your, get all your work done for the day.

Sydnee:

So ce- ... Okay. So the cereal turns into food energy.

Justin:

That's the way foo-, yes. Basically-

Sydnee:

How does that happen? What, what is your concept of ...

Justin:

Well. Okay. Uh, you eat the food-

Sydnee:

Uh huh.

Justin:

And as you chew the food, you're releasing the bonds that hold-

Sydnee:

You want some [munching sounds] sound effects?

Justin:

[Eating sounds]

Sydnee:

Do you want some ...

Sound effects.

Justin:

Just like that. [Eating sounds] Because I'm Batman.

Sydnee:

Okay. [Laughs]

Justin:

And then uh, as you chew the food, you release the energy stored in the covalent bonds, ionic.

Sydnee:

[Laughs]

Justin:

Elemental bonds, and then the ...

Sydnee:

You named some bonds there, that's good.

Justin:

... nucleus of the energy of the food, energy is released into your system.

Sydnee:

Uh huh. Right. The nucleus. Uh huh.

Justin:

And it all lands in your stomach and there it is digested into like, like electricity basically, that goes to different parts of your body and powers your muscles, to control your bones.

Sydnee:

Okay. So that, is that ... That's how food works?

Justin:

That's how food works.

Sydnee:

It's not.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

No. You're wrong.

Justin:

Agree to disagree.

Sydnee:

So, if anyone is listening who doesn't know how food work, food works, that's wrong. Don't listen.

Justin:

That's not how words work. That's not how plurals work.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Smart aleck.

Sydnee:

Okay, well, you, you, practice in your realm over there, of words-

Justin:

Right?

Sydnee:

And I-I'll stick with science, okay?

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So no, that's not, that's not actually how digestion or f-food energy, food energy works. Um. But you know, you're not the first person to not know how digestion works.

Justin:

I would hope not. I don't think Charlie knows.

Sydnee:

Well fair, but I think, you know know what, even if she could speak, and she could explain it, I think she'd do a better job than you just did.

Justin:

Fair enough.

Sydnee:

Uh, it took us quite a while to figure out how digestion works. And there's one, one person in particular who did some, some pretty interesting and gruesome things to figure this out, that I think you'd be interested in hearing about.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So why don't I tell you about Dr. William Beaumont, and Mr. Alexis St. Martin.

Justin:

Okay. Sounds good.

Sydnee:

Okay? First of all, before I tell you why I'm going to tell you about these two guys, I want to thank some people. Um, Hannah who did, she did what I, what you liked referred to as the McElroy bump. She suggested this topic a while ago, and then we hadn't done it, so she suggested it again so it would be fresh in my inbox.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Um, but there's some other people who suggested it. Dale, Robert, Brendan, Grant. Thank you guys, this is a great topic. And Justin, you're going to be so grossed out, you're going to love it.

Justin:

I can't ... Ugh. I haven't eaten though. Well, I guess that's better.

Sydnee:

No, that is-

Justin:

All things considering.

Sydnee:

No, trust me, that is better. We're not going to advertise any food today, right?

Justin:

No, no food sponsors.

Sydnee:

Good. Okay. Thank goodness. They'd hate us.

Um. So, prior to the 1800s, doctors really didn't understand, much like Justin, didn't understand [laughs] the process of digestion very well.

Justin:

So I'm much like a doctor in the 1800s. I can live with that.

Sydnee:

You know what? You ... yes. I think your medical knowledge is about equal to a doctor prior to the 1800s.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Uh. There were two, there were two big camps of people in the medical community ... And when I say medical community, let's be fair, we're still talking about people who are like, "Hey I'm a doctor, I cut somebody's leg off once, behind the barn".

Justin:

Yee haw.

Sydnee:

"He didn't want me to, but I did it."

Justin:

Right. Psychopaths.

Sydnee:

Yeah. I mean there were some people who had actually tried to train, but there were a lot of people who were just like, "My first name is Doctor, so I think that counts."

