

Sawbones 65: Tooth Removal

Published on December 2nd, 2014

[Listen on TheMcElroy.family](#)

Clint: Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin:

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

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

Syd, I don't mean to throw shade, maximumfun.org, check it out. I don't mean to throw shade, but, uh, and I'm not even sure I'm using that phrase correctly... you look like you're in some pain.

Sydnee:

Uh, ye—one, yes. I am in some pain. And two, I actually don't think you're using that phrase correctly, but—

Justin:

That's life.

Sydnee:

... I'm not sure.

Justin:

That's life.

Sydnee:

I am in some pain, Justin. That was very astute of you.

Justin:

What's going on?

Sydnee:

Well, every once in a while, every few months... actually, it's probably been a year since this happened, my wisdom teeth start to act up. Like I think they're, you know, they're kinda half in. And so then they try to come in some more, and there's no room, and so then my mouth just hurts a lot—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... for like a week. And I can't eat—

Justin:

I know rain's coming.

Sydnee:

... anything and... Yes. Every winter. I know the winter is coming—

Justin:

The winter is coming.

Sydnee:

... when my wisdom teeth try to come in. They try to come in, so they can help me eat all those delicious Thanksgiving and Christmas treats.

Justin:

Hello, we'll help you out. No problem. We're on the way.

Sydnee:

But instead, they just hurt really badly for like a week, and then—

Justin:

What's your dentist say?

Sydnee:

My, my what now?

Justin:

What's your dentist say?

Sydnee:

Um, he... the, that dentist that I see, uh, you know the one, I, I definitely see him. I've definitely been there in the last month and he said, um, that it's fine. Don't worry.

Justin:

Sydnee?

Sydnee:

It's fine.

Justin:

Sydnee?

Sydnee:

Tell Justin, he said, "Tell Justin that I, D—Dr. Tooth Guy—"

Justin:

Dr. Tooth Guy, I hear he's very good and real.

Sydnee:

... says, says that, "I say that they're fine. Don't worry."

Justin:

Sydnee, how long has it been since you've been to the dentist?

Sydnee:

Oh, I don't think we need to quibble over numbers, like years—

Justin:

Sydnee?

Sydnee:

... and—

Justin:

Sydnee, you're a medical professional. How long has it been?

Sydnee:

Well, wh—what year did I get my braces off?

Justin:

This is not a bit for the show. Sydnee refuses to go to the dentist.

Sydnee:

I don't... My teeth are fine.

Justin:

They're fine. They look right.

Sydnee:

I brush them often. And they're very clean.

Justin:

You floss?

Sydnee:

Occasionally.

Justin:

Okay, uh-huh.

Sydnee:

But they're fine.

Justin:

You floss in the way most people do, and I know myself do, you floss, uh, uh, you floss in the same that people like go salsa dancing. All right? You know what would be fun? You know what we haven't done in forever? You know what I miss? Oh, my God. Flossing, right?

Sydnee:

[laughs] I'm sorry we don't all own, what is that thing? A Waterpik?

Justin:

Yeah, a Waterpik, it's like the squirt gun of flossing.

Sydnee:

Yeah, well, I don't have some sort of fancy tooth equipment that I use every morning.

Justin:

Sydnee, let's talk more about tooth, getting teeth removed. Uh, you'll never do it. You flatly refused.

Sydnee:

You did it recently.

Justin:

I did it recently. It was crazy.

Sydnee:

Yeah, Justin had his wisdom teeth out over the summer.

Justin:

Uh, I felt like I had to get everything done before Charlie got here. Like I had to just get myself as right as I could.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Because I knew there wouldn't be time for that kind of stuff. But, uh, tooth extraction.

Sydnee:

Yeah. So let's talk about tooth extraction. This topic, actually wisdom teeth specifically came from Sid, not me.

Justin:

Not you.

Sydnee:

Another Sid.

Justin:

Not tooting your own horn.

Sydnee:

An unrelated Sid. Um, so thank you, Sid. Uh, suggested wisdom teeth, but I actually kind of expanded it to tooth extraction, because, uh, I mean, it's kinda all the same thing.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So this is not a new concept. Uh, tooth decay, as you may imagine, is a very old problem.

Justin:

Yeah, we've had teeth for hundreds of years.

Sydnee:

And as long as we've had teeth, they've had problems. And, and let me just say, by the way, let me just preface this episode with this... I know nothing about teeth.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

I think I've said this before.

Justin:

Yeah. Just to be clear. Sydnee doesn't know—

Sydnee:

Doctors don't know—

Justin:

... yeah.

Sydnee:

... uh, well, this is not, and I don't think... I think most, uh, physicians would agree with me on this. We don't know a lot about teeth. Like we know when there's infections and some stuff like that, but honestly, if you have a tooth problem, go to a dentist. Your doctor's going to be of very little help.

