



EVOLUTION IN TENNESSEE

Over the years a number of states have toyed with laws that would forbid the discussion of biological evolution in public schools, but Tennessee has the greatest notoriety in this regard. This notoriety stems from a test trial of the law in Dayton, Tennessee, variously known as the Scopes Trial or the Scopes Monkey Trial.

In 1925, the Tennessee legislature passed the Butler Act forbidding the teaching of evolution in public schools. Seeing this as a breach of Constitutional guarantees, particularly those involving separation of church and state and freedom of speech, the American Civil Liberties Union advertised in Tennessee newspapers seeking a case to test the law.

A group of business men in Dayton read this advertisement in a Chattanooga daily and concocted a plan to bring such a trial to Dayton. The mines and iron smelters of the Dayton area were in decline, and the group of businessmen meeting in the local drug store conceived this as an opportunity to bring attention to Dayton and revive its economy. The group persuaded John Scopes, a High School coach and sometimes substitute teacher, to be guilty of teaching evolution. Scopes had served as a substitute biology teacher during the Spring of 1925, but he didn't remember mentioning evolution.

The trial was held during the heat of July 1925 amid much fanfare and coverage by out of town journalists, including live broadcasts by WGN-Chicago. The lead attorney for the prosecution was William Jennings Bryan; Clarence Darrow led up the defense. After a week of argumentation, which had much to do with the politics of the principal attorneys, some to do with the legitimacy of evolution as a scientific view, and very little to do with the guilt or innocence of John Scopes, Scopes was found guilty and

assessed the minimum fine of \$100. The Baltimore Sun, which had sent the scholar H. L. Mencken to cover the trial, promptly paid the fine.

The Scopes trial is the loose source for the play *Inherit the Wind* and its various film versions, and has been examined in numerous books and articles. The Rhea County Chamber of Commerce sponsors a 'reenactment' of the trial in the original courtroom each July in conjunction with it's annual Dayton Days celebration. This production is put on by faculty and students from William Jennings Bryan College.

The Butler Act forbidding the teaching of evolution in Tennessee schools was not repealed until 1967. Although few teachers were actually persecuted under the act, its inhibitory effect on the course of education in Tennessee would be an interesting topic of inquiry. The issue was not dormant long, however. In 1973, the state legislature passed an "equal time" law which legitimized the use of the bible as a scientific reference. The law was challenged in state and federal courts by civil liberties and teachers groups, and was overturned by the Federal Court of Appeals.

In 1996 a group of legislators attempted another equal time law, Senate Bill 3229, but this died in committee. Numerous legislators thought the proposed law was unconstitutional, but argued against it on the expedient that Tennessee would be obliged to fund the writing and publishing of its own science textbooks.

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