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Um. In the two cam- ... So, the two camps on digestion. One believe that digestion is a mechanical thing. So basically, you chew the food [chewing sounds], it goes down into, into your stomach and then your stomach just kind of mashes it around until it digests. And then your intestines probably help finish the process.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

You know what I mean? So it's all mechanical.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

The food's tossed around, mashed up and ...

Justin:

Well, that's not right, because I know stomach acid's a thing.

Sydnee:

Well there you go. And that was the other camp. They thought that there was something inside the stomach, some kind of fluid ... There were some people who thought acid was part of the process, that actually broke the food down into different parts, and then you digested it that way. Uh, but nobody really understood the process. Now, Dr. Beaumont is credited with figuring this out, with the, with a lot of assistance from somebody who I would consider a very unfortunate participant in history, Mr. Alexis St. Martin.

So let me tell you about who these two guys are. First of all, Dr. Beaumont is born in Connecticut in 1785, and ... Well, and I say "doctor", this, this is crazy, the amount of training, or the lack of training he had to become a doctor. So back then, if you wanted to be a physician, you could just, what they call, "read under" someone.

Justin:

Meaning?

Sydnee:

So you would find a doctor who was willing to let you read under them, meaning that they would, you would find books that said stuff about medicine, I don't know if it's right or not, because it's 1809 when we're talking about this. And then you would read them, and you could, I guess like, I don't know, have a book club with them. Like you could tell them, like, what books should I read next, doctor? And he would tell you and then you'd tell him that you read it, and I don't know he might quiz you, maybe?

Justin:

Perfect. I love it.

Sydnee:

Um. But that was kind of what you would do a-at first. You'd read under them. And then eventually, once you saved up enough money, you would pay them to do an apprenticeship with them.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So he read under a doctor-

Justin:

So it's like Oprah, the entire nation has been reading under Oprah.

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

She's just telling us what books to read and then eventually we'll get an Oprah apprenticeship.

Sydnee:

Who's going to get the Oprah apprenticeship?

Justin:

Me. Congratulate me.

Sydnee:

Con-congratulations.

Justin:

Hooray.

Sydnee:

Yay. Do we get a car?

Justin:

You get a car.

Sydnee:

I get a car.

Justin:

[crosstalk 00:07:41] there's only two people in the room. So there's only two cars. It's not that extravagant, but ...

Sydnee:

That's not as exciting.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So he, so he read under a doctor, starting in 1809, and then in 1811, he was able to buy an apprenticeship with that doctor. And by 1812, he was a doctor.

Justin:

There you go.

Sydnee:

So, what, were it only that simple now. Um. He did ... But he did have a lot of on the job training, I will say, because he worked uh, a-as an army surgeon, or as a surgeon's mate initially and then as an army surgeon, um, in the War of 1812.

Justin:

I like this guy. He's a real ladder climber.

Sydnee:

Um. He also then, later opened a private practice uh, where he would see patients, and after the experiments we're going to talk about, he had a huge private practice, because he was pretty famous.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Um. Where we, where we're going to start our journey with him is on Mackinac Island in 1822. This is where we meet Alexis St. Martin. Alexis St. Martin is not a doctor.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

He is a voyager.

Justin:

Ooh.

Sydnee:

Isn't that a cool name?

Justin:

That's a cool-

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

That's a cool gig.

Sydnee:

Or a cool title. A voyager.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So he worked with the American fur company. He was a fur trader. So he would paddle around in a canoe and kill things and get the fur and then take it back and ...

Justin:

Beaver pelts and, and what not. Yeah.

Sydnee:

Yeah, and sell it for money. And he worked on Mackinac Island, uh, this is in Lake Huron. He was a, a French Canadian. And we're talking about, as we talk about these two men, these are really two different classes of society. Like, Dr. Beaumont was um, by the time they met, was an officer, um, in the army. And uh, Alexis St. Martin was part of the, the fur traders. Who were seen as kind of like a rough class. Like, they gambled and they drank

and they partied and they spent all the money they made trading furs on, you know, loose women and cool drinks and-

Justin:

I'm with you.

Sydnee:

... hot music. I don't know. [laughs] whatever, whatever cool people do.