Justin:

Why is that? Are teeth that complicated that we need, like specialists?

Sydnee:

Well, yeah.

Justin:

Super, super specialists.

Sydnee:

I mean, there are dentists. Like, there—

Justin:

I mean, obviously—

Sydnee:

... they exist.

Justin:

... there are dentists—

Sydnee:

They're called dentists.

Justin:

... that do exist.

Sydnee:

I've heard of them. I don't go to them, but I hear they're great.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So, uh, like I said, tooth decay's a known problem and honestly the easiest solution if your tooth is bad, is to remove it.

Justin:

Get out of there, tooth.

Sydnee:

So the concept of removing a tooth is not exactly new because it's a very, um, inelegant solution to a problem.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

"Well, the tooth is bad. We have no idea why, or what's going on or how to fix it, so yank it out of there."

Justin:

Get it out.

Sydnee:

Um, it was thought, as far back as 5,000 BC, it was documented, the Sumerians documented tooth problems. And it was thought that there... That worms caused tooth decay. That you had worms in your teeth.

Justin:

That's not accurate.

Sydnee:

No, no. Probably, I mean I hope not.

Justin:

I'm going to put that, I'm going to put that one to rest.

Sydnee:

If you have worms in your mouth, that's a whole other problem.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, there were also, they found ancient like dental drills, like hand, like, like, um, with vines or some kind of like flexible, string-like material and wood. Like a handmade drill.

Justin:

Sounds a little grizzly.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Um, but they actually used them, and then I'm, I'm sure they had like some sort of stone tip. But they actually used them for drilling holes in the teeth, to probably, uh, release evil spirits, as opposed to actually trying to fix anything.

Justin:

You know, it's funny, Syd, a lot of our episodes tend to, uh, start in Egypt.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm.

Justin:

And I wonder if, I wonder if it's because they were just that revolutionary, or that's just when we decided to start like keeping track of stuff?

Sydnee:

Well, that's the thing. There's a lot of stuff that we just guess at. We think this is what this was. I mean even these dental drills that we've discovered, like that's what we think they are.

Justin:

Could have been sex toys. It's hard to say.

Sydnee:

Probably not sex toys.

Justin:

Probably not sex toys.

Sydnee:

I don't think humans were that... I mean like, drills.

Justin:

Yeah, okay. We weren't that kinky then.

Sydnee:

Then we evolved with the kinkiness.

Justin:

We evolved the kink.

Sydnee:

Um, the Code of Hammurabi advises teeth extraction.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

But that's not for, that's not for like health reasons.

Justin:

For spiritual reasons?

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

Oh, no, punishment, of course.

Sydnee:

For mean reasons.

Justin:

Right, mean reasons.

Sydnee:

You've been bad, I'm going to pull your teeth out.

Justin:

You bad guy.

Sydnee:

Um, the Greeks wrote about—

Justin:

Stole my bubble gum. Eye for an eye. Tooth for a tooth.

Sydnee:

... was there bubble gum back then?

Justin:

Yeah, there was bubble gum, for sure. Yeah. It's probably—

Sydnee:

Are you sure?

Justin:

... probably unflavored Chiclet.

Sydnee:

So just gum.

Justin:

Just gum.

Sydnee:

Not bubble.

Justin:

Not bubble gum, perhaps.

Sydnee:

Sans bubble gum. Uh, Aristotle wrote about oral surgery. He actually wrote about a lot in terms of the physics, like that were, that are involved in removing a tooth.

Justin:

Sure, because there's like... We didn't have... There's some machines we didn't have back then. I mean, I mean that in the, in the—

Sydnee:

Like simple machines.

Justin:

... simple machines.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So like you wrote about like the lever.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

How do you use a lever to remove a tooth?

Justin:

Slowly.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Or, or forceps, you know, same kind of idea.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Um, Hippocrates did remove teeth. Uh, it was, it was something that was tried.... They tried to avoid if they could because it was very painful, and obviously we're talking in a... about a pre—anesthesia era. Um, but Hippocrates would do it.

There was actually a patron saint of dental problems. Did you know that?

Justin:

No, I did not.

Sydnee:

Saint Apollonia.

Justin:

That's nice.

Sydnee:

Yeah. And she is, the reason she is the saint of dental problems is she was tortured with tooth extraction.

Justin:

So she can empathize.

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

"I'm right there with you, homie," she says.

Sydnee:

But there are like... You can see like there are tapestries with a picture of like, um, a tooth and a crown, or like a, a person holding a tooth and that's, those are in honor of Saint Apollonia.

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

Which I think is kinda cool. So, next time you're at the dentist, you know who to say your prayers to.

But toothbrushes, which we have found ancient evidence of, were not as exactly as effective as our current toothbrushes. They're probably as about as effective as my current toothbrush.

