

Scopes Trial

Essential Questions: What two points of view were debated in the Scopes Trial? What was the legacy of the Scopes Trial for Tennessee and the nation?

The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes, also known as the Scopes Trial or Scopes Monkey Trial, took place in 1925 in the small town of Dayton, Tennessee. The central issue of the case surrounded the Butler Act, a law passed that same year which outlawed the teaching of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution and "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible."¹ After the American Civil Liberties Union promised to fund anyone who challenged the Act, community leaders in Dayton banded together and charged high school teacher John Thomas Scopes, who may or may not have actually taught evolution. After famous attorneys, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, agreed to argue the case, the trial, and Dayton in general, gained national attention and brought the clash between science and religion to the American forefront.

Charles Darwin laid out his Theory of Evolution by publishing *The Origin of Species* in 1859. The book caused a firestorm among religious denominations in the United States. Some churches denounced the theory outright while others attempted to adjust their doctrine around it. By the 1920s, most mainstream northern Protestant churches had accepted the theory and chose to view the Bible as a symbolic work only, as opposed to the literal truth. Some church leaders even went as far to say that evolution was just how God worked.² Most Southern religious leaders, however, would have none of it. The Bible, to them, was the literal truth and anything deviating from it and subsequently taught in schools threatened to corrupt the youth. These leaders also believed that there should be consequences for those who taught such subjects. In 1878, for example, eminent naturalist Alexander Winchell was dismissed from Vanderbilt University for promoting the idea that civilizations of man existed before those mentioned in the Bible. Organizations called the Anti-Evolution League and Bible Crusaders of America paraded throughout Tennessee spreading anti-Darwin ideas. The famed orator William Jennings Bryan gave a speech in Nashville in 1924 entitled "Is the Bible True?," in which he rebuked Darwinism before thousands of cheering listeners.

With a majority of Tennesseans firmly opposed to evolutionary theory, the General Assembly took up the matter in 1925. State Representative George Washington Butler presented for debate House Bill 185, which made it illegal to teach any theory "that man has descended from a lower order of animals."³ The so-called Butler Act passed both houses of the legislature with ease, and with some reluctance, Governor Austin Peay signed the measure into law.

In reaction, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) promised to fund anyone brave enough in Tennessee to break the law and stand trial. Enter John Thomas Scopes. Scopes was listening

¹ Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and their History* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 250.

² *Ibid.*, 249.

³ Robert E. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, 2nd ed., (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 540-41.

to local men debate whether or not biology could be taught effectively without Darwin's theory. Scopes entered the conversation and, when questioned said that he had discussed the topic with his students. Truthfully, Scopes could not remember if he had actually taught Darwin at all, and he secretly hoped that no students would come forward to challenge the claim that he had. Dayton's town leaders, on hearing of the exchange at the drug-store, decided to take up the ACLU's offer, and they charged Scopes for breaking the Butler Act. The community leaders believed that such controversy would bring national attention to Dayton and put the town "on the map."⁴ The stage was set for *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*.

John T. Scopes was born on August 30, 1900 the son of a railroad machinist. After a brief stint at the University of Illinois, Scopes earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Kentucky in 1924. He majored in law but studied with a variety of teachers in a variety of subjects. As a forerunner of things to come, a battle between evolution and religion had been fought at Kentucky during Scopes' time there. In that case, progressive school officials triumphed over the anti-evolutionists. At twenty-four, Scopes became a teacher of algebra, physics, and chemistry at Central High School in Dayton, Tennessee, which lies about forty miles from Chattanooga. He was also the football coach at the school. He proved a popular figure in town, and incidentally, attended church every Sunday.⁵ But when he stood trial in 1925, his popularity was overshadowed tenfold, as Dayton became the staging ground for one of the twentieth century's most famous courtroom dramas.

Volunteering to try the case for the prosecution was none other than William Jennings Bryan. Bryan's had lived a successful life up to the trial. He had been a lawyer, a Populist politician, a congressman, a journalist, a three-time nominee for U.S. President, and, most importantly for the Scopes Trial, an ardent anti-evolutionist. He believed that Darwin's work undermined religion and threatened the basic fabric of society. He spoke out across the country and, in his effective but simple-minded style, questioned the scientific community. "It is better to trust in the Rock of Ages," he is noted for saying, "than to know the age of rocks."⁶ For the Scopes Trial, Bryan assisted state Attorney General A. Tom Stewart to try the defendant.

Opposing Bryan and representing Scopes was the most well-known trial lawyer in America, Clarence Darrow. Darrow graduated from public school, taught local students, and enrolled in the law department at the University of Michigan. Afterward, he apprenticed in Youngstown, Ohio, and was formally admitted to the bar at the age of twenty-one. Darrow spent years on the law circuit, first in Chicago and then all over the nation. He became a friend to organized labor until a bribery scandal damaged his reputation in 1911. After serving as a war propagandist for the Allies in World War I, Darrow defended the infamous murders Leopold and Loeb and urged them to plead guilty so as to avoid the death penalty. The public's attention focused on the trial, and by the end, Darrow was able to spare the two young murderers' capital punishment. In Dayton, Darrow's task was primarily to face off

⁴ Bergeron, Ash, Keith, *Tennesseans and their History*, 252-53.

