

# THE Monkey Trial

## Timeline: Remembering the Scopes Monkey Trial

by **Noah Adams**

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Eighty years ago, in July 1925, the mixture of religion, science and the public schools caught fire in Dayton, Tenn. The Scopes trial — or "Monkey Trial," as it was called — dominated headlines across the country. The trial lasted just a week, but the questions it raised are as divisive now as they were back then. NPR looks back at the Scopes trial, the events that led up to it and its aftermath:

1859 – Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* is published. Darwin argues in his introduction that "the view which most naturalists entertain, and which I formerly entertained — namely, that each species has been independently created — is erroneous."

1871 – Darwin publishes his second book, *The Descent of Man*. In this work, Darwin directly addresses the debate over the origin of mankind, arguing that "man is descended from a hairy, tailed quadruped, probably arboreal in its habits, and an inhabitant of the Old World."

1914 – George William Hunter's *A Civic Biology*, the book that is later used in biology courses in Dayton, Tenn., is published. *A Civic Biology* describes evolution as "the belief that simple forms of life on the earth slowly and gradually gave rise to those more complex and that thus ultimately the most complex forms came into existence."

1921 – Former congressman and ex-Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan becomes a leader in the anti-evolution movement, delivering speeches entitled "The Menace of Darwinism" and "The Bible and its Enemies." Bryan declares in one address that "[i]t is better to trust in the Rock of Ages, than to know the age of the rocks; it is better for one to know that he is close to the Heavenly Father, than to know how far the stars in the heavens are apart."

1924 – Bryan delivers a lecture in Nashville entitled "Is the Bible true?" Copies of the speech are delivered to members of the Tennessee legislature, including Rep. John Washington Butler.

Jan. 21, 1925 – Rep. Butler introduces legislation in the Tennessee House of Representatives calling for a ban on the teaching of evolution. The proposed law, known as the Butler bill, would prohibit the teaching of "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."

Jan. 27, 1925 – The Tennessee House of Representatives approves the Butler bill on a 71-to-5 vote.

March 13, 1925 – After several hours of heated debate, the Tennessee Senate approves the Butler bill 24 to 6.

March 21, 1925 – Tennessee Gov. Austin Peay signs the Butler bill into law. The new law is the first in the United States to ban the teaching of evolution.

May 4, 1925 – A Chattanooga newspaper runs an item noting that the American Civil Liberties Union is seeking teachers willing to challenge the Butler law. The item says that the ACLU is "looking for a Tennessee teacher who is willing to accept our services in testing this law in the courts. Our lawyers think a friendly test case can be arranged without costing a teacher his or her job... All we need now is a willing client."

May 5, 1925 – A group of town leaders in Dayton, Tenn., read the news item about the ACLU's search. They quickly hatch a plan to bring the case to Dayton, a scheme that they hope will generate publicity and jump-start the town's economy. They ask 24-year-old science teacher and football coach John Thomas Scopes if he'd be willing to be indicted to bring the case to trial. Scopes agrees, even though he has only taught biology as a substitute teacher and later says he isn't sure he covered evolution in his classes.

May 12, 1925 – Bryan agrees to participate in the trial on the side of the prosecution, ensuring that the case will receive significant national interest. Several days later, well-known attorneys Clarence Darrow and Dudley Field Malone announce their interest in representing Scopes.

May 25, 1925 – Scopes is indicted by a grand jury for violating Tennessee's anti-evolution law.

May-July, 1925 – Preparations begin in Dayton for an expected onslaught of trial-related publicity. Six blocks of Dayton's main road are transformed into a pedestrian mall; a speaker's platform is built on the lawn of the courthouse; and a tourist camp is constructed. The courtroom is outfitted with the latest technology to transmit the story to the world: telegraph and telephone wiring, movie-newsreel camera platforms and radio microphones. WGN Radio broadcasts the trial live at a cost of more than \$1,000 a day just for telephone lines — the first such broadcast of its kind.