Justin:

[laughs] Sydnee also refuses to switch toothbrushes until I literally throw away her old toothbrush in the garbage and buy a new one.

Sydnee:

I use mine very vigorously, and so it gets flat really quickly.

Justin:

And that's what you like, you like a nice, soft, flat, ineffectual polish.

Sydnee:

Yours, yours doesn't ever get flat, which makes me think I just am... I brush my teeth too hard.

Justin:

You're just getting in there.

Sydnee:

Or maybe you don't brush your teeth hard enough.

Justin:

It's all in perspective.

Sydnee:

Uh, but toothbrushes then were made of horsehair, uh, which was not as, um, hygienic and not as effective, and also could damage the gums. Uh, and then the toothpaste was basically like ground down chalk or salt or charcoal—

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

... or even brick, something like that.

Justin:

Fresh.

Sydnee:

Yeah, and so I mean, I don't know if you're trying to exfoliate your teeth, at that point.

Justin:

I guess. You're just trying to get that deep down... I'll bet it's not a daily thing. I bet this—

Sydnee:

No, no.

Justin:

... is more like—

Sydnee:

No, this wouldn't be a daily ritual in most cultures. Now, some cultures, I mean, and I, I think we talked about this actually in our oil pooling episode, that in the, in the Ayurvedic texts—

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

... that actually there were, there were some people in history that brushed their teeth daily, as part of their morning oral hygiene ritual.

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

But not everybody did. So, people really didn't have great dental hygiene. Uh, but, most people died of something else before dental issues could become a very big problem.

Justin:

Hey, hey.

Sydnee:

So, you know—

Justin:

Silver linings.

Sydnee:

... there... you don't really need to worry about tooth decay. If we look at like the long-term effects of tooth decay, we're usually talking about it setting in, in your forties, is when it should really become a problem, unless you just, I don't know, you eat Sugar Daddies all day long.

Justin:

And I do.

Sydnee:

Which, they weren't eating Sugar Daddies all day long, because they, you know.

Justin:

Hadn't invented them yet, dummies.

Sydnee:

It was ancient Greece. But as time goes on, and people live longer, especially wealthy people who weren't as likely to die from diseases linked to poverty and lack of sanitation, uh, their diets changed, things like sugar became available. Tooth decay became a major problem.

So then you start seeing a bunch of non-surgical treatments come up, because nobody wanted to have their teeth pulled. So, you know, there's some herbal remedies that people recommend. Of course, bloodletting was done for tooth decay. There were a lot of poultices and salves and things you could put on your teeth.

But none of this stuff really helped, right? Because once the tooth is dead, it needs to come out. So surgery came along. And who better to perform surgery than a barber.

Justin:

A barber, right.

Sydnee:

That's who I go to for my dental care.

Justin:

You know, I still—

Sydnee:

Is that the problem?

Justin:

... I still do. He gives me a weird look. He'll do it. Charge me an arm and a leg, though.

Sydnee:

He's very accommodating, though.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So barber surgeons—

Justin:

It's as weird as MasterCuts.

Sydnee:

... they were, they were the, those responsible for performing most tooth extractions. Um, and this starts way back in like the 1400s.

Justin:

Sure, yeah.

Sydnee:

They didn't have anesthesia, obviously, we didn't have it at first. So the way they would distract the patient as they were removing the tooth is someone would play a drum very loudly nearby. And then play it louder and louder, as they got closer to pulling the tooth. Can you imagine how awful?

Justin:

That would make it like so much worse.

Sydnee:

As the drums are just beating and beating and beating and—

Justin:

What on God's green earth is that supposed to solve for?

Sydnee:

It's supposed to distract you—

Justin:

I mean I'm distract—

Sydnee:

... so that they could yank your tooth out.

Justin:

Distract? You gave it a soundtrack, how am I going to be distracted?

Sydnee:

The drums of time are driving you mad while they're pulling your tooth out.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Um, the, uh, barbers would then hang the teeth in their shop window to show how, one that they provided the service, and two, that they were really good at it.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

Look at all these teeth I pulled.

Justin:

Yeah, look at me. I got the whole tooth.

Sydnee:

See all these rotten teeth?

Justin:

No problem.

Sydnee:

They would even actually sometimes hang it around the barber pole. So the, you know the barber pole? The—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... initially was because the bloody rags and all that stuff.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

They would also hang teeth around it.

Justin:

Ah. What a ghastly thing that was.

Sydnee:

Yeah. So in your barber's window, you might see like, uh, some rotten teeth and some jars of blood to demonstrate, "Hey, you can come here. I'll cut your hair, I'll pull your teeth and I'll do some bloodletting while you're at it."

