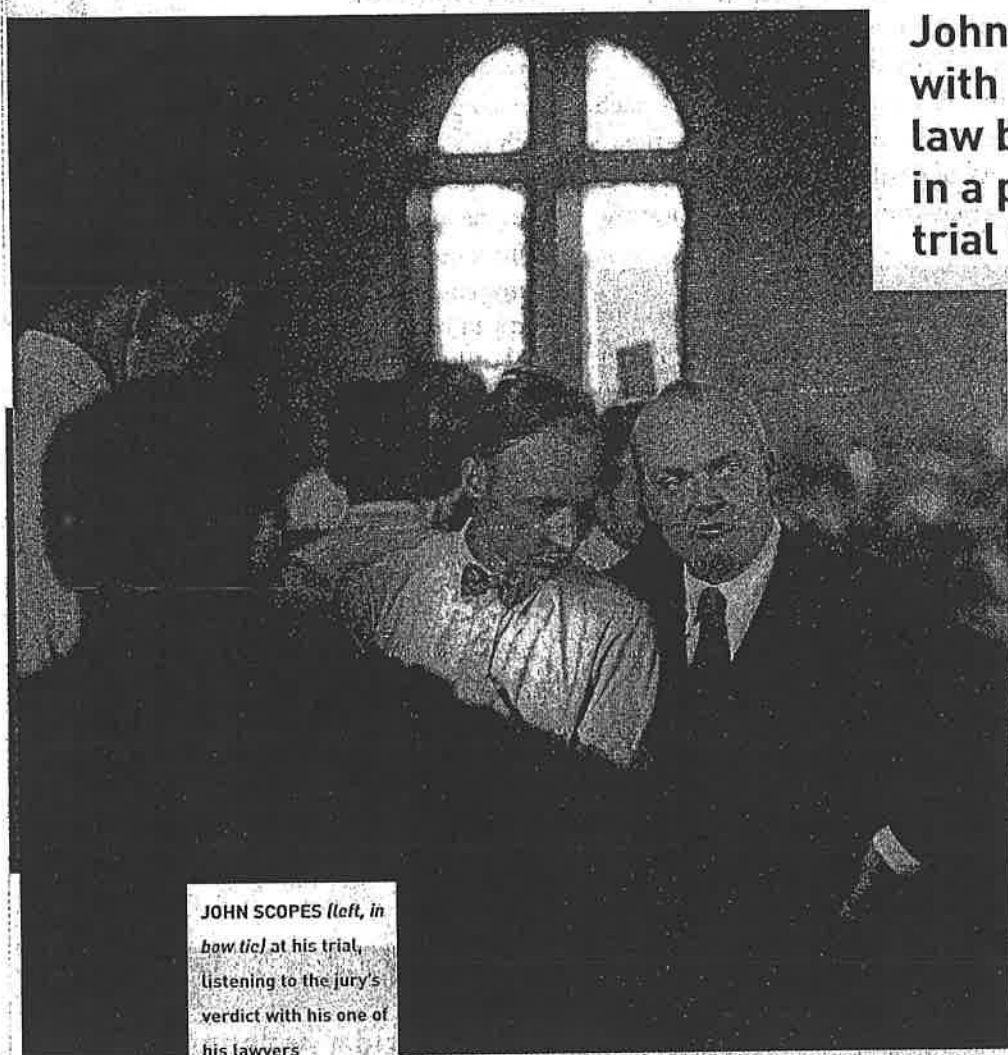


1925: The 'Monkey Trial'



JOHN SCOPES (left, in bow tie) at his trial, listening to the jury's verdict with his one of his lawyers

John Scopes was charged with violating Tennessee law by teaching evolution in a public school. His trial transfixed the nation.



THE NEW YORK TIMES, Page One, July 22, 1925

trial." Supporters of the evolution ban, enacted earlier that year by the state legislature, argued that Darwin's theory of natural selection undermined biblical teachings and religious faith because it was at odds with Genesis.

BRYAN VS. DARROW

The five-year-old American Civil Liberties Union, seeking to challenge the law on grounds that it violated the First Amendment ban against any law "respecting an establishment of religion," advertised for a teacher willing to defy it. Dayton's city fathers, sensing an opportunity to put their town on the map, quickly recruited Scopes, who believed in evolution, and in his right to teach it.

If Dayton officials craved attention, they succeeded beyond their wildest expectations. The city was transformed

BY SAM ROBERTS

Eighty years ago this summer, a 24-year-old high school biology teacher in a tiny town in Tennessee became the focus of a landmark confrontation between science and devout religious belief.

The teacher, John T. Scopes, was charged with violating a Tennessee law that made it illegal to teach in public schools "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." Scopes's trial in July 1925 attracted celebrity lawyers for the prosecution and defense and was conducted largely outdoors before thousands of impassioned spectators.

Several agendas converged in Dayton, Tenn., to bring about what was popularly called the "monkey



FORMER presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan argued for the prosecution.

into a carnival, a cartoon version of the profound issues and deep-seated beliefs behind the trial. "Two months ago the town was obscure and happy," H.L. Mencken, the acerbic *Baltimore Sun* columnist wrote. "Today it is a universal joke."

William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate for President in 1896, 1900, and 1908, and a religious fundamentalist, volunteered for the prosecution and traveled to Dayton from his home in Florida. Clarence Darrow, the country's best-known defense attorney, came from Chicago to defend Scopes.

UNUSUAL WITNESS

That Scopes had, in fact, violated the law was never in doubt. Neither was the outcome of the case. But nobody could have foreseen what



A CARTOON from 1925 showing a map of the Earth as flat poked fun at Bryan's views.