July 10, 1925 – The trial begins with jury selection. Judge John Raulston asks the Rev. Lemuel M. Cartright to open the proceedings with a prayer.

July 13, 1925 – In an effort to have the Butler law declared unconstitutional, defense attorney Clarence Darrow delivers a long, fiery speech arguing that the law violates freedom of religion. Darrow argues that "we find today as brazen and as bold an attempt to destroy learning as was ever made in the Middle Ages."

July 14, 1925 – In the third day of the trial, Darrow objects to the practice of opening the trial with a prayer. Judge Raulston overrules the objection, noting that he has instructed the ministers who offer the prayer to "make no reference to the issues involved in this case."

July 15, 1925 – Judge Raulston overrules the defense's motion to have the Butler law declared unconstitutional. Raulston says in his ruling that the law "gives no preference to any particular religion or mode of worship. Our public schools are not maintained as places of worship, but, on the contrary, were designed, instituted, and are maintained for the purpose of mental and moral development and discipline."

In an afternoon session that day, a not guilty plea is entered on Scopes' behalf. Each side presents its opening statements. The prosecution questions the superintendent of schools and two of Scopes'

students, who testify that Scopes taught his class about evolution. The defense questions zoologist Maynard Metcalf, who testifies that evolution is a widely embraced theory in the scientific community.

July 17, 1925 – Judge Raulston rules in favor of a motion by prosecutors to bar expert testimony by scientists. Raulston argues that the experts' opinions on evolutionary theory would "shed no light" on the issue at hand in the trial — whether Scopes violated the state's anti-evolution laws. Many reporters leave town, believing that the trial is effectively over. Scopes is recruited to write news stories on the trial for some of the delinquent journalists.

July 20, 1925 – With the proceedings taking place outdoors due to the heat, the defense — in a highly unusual move — calls Bryan to testify as a biblical expert. Clarence Darrow asks Bryan a series of questions about whether the Bible should be interpreted literally. As the questioning continues, Bryan accuses Darrow of making a "slur at the Bible," while Darrow mocks Bryan for "fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on earth believes."

July 21, 1925 – The final day of the trial opens with Judge Raulston's ruling that Bryan cannot return to the stand and that his testimony should be expunged from the record. Raulston declares that Bryan's testimony "can shed no light upon any issues that will be pending before the higher courts." Darrow then asks the court to bring in the jury and find Scopes guilty — a move that would allow a higher court to consider an appeal. The jury returns its guilty verdict after nine minutes of deliberation. Scopes is fined \$100, which both Bryan and the ACLU offer to pay for him.

After the verdict is read, John Scopes delivers his only statement of the trial, declaring his intent "to oppose this law in any way I can. Any other action would be in violation of my ideal of academic freedom — that is, to teach the truth as guaranteed in our constitution, of personal and religious freedom."

July 26, 1925 – Five days after the Scopes trial ends, Bryan dies in his sleep in Dayton.

July 31, 1925 – Bryan is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. The words "He Kept the Faith" are inscribed on his tombstone.

1926 – Mississippi becomes the second state to pass a law banning the teaching of evolution in public schools.

May 31, 1926 – The appeal hearing in the Scopes case begins.

Jan. 15, 1927 – The Tennessee Supreme Court rules that the Butler law is constitutional. However, it overturns Scopes' verdict on a technicality, ruling that his fine should have been set by the jury hearing the case instead of by Judge Raulston. The justices declare in their ruling that "[n]othing is to be gained by prolonging the life of this bizarre case."

1927 – George William Hunter publishes *A New Civic Biology*, an updated version of the biology book used in the Dayton high school where Scopes taught. The new text deals with the concept of evolution cautiously and avoids explicitly naming the theory.

1928 – A third state, Arkansas, enacts legislation banning instruction on evolution.