Justin:

I wonder if that like ruins the ASMR chill that you get from just getting your hair cut. I wonder if you could like schedule, like if you could not pull anybody's teeth, or bloodlet at all while I'm getting my haircut, I would really appreciate it.

I'm trying to get like a color dye, sort of a The Bieber meets the Rachel—

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

... kind of look. And I'd rather you not yank teeth out of someone's head, three feet from me, if you don't mind.

Sydnee:

Um, actually—

Justin:

What if they also cut your hair, too? Like you're like, "Oh God—"

Sydnee:

While they're doing it?

Justin:

"... I feel miserable. But hey, look. Look at that."

Sydnee:

Hey, maybe that was, maybe that's how they, ooh, they up—sold you that way.

Justin:

Oh, right. As long as you're here.

Sydnee:

I know you're hurtin', but—

Justin:

I'll tell the drum guy to stop if you get me cut your hair for \$5.

Sydnee:

I know how to ease that pain, check out this cute bob. [laughs] Um, so as sugar and tobacco became more and more popular, especially sugar, sugar is the big culprit here, uh, members of the upper class who could afford this stuff regularly really began to suffer tooth decay.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So as a result, if you had black teeth, you probably had money. So having blackened teeth became a status symbol for a while.

Justin:

Cool.

Sydnee:

So there were actually people who would intentionally blacken their teeth.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

So that they would look like they were rich.

Justin:

Look at me, Governor. I'm well-to-do.

Sydnee:

Well, yeah. It was kinda like, you know, for a while, if your wife was overweight, that was a sign that you were very wealthy—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... because then, you know, you were able to feed her a lot and so it was a status symbol. Same idea.

Justin:

Look at those white, pearly whites, they've barely been used.

Sydnee:

[laughs] You must be poor.

Justin:

You must be poor, you need some weird, tiny lumps of coal like I have. Look at my grill.

Sydnee:

And, and a lot of this was because, even, you know, wealthy, they didn't want to remove their teeth, because it hurt really badly. And, you know, blood loss and infection and all that stuff. But they didn't, they didn't understand or could control for.

Uh, there was, uh, um, a tool invented for this in the 1700s, it's called a Tooth Key. And this is just as terrible as you would imagine.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

It basically has a little claw that is kind of placed and like, like clamped over the top of the tooth, and then there's a metal rod that goes all the way down—

Justin:

No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Sydnee:

... and embraces against the root. And once you've got it in place, just like a key, you turn it.

Justin:

Ah.

Sydnee:

You twist it, until the tooth is free and then pops out. Unfortunately, what u—yeah, I know that's awful. And unfortunately, what usually happened is it would shatter the tooth, because it was probably a diseased tooth anyway. So you would shatter the tooth, or maybe even break the jaw while you were doing it. And so then you'd just be basically picking little tooth fragments out of your gum for a while.

Justin:

[laughs] It's the wor... Wow, I do not get skeeved out very often on this program. That is unfathomable.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

You know how people say that they'd like to like go back and live their life again? "If I could just live my life again, knowing what I know now." You know what I mean? The reason I would not do that is because of losing my teeth. It was the worst thing that I can recall. And I've been through some stuff. That was the worst. That was the pits, uh.

Sydnee:

Will you not tell our daughter that as she gets older?

Justin:

Sitting, eating Christmas Dinner, like you're at church in the Fellowship Hall and just wiggling that stupid tooth back around, back and forth, just wondering, "Oh, God, is it going to fall out?" Oh, ah. The worst.

Sydnee:

I don't think it was that—

Justin:

The worst.

Sydnee:

... traumatizing for everybody.

Justin:

The worst.

Sydnee:

Um—

Justin:

The worst.

Sydnee:

I always think that these are good reminders that when people say like, "I just wish I could go back and live in the days of castles and—

Justin:

You don't.

Sydnee:

... horses and princesses. Nope, you don't. Look, there's a Tooth Key. That's what, that's what lies for you in wait back then.

Justin:

Tooth Key.

Sydnee:

Tooth Keys. Um—

Justin:

Puts a new spin on your romantic fiction, doesn't it? On your Fabio novels.

Sydnee:

[laughs] There were, in the years that came, there were various other instruments invented like forceps and levers, and all kinds of things and, um, some of them are early versions of instruments that they still use in dentistry.

Justin:

Now, see what about replacing teeth? Can we just replace them?

Sydnee:

Well, I'm going to tell you all about that, but, uh, why don't you follow me on down to the billing department real quick?

Justin:

Let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin:

Tooth replacement. Hit me.

Sydnee:

So, wealthy people, once they did, if they ever gave up those little black lumps of delight that every one so envied.

Justin:

Those fancy, fancy nubs.

Sydnee:

[laughs] They would, uh, they would have them replaced. A, a lot of people couldn't afford to do this, so this would have... probably be the upper classes. So, you could either choose between a live tooth or a dead tooth.