Justin:

Yeah. What do cool people do? Oh you have no idea.

Sydnee:

These, these two men probably would never have come into contact, is what I'm saying.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Usually. Except for, in June of 1822, when poor Alexis was accidentally shot in the stomach with a shotgun, when it ... And uh, it sounds like from all accounts it was an accident. It went off about three feet away from him. So he's shot in the stomach, um, Dr. Beaumont is, is nearby and is one of the, the physicians and an officer. He runs to the rescue to save this poor guy. He's got a hole in his side about the side of the palm of your hand.

Um, they, he ... This, this shotgun blast has damaged not just his stomach but his left lung is damaged, two ribs are damaged, and they can see a big gaping hole in his actual stomach. Uh, they know it's in his stomach because his breakfast immediately spilled from the wound.

Justin:

There's the first piece of the puzzle right there. Food is in your tummy. There. You're welcome, doctors.

Sydnee:

[laughs] So we're already learning.

Justin:

Already making progress.

Sydnee:

Uh, Alexis isn't learning. Alexis is clinging to life. Um. And, and Dr. Beaumont comes to, to try to treat him and rescue him, knowing that, at the time, this is likely a fatal wound.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

I mean that, that's what we're thinking. Because we didn't really understand infection very well, as, as in like what caused it. But we knew that usually, we couldn't stop it and people died. Um. So Dr Beaumont though, he, he is intrepid. He does his best. And he, he actually uses his pen knife to kind of pick out the pieces of broken rib and then push the lung back where it goes.

Justin:

Cool. Cool.

Sydnee:

Uh, he cleans the wound up, and he puts a poultice of some sort on it.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

As you would do.

Justin:

Probably just like dirt and fox hair and wishes.

Sydnee:

[laughs] That, some kind of animal poop. You know there's animal poop in there.

Justin:

You know there's scat.

Sydnee:

Um, and then he waits. And for the next six months, it's, it's kind of touch and go whether or not Alexis is going to survive. Um, he gets pneumonia, the wound becomes infected, uh ... None of this is surprising, considering the, you know ...

Justin:

He's, he's hungry.

Sydnee:

[laughs] He's really hungry.

Justin:

Just so hungry.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Dr. Beaumont does his best to tend to him, using the treatments of the time. He bleeds him periodically. You know, why not?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

He's got a big hole in his stomach. Why not cut open a vein and bleed him a little bit. And, um, he cleans the wound as often as he can. He, he tries at one point ... And this was another common treatment at the time, when somebody's sick with something, you don't know what to do, give them something that will make them puke. You know, get the bad stuff out.

Justin:

Sure. Ipecac. Something like that.

Sydnee:

Exactly. So he gives him a cathartic, meaning something that would make him puke. And you can imagine what happened in that situation.

Justin:

I can't, and I won't.

Sydnee:

[laughs] It's ... What, do you want me to describe it to you?

Justin:

Yeah. In great detail.

Sydnee:

So I mean he, instead of throwing up, because he's got this big hole in his stomach, everything just kind of comes pouring out.

Justin:

Great.

Sydnee:

Like the hole in his stomach.

Justin:

Excellent.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Excellent.

Sydnee:

This actually, for a while they feed him through what they record as anal injection for a while.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

To keep him nourished.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

So ... I wish, I'm wondering, like I don't even know what tools, or what food...

Justin:

Probably a turkey baster.

Sydnee:

Well they didn't have like, Ensure. I don't even know ... You think like a turkey baster?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

What were they d-, what, were they just pureeing things? What do you think?

Justin:

Pureed turkey.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

It's all a turkey-based system. Maybe some cranberries around the holidays. Just a nice, nice butt lunch. [laughs]

Sydnee:

[laughs] Please don't ever say butt lunch again. [laughs]

Like a sweet ...

Justin:

So we got a real good butt lunch.

Sydnee:

I guess, it's a festive butt lunch, if you've got to have a butt lunch.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

You want it to be festive.