1930 – The William Jennings Bryan Memorial University opens in Dayton, Tenn. Known today as Bryan College, the institution describes itself as "a highly ranked, nationally competitive college that puts Christ above all."

March 13, 1938 – Clarence Darrow dies at the age of 80.

Jan. 10, 1955 – The play *Inherit the Wind*, which is loosely based on the Scopes trial, opens on Broadway.

1960 – Thirty-five years after the Scopes trial, the film version of *Inherit the Wind* opens at a drive-in movie theater in Dayton. Scopes returns to the town for the premiere and is given the key to the city.

May 17, 1967 – Tennessee repeals the Butler Act, the law that banned the teaching of evolution in public schools.

1967 – John Scopes publishes *Center of the Storm*, his memoir of the trial.

1968 – In *Epperson v. Arkansas*, the Supreme Court strikes down an Arkansas law banning the teaching of evolution.

Oct. 21, 1970 – John Scopes dies at the age of 70.

1973 – Tennessee becomes the first state in the United States to pass a law requiring that public schools give equal emphasis to "the Genesis account in the Bible" along with other theories about the origins of man. The bill also requires a disclaimer be used any time evolution is presented or discussed in public schools. It demands evolution be taught as theory and not fact.

1975 – Two years after it is passed, Tennessee's "equal time" law is declared unconstitutional by a federal appeals court.

1977 – The National Park Service designates Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton a National Historic Landmark.

1982 — In *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education*, a U.S. district judge strikes down an Arkansas law that required public schools to give "balanced treatment" to evolution and creationism whenever either was taught.

1987 – In *Edwards v. Aguillard*, the Supreme Court rules that a Louisiana law requiring public schools to give "balanced treatment" to creationism and evolution is unconstitutional.

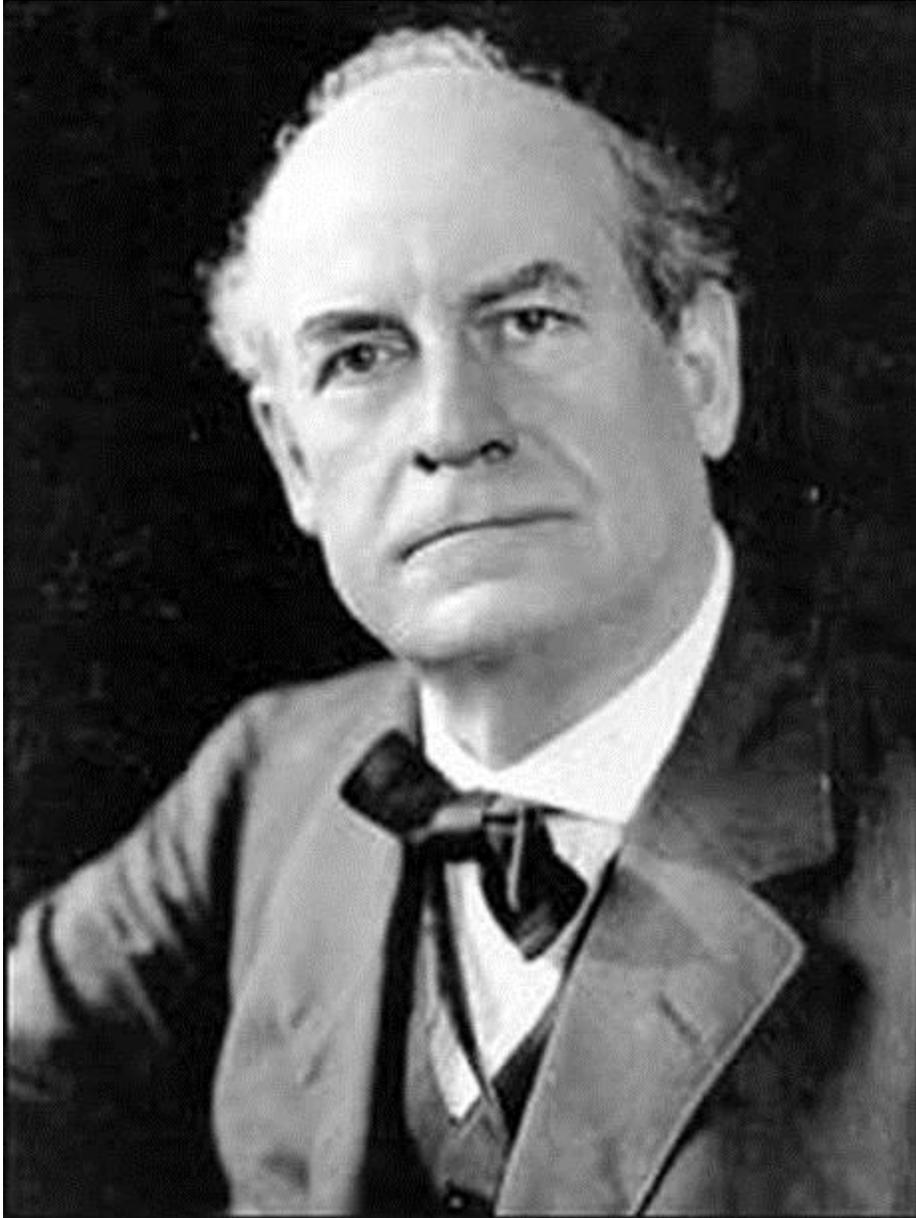
2005 – School boards and legislatures across the country are continuing to debate how to teach students about the origins of life on Earth. Policymakers in at least 16 states are currently examining the controversy.