Justin:

I'm going to go with the live tooth.

Sydnee:

Okay. So let's say you want a live tooth.

Justin:

I do.

Sydnee:

Here's what you can expect. You're going to head down to your local barber surgeon, because they're probably going to be able to provide this for you. They're going to line up some poor people in front of you.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Who are willing to part with a donor tooth. You're going to look through their mouths until you find one that you like. You're going to pay him, the barber surgeon will yank their healthy tooth out. And then try it out in your mouth, with... by attaching it with silver wire.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

If you—

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

... if you like it, you're good.

Justin:

Try before you buy. I'm way into that. Test you, this tooth.

Sydnee:

If you don't like it, all those other donors are still waiting right there.

Justin:

Literally.

Sydnee:

You yank another one.

Justin:

Because they're chained to the ground.

Sydnee:

So basically you would just pick one until you liked it, or I guess, until you ran out of money. And then they would wire it in place. And then you have a tooth.

Justin:

See Fantine was complaining about like losing... having to get all her hair cut off and stuff. But look, she still had this avenue of, uh, uh, income open to her to help support poor Cosette.

Sydnee:

Didn't she have her teeth pulled?

Justin:

Did she?

Sydnee:

I thought she did.

Justin:

Oh, man.

Sydnee:

I thought that was part of it.

Justin:

Is that part of her thing. I fell asleep.

Sydnee:

Which is, that's uh, you know, that just made sense to me now as we're doing this episode.

Justin:

Now, it makes sense.

Sydnee:

I'm pretty sure they did. I'm sure someone will tell me if I'm wrong. Um, if you weren't as rich though, you might have to get a dead tooth. And you know who you're going to have to call for that.

Justin:

Wal-Mart.

Sydnee:

No, [laughs] not Wal-Mart. You're going to call Wal-Mart?

Justin:

Call Wal-Mart on the phone that exists back then.

Sydnee:

Well, first of all Wal-Mart didn't exist. And secondly, who calls Wal-Mart? You just go there.

Justin:

You just go there.

Sydnee:

Because once you're wandering around looking for a tooth—

Justin:

I've called Wal-Mart—

Sydnee:

... who knows what you might realize you need?

Justin:

... I've called Wal-Mart before to ask if they have a certain item in stock and their response, the tone of their response is always pretty much, "How can I possibly know that? Have you—"

Sydnee:

[laughs] Have you seen—

Justin:

"... have you been here?"

Sydnee:

... how big their store is?

Justin:

I don't know, let me spin around wildly with my arms and see what I knock off the shelves. No, I didn't see it. I guess we don't have it or maybe we have all of it. I have no idea.

Sydnee:

That's intentional, because they want you to come there. Because once you get in Wal-Mart, you're not going to leave with one time.

Justin:

You know what else I needed? Another laundry basket.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

I've been getting sick in my laundry baskets, I need another one.

Sydnee:

And they always have that holiday setup right there.

Justin:

Oh, yeah.

Sydnee:

And you know you gotta wander through it.

Justin:

Here's a new kind of... What kind of Oreo is this? Triple dipped?

Sydnee:

And they're right upfront?

Justin:

Gingerbread, pumpkin spice?

Sydnee:

They're right there near the register.

Justin:

They're right there. Okay, sorry.

Sydnee:

Impulse buys galore.

Justin:

Who's giving me a dead tooth?

Sydnee:

Okay, so if you, if you weren't as rich, you need a dead tooth, then you call a resurrectionist. You remember resurrectionists?

Justin:

I do. Uh, somebody who's going to go to the... One of the resurrection men who would go to the graveyard and dig you up a body, right?

Sydnee:

That's right. So usually, what would actually happen, they wouldn't even have to dig up the body for you. One of the first things that may happen, uh, if your corpse was unguarded, was that all your teeth were pulled.

Justin:

Cool.

Sydnee:

So usually, the bodies never even made it to the graveyard before all their teeth were yanked out. Um, because—

Justin:

Helps prevent people from getting buried alive, at least.

Sydnee:

That's true. They're going to wake up when they're teeth are getting pulled.

Justin:

Whoa, whoa, Kemosabe.

Sydnee:

I need those still.

Justin:

What's the story? I need those. Where am I? This is... There's been a huge mistake.

Sydnee:

It kinda makes those little bells like unnecessary.

Justin:

Yeah, right.

Sydnee:

You can make a lot of money off of teeth. So this was a, there was a lot of money to be made for the resurrection men, just yanking teeth before they ever took them to the graveyard.

Justin:

I imagine there has to be like a fast turnaround, right? Don't they get progressively worse, wouldn't you think?

Sydnee:

Yes, but I mean we didn't know any of... We were wiring them in place. We didn't know.