Justin:

Yeah. If you're going to town, go in a Lincoln. If you're going to have a butt lunch, some ground up turkey and cranberries.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Now, it's remarkable, considering all this, that Alexis not only survives, he starts improving. He's doing better.

Justin:

[snorts]

Sydnee:

Um. [laughs]

Justin:

Is he doing better though, Sydnee?

Sydnee:

Like ... He is.

Justin:

Like is he doing "better"?

Sydnee:

Well I mean, he's alive, he's breathing, his heart's beating. He's not riddled with infection by December.

Justin:

O-okay.

Sydnee:

So I mean, this is a long time. June to December. He's struggling, he's sick. By- by December, um, they can actually just put a bandage over the wound, a really tight bandage, and then he can eat, and food doesn't come spilling out of his stomach.

Justin:

Wonderful. That, that's good, right?

Sydnee:

That's good. Well, I mean it's better, I think.

Justin:

Better? It's-

Sydnee:

Better than anal inject-, better than butt lunch.

Justin:

Better than butt lunch.

Sydnee:

[laughs] This is ... See? It's too bad we're not doing any ads for food!

Justin:

Come to TGI Friday's this, this week for mozzarella slammers. We guarantee, we're better than butt lunch.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Is that, I think Guy Fieri's is that.

Justin:

Come down and ... [laughs]

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Come down to Johnny Salsa's this weekend for our quesadilla hour, it's wrapped in bacon and slammed in nacho cheese, and it's better than butt lunch.

Sydnee:

[laughs]Um. As, as ... So now that the, the wound is better, Beaumont starts trying to close it. You know, 'cause he, he's been too sick for him to really go through the surgery to try to, you know, sew up this hole. So he starts trying to close up the wound, and he tries this several different times and he just can't get it to close.

It won't stay closed, he can't get the edges to approximate, meaning like come together and stay, stay sealed. So now there's a much smaller hole in this man's side, but it's still very much present, which I, I guess at that point, if you've got a hole in you, you don't really care how big it is, it's like, a problem.

Um. And what Dr Beaumont notices is it's ... And you kind of have to envision this. So it's healed up around the edges, it's like a tunnel that's solid all the way through, you know what I mean?

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So it's like all healed up on the sides, so stuff's not going to come out of the stomach and just spill into the abdominal cavity. It goes out of the body and then back into the stomach. It's like a one way street there.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay.

Sydnee:

So this is called a gastric fistula.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

And that is what he has developed.

Justin:

Did they have to invent a name for it, there on the spot?

Sydnee:

No, there were actually ... There were [laughs], it's funny. There were actually, throughout history, there have been other people who have survived with gastric fistulas, even prior to Alexis St. Martin. But um, what's notable is that most of them didn't, uh, use it to, I guess, the betterment of mankind, as Alexis will do here soon.

Justin:

Spoiler alert.

Sydnee:

Um. Now, at this point, because, you know, he's pretty much stable, he's got this hole in his stomach. Um, he's got to cover it so that food doesn't come out when he eats. But he could go back to his life. However, he doesn't think, you know what, that whole rough existence as a fur trader is probably going to be pretty tough on somebody with a hole in their gut. And Beaumont agrees with him, that's probably not a good idea. And not only that, he sees an opportunity here.

Justin:

'Cause he can look at his gu-gully works?

Sydnee:

Exactly. So, you know, everybody's been debating about digestion, and now all of a sudden, we have this opportunity to study it really up close and personal.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So he hires Alexis. To keep him around, he first hires him in 1823 to be his handyman. So ... Which I think is kind of interesting, 'cause like, you can't be a fur trader, 'cause that's too hard. But just chop some wood for me and mow my lawn or whatever.

Justin:

Whatever.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Do some chores. Um. It takes him a while of persuading, a year or so, but eventually Beaumont talks him into letting him do some experiments on this hole in his stomach.

Justin:

Oh no. What, what ... Okay. [breathes deeply] What kind?

Sydnee:

Well, I'm going to give you a brief respite before I tell you about the experiments. Why don't you come down with me to the billing department?

Justin:

Oh thank God. Let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin:

Okay, Syd, tell me about these... Stomach Expiraments... He said, not really wanting the answer to his question.