Rhea County Courthouse

in Dayton, Tenn., as it appeared in 1925 at the time of the Scopes trial.

Bryan College Archives



A famous orator, William Jennings Bryan was 65 when he joined the prosecution team in the Scopes trial. Bryan was a leading fundamentalist, traveling widely to warn against "the menace of Darwinism."

Bryan College Archives

H.L. Mencken on Bryan:

" He leads a new crusade, his bald head glistening... One somehow pities him, despite his so palpable imbecilities... But let no one, laughing at him, underestimate the magic that lies in his black, malignant eye, his frayed but still eloquent voice. He can shake and inflame these poor ignoramuses as no other man among us...



Clarence Darrow was 68 when he agreed to act as John Scopes' defense attorney. At the time, he was the most famous criminal defense lawyer in the country, and a very popular public speaker. His favorite topic was anticlericalism.

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The Scopes trial was as much about spectacle as it was about the clash of science and religion. Among those in attendance was a chimpanzee movie performer named Joe Mendi. Journalist H.L. Mencken dubbed Dayton "monkeytown."

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Despite the hopes of organizers, the trial didn't draw tourists. But locals turned out in droves. Above, girls from the Dayton area display monkey doll souvenirs at the courthouse.

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The John T. Scopes Song

The Scopes trial also inspired music. The excerpt below is from the song "The John T. Scopes Trial," by recording artist Vernon Dalhart:

“ Then to Dayton came a man with his new ideas so grand; And he said we came from monkeys long ago; But in teaching his beliefs Mr. Scopes found only grief; For they would not let their old religion go. You may find a new belief; it will only bring you grief; For a house that's built on sand is sure to fall; And wherever you may turn there's a lesson you will learn; That the old religion's better after all.

Hear the song performed, courtesy of the Authentic History Center.

Bryan College Archives



From left: Defense attorney Dudley Field Malone, District Attorney General Tom Stewart, William Jennings Bryan, and Judge John Raulston, seen shaking hands with Clarence Darrow. Note the WGN microphone. This was the first U.S. trial broadcast live over a national radio network.



A cameraman (far right) captures Bryan and Darrow conferring during the trial. Members of the press were seated inside the bar in the courtroom.