Justin:

All right.

Sydnee:

So.

Justin:

Good point.

Sydnee:

You know, if you needed a tooth, you would pay for a whatever they had.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

I mean, I'm certain they would hold out a handle of them and let you pick. [laughs] I mean that's how I imagine this, this trade-off goes down.

Justin:

Yeah, something like that.

Sydnee:

"Here, see all these nasty teeth I have. Which one do you want?"

Justin:

Which one do you want?

Sydnee:

"I, I'm leaving them for the tooth fairy." Uh, you could, uh, the big problem was that you could get TB or syphilis this way.

Justin:

Cool.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Great.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Now your, now your inability to chew doesn't seem that bad, does it?

Sydnee:

Which I... No, which you probably also get from the live donor teeth, now that I think about it.

Justin:

Yeah, sure.

Sydnee:

I'm sure you could. They actually, after a while, so you know, you could go, you could take these corpses who died of who knows what and were whatever age and had whatever illnesses and pull their teeth.

But what you really want, what you really want are young, healthy teeth, right?

Justin:

Fresh.

Sydnee:

Well, where are you going to find a lot of young, healthy people who have sadly died?

Justin:

Uh, spring break?

Sydnee:

[laughs] That's terrible.

Justin:

Just a guess, I don't know.

Sydnee:

That's an awful joke.

Justin:

You put me on the spot.

Sydnee:

Spring break?

Justin:

I don't know. Where?

Sydnee:

War.

Justin:

War, okay, war.

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

War.

Sydnee:

So, sadly, war was seen as a great way to get young, healthy teeth, to give to rich people.

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

So, actually there were so many, uh, corpses were robbed of their teeth after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, that for a while, dentures and teeth replacements became known as Waterloo Teeth.

Justin:

Hmm, charming.

Sydnee:

So you get a set of dentures, and you'd say, "Those are my Waterloo Teeth." Um, they may have indeed, come from people that died during the Battle of Waterloo. Not necessarily, because in the following wars, or in battles, every, uh, every, uh, every time this would happen, they would go, their bodies would be ransacked for teeth.

Justin:

Ah, miserable.

Sydnee:

Um, so resurrectionists would actually follow soldiers into battle.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

And just wait—

Justin:

Just wait.

Sydnee:

... for them to be shot and just go pull their teeth out. Uh, they began to, not just implant one tooth at a time, but actually create dentures then, because were losing a lot of teeth. So that's the first dentures were seen

after this. And they were basically just wired together, either teeth that they found, they could be made of ivory, uh, eventually porcelain—

Justin:

Probably a—

Sydnee:

... just whatever.

Justin:

... crazy mix thereof.

Sydnee:

Yes, actually they were. They, they often were a crazy mix of just whatever teeth were available.

Justin:

Excellent. That is a great look.

Sydnee:

And they would just string them together with some kind of wire, and then you'd wear them, and terrify children.

Justin:

Ah.

Sydnee:

Did you know by the way, as I was reading about this, Paul Revere was a dentist?

Justin:

I think I knew that. Sounds like something I probably knew.

Sydnee:

I did, I didn't know that about Paul Revere. He, uh, the... He actually would make some of these, uh, dentures. And he identified bodies by... He ha—... would help identify bodies by, "Oh, yeah. I remember those dentures. That's So-and-So." So it was kinda like dental forensics started with Paul Revere.

Justin:

Coming this fall to CBS.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Paul Revere is back from the dead.

Sydnee:

CSI Revolutions.

Justin:

No one can understand why.

Sydnee:

Um—

Justin:

CSI Roanoke. CSI, sorry, CSI Boston. Roanoke was another old-timey colony, sorry.

Sydnee:

CSI Boston, there you go.

Justin:

There's like already a show though, right? I don't know, that, maybe that's why I didn't say CSI.

Sydnee:

Is it already a show?

Justin:

Probably, not yet.

Sydnee:

Is it about Paul Revere and dental forensics?

Justin:

Copyright, copyright, trademark, Sawbones, 2014.

Sydnee:

It has to take place in the 1700s, though.

Justin:

Yeah, that's true.

Sydnee:

Yeah. So, uh, a lot of people, when we start talking about old—timey dentures, think about George Washington.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Because what does everybody think about George Washington.

Justin:

Captain Wood Teeth.

Sydnee:

He didn't.

Justin:

He didn't.

Sydnee:

He didn't. Does... Is that, is that all fully been fully been debunked by now.

Justin:

I think that's one pretty well myth busted, there's probably some, some stragglers, but I feel like I, the, they were like ivory, right?

Sydnee:

Well, he had many sets of dentures.

Justin:

Ah.

Sydnee:

So, yeah some of them—

Justin:

Depending on the occasion.

Sydnee:

... some of them certainly were ivory, uh, because of the time period. Some of them probably had dead people teeth in them.

