



Episode 704, Story 1: Sideshow Babies

Elyse: Our first story investigates the tiniest pioneers of medical science. May 1933. In the midst of the great depression, the city of Chicago throws an elaborate and expensive party: the “Century of Progress Exposition” – the 1933 World’s Fair. Over the next two summers more than 38 million people crowd onto the city’s lake front to forget their troubles and to witness the latest technological wonders. Fairgoers could see the world’s largest thermometer, ride the sky ride 625 feet above the fair, or visit the giant animatronics dinosaurs. But did the attractions also include an exhibit of live premature babies? Today, over 75 years later, Sue Kholer and her mother Pat Shaver of New Berlin, Wisconsin have an artifact that could reveal a first hand account of a strange chapter in medical history.

Sue: Imagine putting babies on display for paying customers.

Pat: That’s the story. Yeah.

Elyse: As an appraiser and as a mom, I’m intrigued by Pat and Sue’s story. So I’ve come to New Berlin to find out more.

Pat: Hi.

Elyse: Hi. I’m Elyse.

Pat: Hi, Elyse. Nice to meet ya. Come on in.

Elyse: Thank you. So, Sue, what do you have for me?

Sue: I have this cup that my mom supposedly got from the Chicago World’s Fair.

Elyse: Let’s see. 1933. A century of progress. Chicago. I recognize the logo from other appraisals I’ve done - it’s definitely from the 1933 World’s Fair. And it says Patricia. Is that you?

Pat: Yes, it is.



Elyse: And what's the story behind this cup?

Pat: I was born at home prematurely. And -- in a matter of, uh, days, I suppose, the Chicago board of health came in and took me out of the house. And, uh, my parents were informed that I was in an incubator on display at the Chicago World's Fair. And, uh, I assume they came to visit me. [Chuckles]

Elyse: What do you know about that story?

Pat: Uh, I just know that I was a preemie. I was four pounds, seven ounces.

Elyse: Pat was born Patricia Mylas September 20th, 1933. Her birth certificate records that she was born prematurely.

Pat: And from what I heard, I was put in a shoebox then and put by the oven to keep warm. And it was something that we really never discussed at home. But there was always that cup sitting in the china cabinet.

Elyse: An exhibit of living babies sounds very unusual. Why do you think that you were on display at the World's Fair? Pat knew nothing of the incubator story until she was a teenager. That's when an aunt told her about her first months, on display at the Chicago World's Fair. So this is all very interesting, but what could I find out for you?

Sue: Well, if babies were really on display at the World's Fair, and if my mom was one of them.

Elyse: If the story is true, she'd like to see some photos of the exhibit. I'll look into it and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

Pat: Good luck. [Chuckles]

Sue: Thank you!



Elyse: It's a curious object and an even stranger story. The cup appears to be a period artifact – but there's nothing on it about babies, or incubators. I'm heading to meet journalist Lee Bey at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. I'm investigating an exhibit at the World's Fair that this cup might have been a part of. Ever seen it before? Lee's never seen our cup. He says it's almost certainly an authentic souvenir from the fair. The logo was a symbol of the fair's futuristic exhibits.

Lee: I mean you'd see things like, for instance, this train behind us, the Zephyr, which raced from Denver to Chicago, sitting...setting land speed records.

Elyse: The diesel powered Zephyr made steam trains obsolete overnight, with a 1000-mile non-stop run, and reaching speeds of up to 112 miles per hour.

Lee: And it really set the stage for what you'd see at the fair.

Elyse: Fairgoers could witness working automobile assembly lines, and tour "Homes of Tomorrow" with radical new inventions like automatic dishwashers and air conditioning.

Lee: And it's important, because it happens during the time of the Great Depression. So, the people needed some relief, some sense that the future would be better than the present.

Elyse: Lee explains how the Depression almost caused the 1933 fair to be cancelled. With unemployment soaring, World's Fair investors feared no one would show up. With so much on the line, organizers made sure the event had plenty of eye catching attractions. But was one of those spectacles an exhibit of live babies? My investigation is about using babies for medical technology. Have you ever heard of a baby incubator exhibit at the World's Fair?

Lee: Indeed I have. And, in fact, when you called, I found this photograph from the World's Fair.

Elyse: Baby incubators "with living babies". Lee says the exhibit featured dozens of babies, cared for by a full medical staff in a hospital-like setting.

Lee: And if you look closely, this is actually not in the technology section of the fair, this is along the midway...where the more tawdry, the sideshows could be found at the fair. And, in fact, to the



left of this would be where Sally Rand, the fan dancer, the notorious fan dancer, did her thing, uh, at the "Streets of Paris" exhibit.