Bryan College Archives

[Enlarge image](#)



Defense attorney Darrow cross-examines Bryan, trying to get him to admit the bible is open to interpretation. One of the most famous scenes in American legal history, it took place on the courthouse lawn due to the summer heat.

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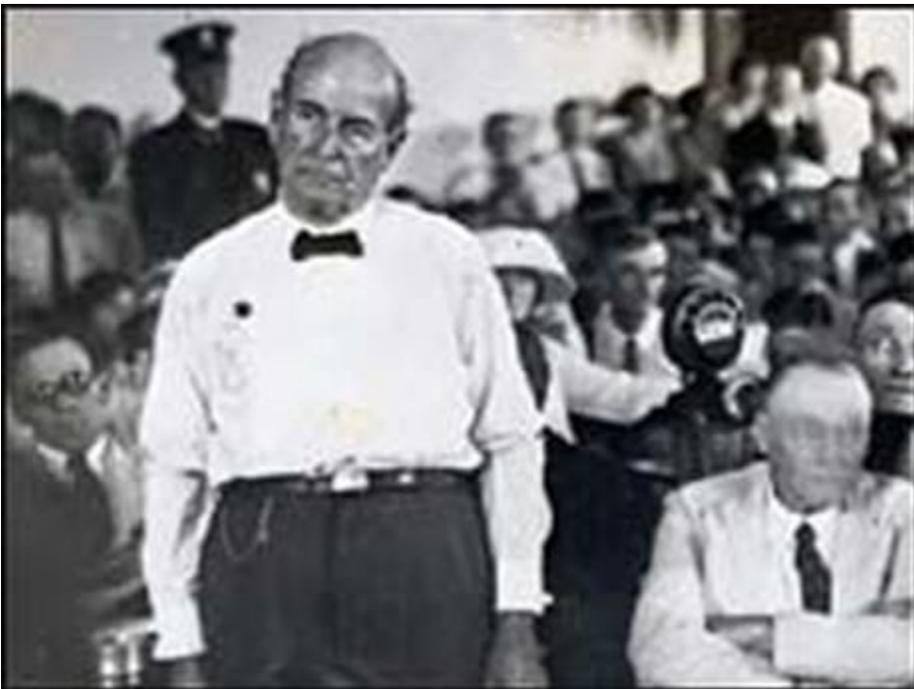
From left: Defense lawyer Dudley Field Malone; prosecutors Gordon McKenzie, Wallace Haggard, Herb Hicks; and District Attorney General Tom Steward. Seated under the WGN microphone is H.L. Mencken, who covered the trial for the Baltimore Sun.

[Enlarge image](#)



From left: John Scopes, defense attorney Dr. John R. Neal, and George Rappleyea, manager of the Cumberland Coal and Iron Co. and one of the original organizers of events leading up to the trial.

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Bryan addresses the court.

He died in Dayton five days after the trial ended.

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Darrow addresses the jury.

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Dayton teacher and football coach John Scopes, seen here during sentencing, was fined \$100 on July 21, 1925. Both Bryan and the ACLU offer to pay it for him.

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People in Dayton still talk about the Scopes trial. Dayton-area farmer O.W. Wooden calls it "something else": "Trying to tell you people come from monkeys and all that stuff. Couldn't be right! Monkeys to me, like a chicken, you know? People is people."

Noah Adams, NPR



Eloise Reed, now 92, was 12 at the time of the trial.

Noah Adams, NPR



Ed Larson, author of

Summer for the Gods, a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the Scopes trial, says defense lawyer Darrow was the Thomas Paine of his day.

Noah Adams, NPR

Arkansas' Creationism Trial

Read the Essay July 5, 2005

The Scopes trial was not the only time that the origins of Earth and humanity were debated in court. In 1981, Arkansas passed a law requiring public schools to give "balanced treatment" of creationism and evolution. Read an essay about the federal court trial there by a former newspaper reporter who covered it.