Sydnee:

So. Dr. Beaumont has this guy, Alexis St. Martin, he's got a hole in his stomach and he thinks, what can I put in there. So he starts by tying pieces of meat to a string and then just kind of dangling them into the hole in his stomach.

Justin:

Mmm.

Sydnee:

And he tries different kinds of meat. Like, he starts off and he's like, here's some salted-

Justin:

How you catch a gator.

Sydnee:

[Laughs]

Justin:

Trying to catch himself a gator. A tummy gator.

Sydnee:

[laughs] That's how your food is broken down. A tummy gator.

Justin:

That's how your food is broken down, tummy gators. We solved it. What if he did, reached down some food on a string, and he just pulled up a little tummy gator. Like how stoked would he be? Like, "Hey guys. Hey, hi, hello? It's Dr. Beaumont. We were very wrong. We were almost incalculably wrong."

Sydnee:

"But it is much cooler than we ever thought."

Justin:

It is much better ...

"Do you know how sometimes when you throw up really hard, a little alligator comes out? Well, good news, I have cracked that case as well."

Sydnee:

It's ... [laughs] See, they teach you that in med school, but you've got to get to like the higher levels of med school.

Justin:

Yeah. They're-

Sydnee:

You gotta pay extra before they tell you that. [laughs]

Justin:

It's like Scientology. You got to get to OT3 before they'll tell you that your tummy's full of little gators.

Sydnee:

That's when you get so far, they tell you that and you go "Oh no".

Justin:

Oh no.

Sydnee:

Oh no.

Justin:

This is a bad med school.

Sydnee:

I have gone astray! [laughs]

Justin:

Okay. So what was he dangling?

Sydnee:

So he tried some, some salted lean beef, some slated fat pork. And then he started trying like, raw beef.

Justin:

Mmm.

Sydnee:

So he was dangling just like, raw pieces of beef in, in this poor guy's stomach. Um. He did try things that weren't meat occasionally. Stale bread,

raw cabbage. He would dangle it in there and then take it out at like one hour, two hours, three hours, to see what it looked like, basically.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay.

Sydnee:

To see, you know, how did it ... Did it break down, if it wasn't being moved ... You know, what was happening. Um. He would also like, take the temperature of his stomach. So he would have him fast and then check the temperature, which was 100 degrees, in case you're interested. And then he would, like, take some of the juices from his stomach. Like, stick a spoon in there and take some gastric juices out.

Justin:

Get some tummy juices, yeah.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Put 'em in a test tube, make sure they stayed at a hundred degrees and then put food in that and see like, does that digest food just as easily, if I like put it in a test tube. And he would try them at different temperatures and um, you know, basically just see like what, what happens. Like, what, what is it in the stomach that's digesting the food?

Um. As you can imagine, these experiments left Alexis feeling ...

Justin:

Terrible.

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Pretty bad.

Justin:

Yeah, thanks for dangling raw pork in my tummy. I'm gonna go.

Sydnee:

It's ... [Laughs] You know, it's funny, they note that he had indigestion afterwards, which I think sounds like an, like an understatement.

Justin:

Yeah, right.

Sydnee:

Indigestion.

Justin:

Got off easy.

Sydnee:

Um. So it, after only about a month or so, Alexis takes off back to Canada. And he's like, "I'm sorry dude", you know, "I, I appreciate that you saved my life. I appreciate that you tried to give me a job. But I just think the price is too steep here."

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]. "This is not fulfilling or rewarding work."

Sydnee:

"I feel like crap, so I'm going back to Canada", where he got married, and had kids.

Justin:

Great. And they had holes in their tummies too.

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

Because he's passing it on.

Sydnee:

No, that's not how that works.

Justin:

That's how that works.

Sydnee:

He must've been a really charming guy. [laughs]

Justin:

Oh boy. Do you know how smooth a talker you have to be, to ... "There's uh, one other thing that I meant to tell you. I put food in a hole in my belly. That's right. That's where I put food."