Elyse: Rand was arrested four times for her lascivious dance. The scandal delighted fair promoters – the police attention only made for larger crowds. Lee says it was no accident that the incubator babies were Sally Rand's next door neighbors. The baby display was run just like a sideshow, with barkers and glossy posters. The exhibit was operated by a German doctor named Martin Couney, who charged visitors 25 cents to see his baby display.

Lee: And he made about fifteen hundred dollars a day. Which gives you a sense of the numbers that were moving through the place.

Elyse: Any other information about him?

Lee: No. I don't, I'm sorry.

Elyse: Lee doesn't know where I can find interior photos of Couney's Chicago exhibit – photos that might show me a young Patricia Milas. But, he's given me a lead on someone who might be able to help. Right, that's what I'm looking for. Meanwhile, I want to figure out what kind of doctor would use babies in such a spectacle. Martin Couney received a medical degree in Leipzig Germany, and in 1890 began to work with prominent pediatrician Pierre Budin. The first baby incubator had been invented in France 20 years earlier. Budin made major design improvements. In 1896 Couney took what he had learned on the road, opening an incubator display at the Berlin exhibition. The show was a huge success. In 1898 Couney brought his baby show across the Atlantic, opening at the Omaha trans-Mississippi exposition, quickly followed by shows in Buffalo, St. Louis, San Francisco, and eventually Chicago. Critics pounced.

Elyse: The British medical journal *The Lancet* asks: "is it in keeping with the dignity of science that incubators and living babies should be exhibited amidst the glare and noise of a vulgar fair? The Brooklyn Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children launched an investigation into Couney's shows on Coney Island. They attempted to shut him down, but Couney continued. Although he was criticized, he appears to have had the backing of parents and at least some doctors. I've come to the University of Illinois hospital in Chicago to meet with National Institute of



Health Pediatrician and Medical Historian Dr. Tonse Raju. He's written about the history of incubator technology. So who is this?

Dr. Raju: Uh, this is Arielle... who is now three weeks...about three weeks of age.

Elyse: Uh huh.

Dr. Raju: And, when she was born she was...two pounds and one ounce. And now she weighs close to three pounds.

Elyse: My god. She's precious. Can I touch her?

Dr. Raju: Yes. Sure.

Elyse: Okay. Hi sweetheart... can you hold my hand? Hi, Arielle. So, tell me, what is this incubator doing for her right now?

Dr. Raju: Uh, incubator is actually helping her to keep her body temperature constant.

Elyse: And why is that?

Dr. Raju: It's very important for premature babies, because they don't have ability to keep up their body heat.

Elyse: Dr. Raju tells me that in the early part of the 20th century few hospitals had incubators, or staff trained in how to care for underweight babies. The incubators were expensive and the priority was simply increasing survival rates for full term babies, and their mothers. What did doctors do before incubators?

Dr. Raju: Not a whole lot they could do. Uh, they tried to keep the babies warm as much as possible. Keeping them in shoeboxes, you know, surrounded by hay. But, most of these babies, especially those who are below two pounds, would not survive in those days. Incubator technology really revolutionized care of the baby; there's no doubt about that.



Elyse: I tell Dr. Raju about Pat's silver cup and its possible connection to Martin Couney's incubator baby exhibit.

Dr. Raju: Oh yeah, Dr. Martin Couney is a very interesting character.

Elyse: Do you know why a city health department would work with Dr. Couney to get babies for his shows?

Dr. Raju: well, I think it purely boils down to the matter of economics. He was not charging any...anything to the parents. He was just charging people to get in to the shows.

Elyse: Although many doctors bristled at the side show setting, they realized that without Couney's incubators, few of these underweight newborns would have survived. You know, it just seems like shaky medical ethics.

Dr. Raju: Well, yes, he was making money. But he claimed that's the only way he could keep that show going.

Elyse: Well, isn't that exploitation?

Dr. Raju: Well, that was a criticism he was facing. But on the other hand, he seems to be saving those babies. And then he was also educating the public.

Elyse: Dr. Raju says that Dr. Couney's exhibits helped prove that premature babies could survive through the use of medical technology. And in many smaller cities, the shows gave local physicians their first exposure to the incubator. He says Martin Couney paved the way for wide acceptance of incubator use in hospitals in the 1940s. And, during Dr. Couney's 40 year career his shows had an 80% success rate, saving the lives of over 6500 underweight babies. I tell Dr. Raju that I'm looking for records to help me figure out if Pat's silver cup really is a souvenir from her time in Dr. Couney's live baby show. Do you know where I could go for that?