⁵ Kathleen S. Brown, "Scopes, John Thomas," from *American National Biography*, Vol. 19 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 263-64.

⁶ Robert W. Cherney, "Bryan, William Jennings," from *American National Biography*, Vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 815.

against his longtime-foe, Bryan.⁷ Darrow was joined by Dudley Field Malone and Arthur Garfield Hayes in their defense of Scopes.

The trial itself, taking place at the Rhea County Courthouse, resembled a festival more than a trial. Journalists and newspaper-men from all corners of the country descended upon the little town. Writers sent their publishers colorful descriptions of “Monkey State” Tennesseans, whom they ridiculed incessantly.⁸ The *New York Times* described the proceeding as “the first case of its kind since we stopped trying people for witchcraft.”⁹ H.L. Mencken, the most renowned journalist of the age, wrote several articles for the *Baltimore Sun*. He gave the event the title “Monkey Trial” and described Dayton as “the bunghole of the United States, a cesspool of Baptists, a miasma of Methodism, snake-charmers, phony real estate operators, and syphilitic evangelists.”¹⁰

When the trial began, Darrow attempted to bring in witnesses from many different fields. The experts included Christian theologians, Hebrew scholars, geologists, biologists, and others. Instead of simply a trial about Scopes, Darrow and the defense team wanted to put not only the Butler Act but conservative Christianity on trial. The judge, John T. Raulston, refused to allow Darrow’s witnesses and shot down the notion that the trial was about more than Scopes’s violation of the law. Raulston did, however, admit that some examination of the Book of Genesis was necessary to determine whether Scopes was guilty.¹¹

For days, the two sides battled. Contrary to Judge Raulston’s wishes, the overarching themes of Darwinism and Creationism were discussed. Bryan, as expected, ridiculed Darwin and attempted to poke holes in his theory. His speeches were directed at homespun Tennesseans and other Southern American Christians as he tried to win them to his side. He found the notion that man evolved from apes to be not only factually wrong but insulting as well. He complained that according the theory of evolution American men were not even descended “from American monkeys, but from old world monkeys.” This remark caused the courtroom to erupt in approving laughter.¹²

On the seventh day of the trial, Darrow called Bryan himself to the stand in order to question his defense of anti-evolutionism. Judge Raulston, fearing that the building would not support the crowds of people who had gathered to hear the examination, called a recess to escape to the courthouse lawn.¹³ When the recess ended, Darrow and Bryan had their confrontation. The two argued about everything from the age of the Earth to Adam and Eve to Confucianism to whether Bryan had any respect at all for scientists. “We have the purpose,” Darrow declared, “of preventing bigots and ignoramuses from controlling the education of the United States.” Bryan, however, presented himself as a Christian martyr. “I am simply trying to protect the word of God,” he said, “against the greatest atheist or agnostic in the United States. I want the papers to know I am not afraid to get on the stand in

⁷ Kevin Tierney, “Darrow, Clarence,” from *American National Biography*, Vol. 6 (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999, 114-15.

⁸ Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, 542.

⁹ *New York Times*, July 21, 1925.

¹⁰ Bergeron, Ash, Keith, *Tennesseans and their History*, 253.

¹¹ Bergeron, Ash, Keith, *Tennesseans and their History*, 252.

¹² *The World’s Most Famous Court Trial: Tennessee Evolution Case: a word-for-word report of the famous court test of the Tennessee anti-evolution act, at Dayton, July 10 to 21, 1925, including speeches and arguments of attorneys, testimony of noted scientists, and Bryan’s last speech*, Reprint, (Dayton, Tennessee: Rhea County Historical Society, 1978), 176.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 227.

front of him and let him do his worst.” Bryan’s statement was followed by prolonged applause.¹⁴ Finally, after another heated exchange between the two rivals, Raulston banged his gavel and adjourned for the day.

The debate between Darrow and Bryan did nothing to affect the outcome. Scopes had defied the Butler Act, and as a result, he was found guilty and fined \$100. An appeals court later upheld the law but overturned Scopes’ conviction on a technicality. Scopes received donations from admirers, which he used to attend graduate school. Darrow went on trying cases for another decade while Bryan died in Dayton shortly after the Scopes Trial.

However much the trial brought evolution to the forefront of American thought, the Butler Act remained in place in Tennessee until 1967. Darwin was excluded from state textbooks until the 1960s. So while Darrow believed that he had won a moral victory for science, and media portraying the event (most notably the film *Inherit the Wind*) claimed the same, anti-evolutionism won the day in Tennessee. The outcome and the trial, as described through northern newspapers, contributed to the national image of backward, uneducated Tennesseans who shun science and adhere to an outdated rural existence. The battle between religion and science persisted. The Scopes Trial only intensified the conflict.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

Scopes Trial

Who's 'scene' it?

Pretend the Scopes Trial is a movie. Get into small groups and create a 2-3 minute highlight reel of the film. Things to include/consider: What is going on? Who is involved? What is at stake? What are the key moments? What is the outcome?

Use the blank sections below as a storyboard for brainstorming with your group.