Sydnee:

Well now—

Justin:

Imagine if first date's dinner. What if your first date is dinner? A breadstick, another breadstick? "Oh I really shouldn't", unzips shirt. Puts a breadstick in, tummy hole

Sydnee:

Don't mind if I do. [laughs]I don't think he, he fed himself that way.

Justin:

[singing] I bet at parties he did. You don't know guys very well.

Sydnee:

[laughs] He, he was kind of a heavy drinker, so ...

Justin:

Yeah. Uh, yes Sydnee, I'd like you to meet uh, every dude ever, would definitely, definitely do that at every opportunity.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Especially when drunk. Are you kidding me?

Sydnee:

Well, but maybe he had to drink so much because it kept coming back out.

Justin:

Right. Like a, like that old joke, a skeleton walks into a bar and he says, "Bartender I need a beer and a mop".

Sydnee:

[laughs] That's a good joke. I like that.

Justin:

Thanks, I thought it was a pretty good joke.

Sydnee:

So, okay. So Alexis leaves but Beaumont's not done with him. He, he wants to understand digestion better, he didn't feel like he got enough, he, he didn't feel like he crammed enough raw beef into his stomach, I guess.

So over the next ten years, um, he keeps trying to get Alexis to come back and spend more time with him and do more experiments. And he occasionally succeeds. Like they would meet on and off. And the whole time Beaumont's traveling to different places with the army, and he's, he's, cau-, like, writing letters to Alexis. And like, "Please, come back to me. I will pay you, I will, bring your family with you and pay them too. Please, I really want to do some more experiments on your stomach."

At one point Beaumont even arranges to have him enlisted in the army so he could travel with him. And like his job is just to follow him around and let Beaumont stick stuff in his stomach.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Um. Uh, when they did come, when him and his family would come and stay with him for periods of time, um, Beaumont would pay them all like, hired hands, essentially.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um. It, and it's a really odd relationship, because like, by all accounts, Alexis St. Martin didn't speak English very well. He was French-Canadian, so he mainly spoke French. And Beaumont did not, um, speak French-

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

... that we, that we know of. So he probably didn't communicate very well. They're from very different classes at the time. And if you read their letters, they kind of hated each other.

Justin:

Really?

Sydnee:

Yeah. Beaumont thought Alexis St. Martin ... He calls him a villain, he thought he was like a drunk and a ... You know, just kind of worthless except for what he could, you know, teach us, basically.

Justin:

His tummy tricks.

Sydnee:

Yeah. His ... [laughs] Except for the hole in his stomach.

And, A-Alexis kind of thought Beaumont was a jerk and kind of elitist, but he felt an allegiance to him because he saved his life. Uh, so he would go back periodically. At one point, in 1829, Beaumont paid the whole family to, to come to Fort Crawford. He started observing Alexis' stomach under different like, weather conditions. When it's raining, how fast do you digest? When it's really hot outside, what, what does raw beef do at that point?

Um, at some point, this really ticked Alexis off. And he even like, notes this in his experiments. Like, when the subject's really angry, his digestion is slowed down.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

So like, you can note the, the effect of, of, you know, ticking him off of your, your cabbage.

Justin:

Yeah. [laughs]

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Um. He compared, like stomach juices to water. That was a big thing he did, to like, see would anything break it down? Or is there something in the, the you know, stomach juice that really breaks the food down.

Um. He, he got mad again at, at this time and left again in 1831. Um. Only to meet up with him again a year later, 1832 in Washington D.C. And then it's just the two guys together. Like, they spend some months together in like Washington D.C., just the two of them, like holed up in a hotel somewhere doing experiments on his stomach. Can you imagine? Like, what a weird period of time.

Justin:

Yeah. That would be a ... Yeah.

Sydnee:

That-

Justin:

That would be an odd, odd way to spend your days.

Sydnee:

And like, and he's doing experiments ... Like at one point they note that he put 12 raw oysters into his stomach hole.

Justin:

Ugh. God. Come on.

Sydnee:

Which, I don't know, this sounds like the weirdest, like, romantic, like they meet up again-

Justin:

It is.