Dr. Raju: Uh, that will be very difficult to find out, because Couney was very, very protective and very secretive about all the parents' information and babies' information. So I...I do not know where you might be able to get that.

Elyse: Was Pat part of Dr. Couney's exhibit? I'm headed to the American Academy of Pediatrics in Elk Grove, Illinois where they have an impressive collection of original documents, photographs and artifacts on the history of children's health care. I'm meeting director Susan Bolda Marshall. Okay, let's see what you've got.

Susan: Alright. I'm gonna go get some more stuff.

Elyse: Okay. I'm gonna start looking. We don't find any lists of babies or mothers. But it looks like I'm not the first one to search for these records. This is interesting. This is a letter from a doctor who knew Dr. Couney. It says, "As for his records of the infants, I have no idea what happened to them." Which doesn't look too good for me. Just when it seems like we've hit a dead end, Susan uncovers a possible lead.

Susan: I found something interesting.

Elyse: Oh, what have you got?

Susan: Okay. Infant reunion. A century of progress. Publicity division, Chicago. July 25th.

Elyse: Forty-one tiny tots nursed to vigor at the infant incubator exposition were guests, together with their mothers, at a colorful homecoming party given at the World's Fair." People prominent in the medical and nursing profession mingled with the infants as part of a nationwide NBC radio broadcast.

Susan: Interesting.

Elyse: So, the reunion was really like a big publicity stunt. And what I find next will certainly interest Sue and Pat. On my way back, I get a call I've been waiting for. Right ...great, great, okay well then I'll meet you at Pat's. Alright, I'll see you there. It was certainly an eye opening



experience for me. Yes, babies were on display at the Chicago World's Fair. I tell Pat I had a hard time linking her silver cup to Couney's exhibit – until, I uncovered this. In a reference book I discover that Dr. Couney's reunion party's featured an important souvenir. "Each parent was presented with a silver cup inscribed with the name of their baby." so the reunion and the presentation of the silver baby cups were all part of a big promotion. In fact, Couney staged the reunions to prove how successful the babies were and how they survived.

Pat: Putting these babies in these incubators was advertising, or telling the medical world this is the way you have to go. Right?

Elyse: And he saved your life.

Pat: Right. I wish my parents were here...to hear this.

Elyse: I tell Pat it was hard to uncover any photos of the incubator where she spent her first weeks of life. But, I located something even better. Sue and Pat, I want to introduce you to Nancy Seibold.

Pat: Hi, Nancy.

Nancy: Pat, it's so nice to meet you.

Pat: Nice to meet you.

Nancy: Sue?

Elyse: ...Nancy was also an incubator baby.

Pat: How nice!

Elyse: And she was at the World's Fair as well. And, she was also under the care of Dr. Couney.

Pat: Wonderful.



Elyse: Nancy was an incubator baby in 1934 – the second year of the fair. Her family also kept her incubator past a secret, in her case until she was in her 30s. But she's since uncovered a whole collection of photos and memorabilia from her first months of life.

Nancy: Well, these actually happen to be pictures of the incubators that were at the fair. Um, they were lined up in a row, in this exhibit. We could have been in the same incubator a year apart.

Pat: Exactly. My goodness.

Nancy: Actually, uh, this...this is a picture of the...of the exhibit. I love the picture here where it says, "with living babies."

Pat: Living babies. Right.

Nancy: And the people lined up in front to go in.

Pat: Oh, my goodness.

Nancy: And they actually had to buy tickets to get into see us. This happens to be...a ticket for a child to enter the fair.

Pat: Wow. Oh, my goodness. [Sue chuckling]

Elyse: A ticket...a ticket to see you.

Pat: Yes. wow! [Nancy laughs] I'm...it's, uh...it was, uh, a good start for many babies. And, um...uh, it...you know, it's through his...hind...far... farsightedness that there are babies today that can survive. So... I... I'm real...feel really thankful for this. [sniffles, tearing up]

Elyse: So you're happy that you were on display?

Pat: Yes. Yes, I am.



Elyse: Even though you're crying.

Pat: I...even though I'm crying. I'm... I'm happy. Cause if I... I hadn't been, I wouldn't be here today.

Elyse: In 1939 Cornell University Hospital in New York opened the city's first research center for premature infants. Four years later Dr. Couney shut down his last surviving incubator show at Coney Island, declaring, "my work is done." As for little Arielle, thanks to her time in the incubator, she's now thriving at home with her proud parents.