

Scope's Monkey Trial - I

Lead: In the summer of 1925, in Dayton, a small mining town in Eastern Tennessee, a teacher of high school biology was brought to trial for teaching the theory of evolution.

Intro.: "A Moment in Time" with Dan Roberts.

Content: On a sunny May afternoon, John Thomas Scopes, a popular twenty-five year old biology teacher, was playing tennis with some of his students. At the end of the game he noticed a small boy obviously waiting for him at courtside. The

youngster had a message. His presence was requested at Fred Robinson's drugstore. There he found several of the town's leading citizens and they had a proposition. A recent issue of the Chattanooga News contained an offer by the American Civil Liberties Union to pay the expenses of anyone willing to test the constitutionality of the Butler Act. Robinson and Sue Hicks wanted to know if Scopes would let himself become the legal guinea pig in a case testing the legality of the Act.

The law had been passed that year by the Tennessee legislature at the urging of John Washington Butler, an influential fundamentalist. It was made illegal to teach any theory about the origins of human beings contrary

to the Bible. According to the Butler Act, God had created human beings, they had not evolved from animals, particularly monkeys. Scopes opposed the law but had never taught evolution as true, rather he had reviewed the theory at the end of the school year prior to examinations. Scopes was no crusader but went along with the scheme anyway. He was single and had no established career. The conspirators agreed to a friendly challenge of the law and it probably would have been that except that the prosecution and defense recruited two nationally prominent lawyers to assist in their cases. The presence of these figures transformed what would have surely been a footnote in legal history in a backwater community into a

major cultural confrontation. The trial turned Dayton into a three-ring circus. Next time: Bryan and Darrow, a clash of two cultures.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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