Sydnee:

... over oysters.

Justin:

It's like a will they/ won't they put food into his stomach. Like, they ... "At first they hated each other, but then, something changed." Well, he got shot in the stomach with a shotgun, but-

Sydnee:

Can I offer you some oysters?

Justin:

That would ... Ca-That is, that is like the worst meet cute ever, okay?

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Getting shot in the stomach with shot gun.

Sydnee:

Yeah. He would also make him exercise. I'm hoping like, not immediately after the raw oysters.

Justin:

Yeah. Let's hope so.

Sydnee:

Um. The two finally parted ways after this Washington D.C. extravaganza trip. This is, I don't know I guess they toured the city, they toured the monuments, checked out the mall-

I don't think there were many at the point, at that point.

Justin:

No, there's not a lot to look at.

Sydnee:

No, there wasn't a lot to look at yet. Um. But they had oysters and-

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

And then they, they parted ways. And Beaumont wrote his book, where he wrote down all of his observations and proved once for all that it was, digestion was a chemical process. There was acid, as he theorized, hydrochloric acid, and the juices as well. There was other things that would break food down, and it wasn't just mechanical. Um. But even after he published this book, and it brought him a lot of fame, which helped him a

great deal in his private practice. So he had like this flourishing private practice at this point. He'd settled down in St. Louis and basically was just, living out his life. But he kept writing to Alexis for the next 20 years.

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

To please come back, I will pay ... And sometimes, like, he would say he'd pay for his family and Alexis would be like, "Well, send me the money the first so that I can ... 'Cause I don't have the money. I can't front it for you, dude."

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

"Can't pay me back". But, he wouldn't send him the money 'cause he thought Alexis was a scoundrel and he would just spend it on booze or whatever, so he wouldn't pay for him to come back. So they couldn't ever come to an arrangement, and unfortunately, they never meet again, because Dr. Beaumont slips on some icy stairs when he's visiting a patient at home in 1853, and hits his head and dies shortly thereafter.

Justin:

Oh. That's terrible.

Sydnee:

Um. There is, there is some sort of kind of, I don't know if this brings you some closure to this story. In 1856, Alexis St. Martin is traveling, with essentially a medicine show-

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

... at this point. Uh, there's a fake doctor, he goes by Dr. Bunting.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

And he's selling people stuff and kind of as a sideshow act, he has Alexis along.

Justin:

The man with the hole in his tummy.

Sydnee:

Exactly. So he can show him off and ... He probably is doing weird things to him like Beaumont did.

Justin:

Sure, sure.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Um. But he, he shows up in St. Louis. Now of course, Dr. Beaumont has passed away at this point, but Alexis goes and visits his widow and his son, Israel Beaumont. And the two of them kind of strike up a friendship and, until Alexis dies, him and Israel exchange letters and speak of his father and kind of share their admiration for, if nothing else, he did a lot of great things. Um. Which is kind of interesting.

Uh, Alexis, uh, lived to his eighties. Which is crazy.

Justin:

That's crazy.

Sydnee:

Yes. He died in 1880. On a sad note, his family, uh, after he died, left his body out to decompose in the sun for several days. And then when they buried him, they buried him very deep in an unmarked grave under a bunch of rocks, because they were so worried that someone would dig him and try to experiment on him more.

Justin:

I don't think that's necessarily sad. I think that that's probably what he, sounds like, considering the way this cat lived his life, he probably would've been okay with that.

Sydnee:

That's true.

Justin:

That's very pragmatic.

Sydnee:

That's, no, that's a good point. That, that was a very pragmatic decision. And, it was years. It was like over a hundred years before somebody would finally reveal where, where they buried the body. So that they could like, pay tribute to him and the, the Canadian Physiological Society got, you know, his descendants to reveal where the grave was. And then they, they went and put a plaque there, basically. Just marking, you know, this is-

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

He, he made great contributions to science, as did Dr. Beaumont and ... You know, they'd do this, by the way, to cows.

Justin:

Oh really?

Sydnee:

They create gastric fistulas in cows, different universities across the country, and like study digestion in cow stomachs by making holes in their stomach. It's crazy.