CLARENCE DARROW, the nation's leading defense attorney, defended Scopes.

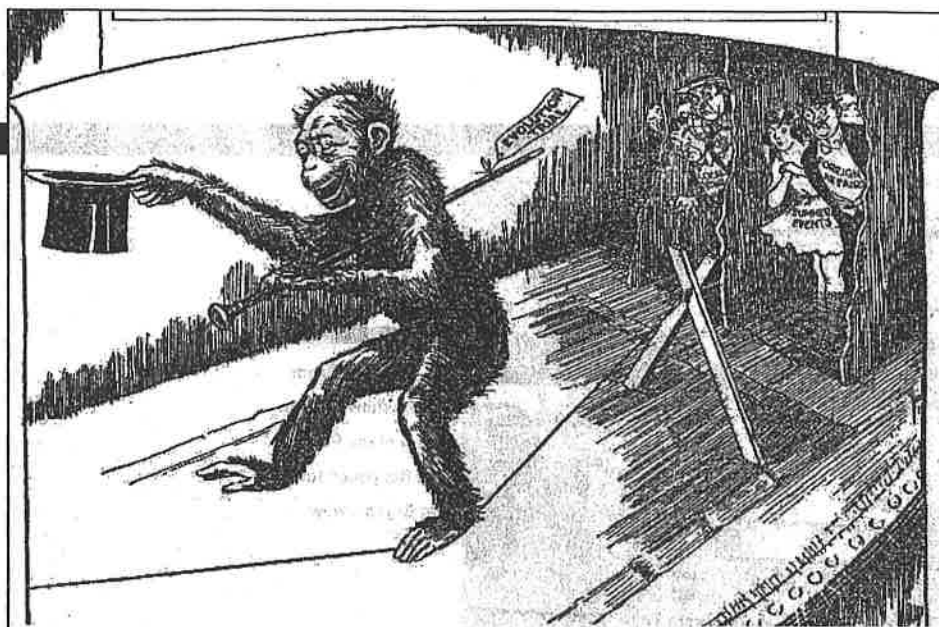
happened in between.

In a highly unusual move, Darrow called Bryan as a defense witness. The trial was moved outdoors to accommodate the crowds of spectators, and the two lawyers locked horns, as *The New York Times* reported, "under the most remarkable circumstances ever known to American court procedure."

Attempting to argue against a literal interpretation of the Bible, Darrow demanded to know whether

Bryan really believed that Joshua made the sun stand still (it was one of those things, Bryan replied, that "anybody can put his own construction upon") and whether the days described in Genesis were actually 24 hours long. (Bryan acknowledged that "days" could probably be

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THE STAR.

Former Headliners: "Ye Gods! And We Must Give Way to an Animal Act!"

THE TIMES ran this cartoon during the trial.

defined as "periods" that might have lasted millions of years.)

"The traps of logic fell from Mr. Darrow's lips as innocently as the words of a child," the *Times* reporter wrote, "and so long as Mr. Bryan could parry them he smiled back, but when one stumped him he took refuge in his faith and either refused to answer directly or said in effect: 'The Bible states it; it must be so.'"

Darrow, himself an agnostic but not an atheist, tried to suggest that Bryan was disregarding scientific evidence that contradicted his faith, as summed up in this exchange:

"I do not think about things I don't think about," Bryan said.

"Do you think about the things you do think about?" Darrow asked.

"Well," Bryan replied, "sometimes." Finally, the judge called a halt to the exchange—before Bryan could retaliate by calling Darrow as a witness.

QUICK VERDICT

Darrow virtually invited the jurors to convict Scopes, explaining that the case could only be resolved by a higher court. Jurors obliged, finding Scopes

Dayton was transformed into a carnival, a cartoon version of the profound issues and deep-seated beliefs behind the trial.

guilty after eight minutes of deliberation. The judge fined him \$100. (Five days later, Bryan died while napping in his hotel room in Dayton. "Honor must be paid to Mr. Bryan for his fearless stand on issues that he thought were right," Scopes said at the time.)

A year later, the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the verdict, not on constitutional grounds but because of a technicality—that the jury, rather than the judge, should have set the fine. But instead of ordering a retrial, the court dismissed the charges entirely, concluding, "Nothing is to be gained by prolonging the life of this bizarre case."

Even so, Scopes, who left Tennessee shortly after the verdict and became a geologist for oil companies, said that challenging the statute had been worthwhile. He later recalled that coverage of the case (including the first live radio broadcast from a trial) "made a tremendous impact on the science education of the country

and the world."

"But most importantly," Scopes would write in 1965, five years before he died, "I feel that restrictive legislation on academic freedom is forever a thing of the past, that religion and science may now address one another in an atmosphere of mutual respect and of a common quest for truth."

In 1967, the Tennessee statute was repealed. The next year the U.S. Supreme Court struck down an Arkansas law that banned the teaching of evolution. In 1987, the Court

declared unconstitutional a Louisiana law that required public schools teaching the theory of evolution to also teach creationism as science.

PROLONGED DEBATE

Scopes's optimism notwithstanding, the evolution debate continues, with lawmakers and school boards in a number of states attempting in recent years to limit the teaching of evolution in schools.

And 80 years after the Scopes trial, some observers believe the case actually prolonged the debate, rather than resolving it. Susan Jacoby, director of the Center for Inquiry-Metro New York, a group that promotes the separation of church and state, wrote on the Op-Ed page of *The Times* in January that "the trial undermined the merging accommodation between religion and science by intensifying the fundamentalists' conviction that acceptance of evolution would inevitably weaken any type of faith." ❶