Justin:

Excellent.

Sydnee:

Um—

Justin:

What an honor.

Sydnee:

... some of the different materials they would use would begin to take on a cast that... I, I've looked at some of them online that can look kind of wooden. So I could see how looking at them from a distance you might think they were wooden. But they absolutely were not.

Um, there were, there were people who tried to make wooden dentures, but they never worked well.

Justin:

Well, it's porous for starters.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Exactly. That was the big problem. They become soft. Um, he had dental troubles his whole life. He actually... I don't know if you knew this, when he was inaugurated, he only had one tooth. One original tooth left.

Justin:

But what a proud, inspiring tooth it was.

Sydnee:

[laughs] So he had lots of set of dentures, and you can tell his dentures, because they always had a whole for that one original tooth to go through.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Um, and it's interesting. He actually wrote a letter to his dentist, uh, to tell him, "Hey, I don't think I'm gonna... I, I need you to send me this stuff to New York, this new denture set, um, because I'm probably not going to be in Philadelphia for a while. And, uh, so would you mail this to me?"

And this letter was intercepted by the British during the Revolutionary War, and it actually led them to think that he wasn't marching south—

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

... because of the letter. So they didn't move their forces south either. And as a result, this probably contributed to us winning the battle at Yorktown.

Justin:

Dentures, turning the tide.

Sydnee:

So there you go. Which is interesting.

Justin:

You'll see that in the next Fixodent ad, I'm sure.

Sydnee:

If you, [laughs] if you go into the early 19th century, and we're going into kinda like the era of medicine shows, you would see a lot of barber surgeons who would travel around and put on big shows where they would pull teeth. Uh, and certainly doctors may have done this as well, um, because they would dabble in anything, really.

Uh, so you would travel around. You would have lots of different performers. Uh, you would walk up and like other performers would do their acts to drum up a crowd, and then the big finale would be a dentist pulling teeth.

Justin:

Well, [laughs]—

Sydnee:

And you're—

Justin:

... when you've got that sick drumbeat. Be, be a heck of a show.

Sydnee:

You would. You'd have the drumbeat. Your assistant would be dressed as a clown or something of—... to that effect. And like juggle or tell jokes.

Justin:

This just keeps getting better.

Sydnee:

[laughs] And the dentists, the, the idea was that the faster he could pull teeth and the less pain that the patient would then tell the audience they were having, the better the show was.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So and he could do, you know—

Justin:

At least that's what people would say—

Sydnee:

... tons of people a night.

Justin:

... but really the exact inverse was true.

Sydnee:

Well, maybe there... maybe that was like a psychological thing. There's a lot of pressure, like I gotta be, I gotta be tough. Everybody's watching me—

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

I don't wanna, you know. I don't wanna show pain. So, uh, i— in the same time period, unfortunately there were actually in addition to people who actually needed their teeth pulled. Because I mean, presumably, all these people who were going to medicine shows and having barber surgeons pull all their teeth, this was their last resort.

I need my teeth pulled, you know, it hurts really badly, so I will let this dentist kinda make a show of me and pull my teeth. There were people who were having dental extractions done for reasons other than tooth decay. Uh, specifically in psychiatric facilities.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Sometimes it was a very functional decision. Uh, patients who were psychotic and, they thought were at risk of biting people, they would occasionally pull their teeth. Um, which is terrible.

Justin:

It is terrible.

Sydnee:

In addition, there was something that I actually decided to look up because, uh, as many people have asked us on Twitter, I do watch The Knick, it's a wonderful show on Cinemax about the heroic era of medicine.

Justin:

I don't because I can't take that.

Sydnee:

Justin can't handle it. Because it's pretty—

Justin:

I can't.

Sydnee:

... it's pretty gruesome. For those of you who watch it, you know it's pretty gory. Uh, but if you like this kind of stuff that we talk about on our show, you would probably like this show. I certainly do.

Uh, on the show, there was, uh, um, a patient who had to go to a psychiatric hospital and was cared for by a Dr. Henry Cotton, who was an actual psychiatrist at the New Jersey State Hospital in Trenton in the early 1900s. This is a real person. Who was portrayed by Mr. John Hodgman.

Justin:

Your friend and mine, John Hodgman.

Sydnee:

Yes, on the show. Uh, and—

Justin:

Our old buddy.

Sydnee:

... our old body, buddy, John Hodgman. Who, as far as I know, does not believe in pulling teeth to cure psychiatric disease.

Justin:

Correct.

Sydnee:

No. But the physician he played, Dr. Henry Cotton did, and he thought that because of bacterial infections in your teeth and other places too, he also thought the same with the colon, that you could, uh, cure insanity by, by removing teeth or even removing your colon.