Justin:

It's unfortunate, but that's probably more efficient than trying to track down a French Canadian voyager.

Sydnee:

And shoot him in the stomach.

Justin:

And shoot him in the stomach.

Sydnee:

Nurse him back to health slowly and poorly over the course of six months, and then have a torrid relationship over the next 30 years, during which you try to get him, you try to lure him to you with oysters. [Laughs]

Justin:

Uh, folks, that's gonna do it for us. Thank you so much for listening to our show. We do have one additional sponsor, um. This is kind of weird. We've never had one of these before. It's a, a movie trailer, which is also weird,

because this is a podcast, and movie trailers are a visual medium. But you know, they, they paid us some money so we have to, to air it. So, here is that, first up.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

[music] Alexis St. Martin had it all. A great job.

Alexis:

[French accent] I am a voyager.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

Great friends.

Speaker 6:

Girl, I don't know how you do it. It's like you can eat meat whenever you want, and you never gain weight.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

But there was something missing.

Alexis:

I have a hole in my stomach.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

William Beaumont thought he had it all figured out.

Beaumont:

I've already studied an entire year to be a doctor.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

But he had a problem anybody can relate to.

Beaumont:

I want to resolve the question of whether human digestion is purely a mechanical or a chemical process.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

Until both of them found the answer where they least expected it.

Alexis & Beaumont:

Him?!

Movie Trailer Narrator:

This summer, experience the most beautiful on again, off again love story in history.

Or, or at least, you know, medical history.

Beaumont:

Dear Alexis, please come back to me in St. Louis and visit again.

Alexis:

No. I will not. I can not.

Beaumont:

I have some oysters ...

Movie Trailer Narrator:

He was an uptight medical doctor. And he was a vagabond fur trader. And they couldn't have been more different.

Beaumont:

Alexis, you left your dirty moccasins on top of my white coat, again.

Alexis:

It was not me.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

From Miller [inaudible 00:34:04] productions. Matthew McConaughey is Alexis St. Martin.

Alexis:

I am just a boy asking another boy to fix the hole in his stomach thats from the shotgun.

No, but-but seriously, please fix it all.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

And the little kid from "Jerry Maguire" who's an adult now, as William Beaumont.

Beaumont:

Stop. Stop. You had me at gastric fistula.

Movie Trailer Narrator:

On June 16th, discover the way to a man's heart really is through his stomach. In, "When Alexis met William", or, "Dirty Digesting", or, "The Notebook ... Full of Observations on Human Digestion". No, but, take your pick. They all, they all pretty much work.

[Justin singing]

Justin:

I'll see that. I would totally-

Sydnee:

Yeah, that sounds amazing.

Justin:

Sounds like a great picture. Uh, we also want to tell you uh, to uh, go get some tee shirts. The new Sawbones tee shirt is on by Sydnee's sister, Teylor, is available at Maxfunstore.com. Lot of sizes are selling out or are low quantity, so get one of those right now.

Sydnee:

Yeah, go check 'em out. They're really cool. And Teylor's really talented.

Justin:

And tweet a picture of us, of ... At us, of you wearing them. A few people uh, tweeted some, some pictures ...

Sydnee:

Yeah. We love to see that.

Justin:

We love to see that.

Sydnee:

So let us know.

Justin:

Let us know.

Okay. Thanks to The Taxpayers for letting us use their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. Thanks to Max Fun Network for having us as a part of their, their podcast family. There's a lot of great shows you can find at maximumfun.org. If you like *Sawbones*, I guarantee you're going

to like something else on that network. So go check it out. They got great shows like uh, uh, uh *Rendered*, *Stop Podcasting Yourself*, is, is a very funny program. Um.

Sydnee:

My Brother, My Brother and Me.

Justin:

Thank you dear. I appreciate that. Uh, *Bullseye*, a great show about pop culture. If you're, you're interested in that. There's tons of great stuff there, maximumfun.org.

That's going to do it for us, until next Wednesday. I am Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

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

[theme music plays out]