

State v. John Scopes

- * Early 1920s social patterns were in chaos. Young modernists danced to jazz, went to speakeasies, debated abstract art, and challenged the traditional views of the strict morality of the Victorians.

- * In February of 1925 Tennessee enacted a bill making unlawful to “teach any theory that denies the story of divine creation as taught by the bible and to teach instead that man was descended from a lower order of animals.”

- * The American Civil Liberties Union would offer it’s services to anyone to challenged this law.

- * A man named George Rappalya, a 31 year-old New Yorker who had recently moved to Dayton, Tennessee as a coal company manager, wanted to challenge the law for two reasons: he didn’t like the law and he felt the publicity would bring in money to a town whose population had dwindled from 3,000 in the 1890’s to 1800 in 1925.

- * They found their teacher in John Scopes. He was a twenty-four year old general science teacher and part-time football coach. As he was covering a class for another science teacher, he assigned readings from a textbook that included passages on evolution. He agreed to be a “test case.”

- * William Jennings Bryan would be the prosecuting attorney. Bryan had run for President three times on platforms of populism (fighting for small businesses against large corporations) prohibition, women’s suffrage, and other causes for the “little man.”

- * Clarence Darrow would defend Scopes. Darrow was an agnostic and had defended other high profile criminals such as Eugene Debs and Al Capone (???).

- * Dayton became like a carnival. Banners, lemonade stands, chimpanzee performances, fundamentalist Christians prayed and demonstrated. Nearly 1000 people, 300 standing) crowded into the court house on July 10, 1925 for the first day of the trial.

- * The testimony of Scopes and students was simple – John Scopes had taught from a textbook that had been banned by the Tennessee law.

- * What made this case unique was that religion itself and the Bible’s credibility became the center of the trial. Darrow put Bryan on the stand and got him to admit that you couldn’t take every passage of the Bible literally and that the six days of the creation story may have been “periods.”

- * Darrow requested the jury find Scopes guilty so he could appeal the case to the Tennessee Supreme Court. They did and fined Scopes \$100.

- * The Tennessee Supreme Court ruled on a technicality, that the judge should have fined Scopes, not the jury and dismissed the case. It was not the ruling either side really wanted. It was a set-back for anti-evolutionary groups as only two (Arkansas and Mississippi) of the fifteen states with anti-evolution laws in the works before the trial enacted them.