So he would have many patients' teeth removed as treatment for their various psychiatric illnesses. That obviously is not a treatment for anything—

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

... psychiatric. I would not remove teeth for that reason, or to prohibit biting. That's bad.

Anyway, as time goes on dental instruments obviously became better. Uh, but the big breakthrough was really in the 1840s with the use of ether and nitrous oxide for dental procedures. So—

Justin:

Went down a little smoother.

Sydnee:

Yes. So then it wasn't so horrifying to have your tooth removed. Um, today, about five million Americans each year have their wisdom teeth extracted.

Justin:

I know I was one.

Sydnee:

Yes, um, the, those are your third molars. Uh, they're named wisdom teeth. Do you know why?

Justin:

I... because they come in once you're older.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm. Exactly, because they usually come in, in like your twenties, and you're presumably wiser. Although if I was wiser in my twenties, I'd—

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

... yeah, somebody should have told me. Uh, they are, in the sense vestigial. We really don't need wisdom teeth.

Justin:

You know what, I thought that, too.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

But after I got them removed, I was definitely aware of some deep chewing, like sometimes I just don't feel like I'm giving food my best chew. And I was definitely missing the chewing surface there at the beginning.

Sydnee:

You think you were?

Justin:

I think there was some deep down, like I mean like a Charleston Chew, or maybe a Cow Tale or a Sugar Daddy. I feel like I wasn't giving it my best chew for a while. I feel like I've come around to it, but, um, I wouldn't say completely vestigial. I, I miss that chewing surface, I do.

Sydnee:

Well, what we really needed them for was like plant material that we had to ground down.

Justin:

Well, I don't, I don't mess with any of that.

Sydnee:

No, I know that. Um, that's why you're down so many cookie points.

Justin:

That's a joke, I love salad this year.

Sydnee:

Uh, but most of us don't need them. So, we don't... Our jaws are not quite big enough to accommodate them.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So as a result, they get stuck, they don't come in completely, and, um, if they're not in completely and they're causing infections or impaction or pain, then you need to have them removed.

Um, it actually varies. Some people don't have wisdom teeth. Like there, there are some genetic lines in Mexico where just, there are no more wisdom teeth. They don't... they're not born with them anymore.

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

Because you don't need them, so they've already lost them. Whereas, some other parts of the world you go to and 100% of the culture has wisdom teeth. So—

Justin:

Or double wisdom teeth. Sometimes they have more wisdom teeth. Maybe they have—

Sydnee:

I hope not.

Justin:

... eight wisdom teeth.

Sydnee:

You don't need those.

Justin:

Don't need those, get those removed. Anyway, uh, that's going to do it for us here, this week. We hope you've had a good time. Thank you to folks tweeting about the show. Uh, folks like Elizabeth, uh, RJ Moore, Tony, Eric, Ashley, Harlequin, Clarity, Brynne, Michal, uh, Amanda, Cutie Claris, Angry Potou, Chazoo, Scout, Maggie, Mudsucker, Foxy, Home Grow Adventures. So many others, Ross, Los Appio, and many, many others. Thank you so much for tweeting about the show.

We're at Sawbones on Twitter. So if you want to, uh, uh, get ahold of us there. Um, then, uh, do it.

Sydnee:

Or you can always email us.

Justin:

Yeah, sawbones uh, @maximumfun.org.

Sydnee:

Yeah, if you have any topic suggestions or comments, we love to hear 'em.

Justin:

We're also on Twitter ourselves. She's @SydneeMcElroy, S-Y-D-N-E-E M-C-E-L-R-O-Y.

Sydnee:

And he's just @justinmcelroy.

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

Sorry.

Justin:

Just not picking up my cues there, huh?

Sydnee:

Well, like everybody knows now, right?

Justin:

Not everybody.

Sydnee:

Does anyone need to spell Justin? No.

Justin:

No? Okay, fine. Uh, uh, [laughs] we're on the Maximum Fun network. There's a ton of great shows there you can listen to. Uh, Stop Podcasting Yourself is two really funny guys, Canadians, uh, if you will. And I think you will. I think you're going to enjoy those fellas. Uh, eh, just as one example. Uh, my brother Travis is also launching a new program, uh, tomorrow, that you'll have to check out maximumfun.org to find more about that.

Sydnee:

And—

Justin:

[whispers] It's great.

Sydnee:

... and you can always check out My Brother, My Brother and Me.

Justin:

That's true. That's another podcast that we do on the network. Uh, but there's a lot there. Maximumfun.org is the place to check it totally out. Uh, ah, thanks to The Taxpayers for letting us use their song, Medicines, for our intro and outro. And thanks to you for listening. We'll be back with you next Tuesday. Until then, I'm Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

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

[theme music plays]

MaximumFun.org.
Comedy and culture.
Artist owned.
Audience supported.