

Scopes Monkey Trial III

Lead: In the hot summer of 1925 the State of Tennessee prosecuted John Thomas Scopes for teaching the theory of evolution.

Intro.: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: While a believer in evolution, Scopes merely made his students aware of Darwin's theory in the run-up to their end-of-the-year examinations. At stake was the constitutionality of the Butler Act, Tennessee's statute outlawing teaching anything contrary to the Bible.

The trial was the centerpiece of a three-ring circus. Crowds of reporters and the curious descended on the little mining town of Dayton. Ideologues of all types set up booths or tents selling literature. Food stands lined the streets. The trial began on July 10th in a steamy courtroom filled to capacity as fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution and skeptic Clarence Darrow for the defense began their maneuvers. From the beginning, the fix was in. The judge ruled the Butler Act constitutional. The only question was whether Scopes had violated the law. The defense had intended to argue the validity of evolution but the judge's ruling meant

that the trial would be on the narrow question of Scopes guilt.

Bryan's contribution was largely irrelevant to this central legal point and he spent most of his time denouncing life without God and attacking the legal career of Darrow. The trial's climax came when Darrow called Bryan to the stand as an expert on the Bible. Under intense questioning Bryan's knowledge of the Scriptures was shown to be shallow and not very scholarly. Bryan admitted that he was not sure how long the days of creation lasted, twenty-four hours or millions of years. Even Bryan the literalist used modern interpretation. This humiliation, combined with the rejection Bryan had

received at the Democratic National Convention that summer may have proved too much for the old warrior. He died within a week of the trial. John Scopes' conviction was overturned on appeal. He lived a life of relative obscurity until 1970 hardly outliving the law that made him famous. Tennessee did not repeal the Butler Act until 1967.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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