

## The Monkey Trial



When Darwin announced his theory that humans and apes had descended from a common ancestor, he sent shock waves through the Western world.

In the years that followed his 1859 declaration, America's churches hotly debated whether to accept the findings of modern science or continue to follow the teachings of ancient scripture. By the 1920s, most of the urban churches of America had been able to reconcile Darwin's theory with the Bible, but rural preachers preferred a stricter

interpretation.

Amid the dizzying changes brought by the roaring decade, religious fundamentalists saw the Bible as the only salvation from a materialistic civilization in decline.

### Darwin Banned

In 1925, the Tennessee legislature passed the **BUTLER LAW**, which forbade the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in any public school or university. Other Southern states followed suit.

The **AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION** led the charge of evolution's supporters. It offered to fund the legal defense of any Tennessee teacher willing to fight the law in court. Another showdown between modernity and tradition was unfolding.



[3] He's Always Seeing Things. (Orr in the *Chicago Tribune*)

The man who accepted the challenge was **JOHN T. SCOPES**, a science teacher and football coach in Dayton, Tennessee. In the spring of 1925, he walked into his classroom and read, from Dayton's Tennessee-approved textbook **HUNTER'S CIVIC BIOLOGY**, part of a chapter on the evolution of humankind and Darwin's theory of natural selection. His arrest soon followed, and a trial date was set.

### Darrow versus Bryan

Representing Scopes was the famed trial lawyer **CLARENCE DARROW**. Slick

and sophisticated, Darrow epitomized the urban society in which he lived.

The prosecution was led by William Jennings Bryan, three-time presidential candidate and former secretary of state. The "Great Commoner" was the perfect representative of the rural values he dedicated his life to defend.



Bryan was a Christian who lobbied for a constitutional amendment banning the teaching of evolution throughout the nation.

### **A Media Circus — with Monkeys**

The trial turned into a media circus. When the case was opened on July 14, journalists from across the land descended upon the mountain hamlet of Dayton. Preachers and fortune seekers filled the streets. Entrepreneurs sold everything from

food to Bibles to stuffed monkeys. The trial became the first ever to be broadcast on radio.

Scopes himself played a rather small role in the case: the trial was reduced to a verbal contest between Darrow and Bryan. When Judge John Raulston refused to admit expert testimony on the validity of evolutionary theory, Darrow lost his best defense.

He decided that if he was not permitted to validate Darwin, his best shot was to attack the literal interpretation of the Bible. The climax of the trial came when Darrow asked Bryan to take the stand as an expert on the Bible. Darrow hammered Bryan with tough questions on his strict acceptance of several Bible's stories from the creation of Eve from Adam's rib to the swallowing of Jonah by a whale.

The jury sided with the law. Clearly, Scopes was in violation of Tennessee statute by teaching that humans evolved from apes. He was fined \$100 and released. But the battle that played out before the nation proved a victory for supporters of evolutionary theory. A later court dismissed the fine imposed on Scopes, though in the short term, the antievolution law was upheld.

Fundamental Christians were down but not out. Through the radio airwaves, ministers such as **BILLY SUNDAY** reached audiences of thousands. **AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON** of California preached her fundamentalist message over loudspeakers to arena-sized crowds. At one point, she used a giant electric sports scoreboard to illustrate the triumph of good over evil, foreshadowing generations of televangelists who would follow her lead.

Clearly, the 1920s did not see the end to these conflicts or the answers to their major questions.