



Teaching Biology and the Long Shadow of Scopes



EDITOR'S COMMENTARY

William F. McComas
Editor, *The American Biology Teacher*

For years, the February issue of *The American Biology Teacher* has focused on Evolution Education in honor of Charles Darwin in his birth month. This year we also reflect on a century-old trial, the consequences of which still resonate in classrooms. Of course, I am talking about the Scopes “Monkey” Trial that took place in Dayton, Tennessee, between July 10 and July 21 in 1925.

Tennessee and two other southern states—Arkansas and Mississippi—passed laws that prohibited the teaching of human evolution. This was the case in Tennessee with the Butler Act named after the legislator who proposed it. The law was not particularly detailed and passed without much fanfare but made it illegal for teachers in public schools to “teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible,” but many interpreted this to extend to evolution generally.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was concerned and searched for a defendant to challenge the law. Several leading citizens in the small town of Dayton, which had fallen on economic hard times, believed that having a trial there might bring attention to their fair city and boost the local economy. They responded to a newspaper ad from the ACLU and found a willing party who agreed to “break” the law and stand trial. That man was local coach and science and math teacher, John T. Scopes, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Sadly, much of that fascinating history has become muddy with time, but here are the main points. Scopes did use a state-approved biology book that contained a few pages about evolution mostly featuring what is called the “great chain of being,” but probably taught nothing contrary to the “divine creation of man.” Scopes was never really arrested, did not testify at the trial, never spent a night in jail, and most certainly never dated the daughter of a local fire and brimstone minister, as depicted in the stage play and movie, *Inherit the Wind*.

Quickly, Scopes was tried with defense support from the ACLU, but not before former Secretary of State, three-time presidential candidate and fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan volunteered to assist the prosecution. Clarence Darrow, arguably one of the most famous lawyers in the country, soon signed on to aid the local defense team. To make things even more interesting and contentious, Darrow and Bryan knew each other and traded barbs throughout the trial effectively putting them centerstage. Scopes, the jury, and the main arguments in the case were often forgotten.

The judge quickly ruled that the law was not on trial, and all the assembled scientific experts were excused from testifying. This brought the ironic comment from John Butler, author of the anti-evolution law, that perhaps some discussion of evolution would

be useful because he didn’t know anything about it, a view that is likely true among many who oppose evolution today.

The eight-day trial was shared with the world through the relatively new medium of radio and the breathless newspaper reports including those from the sardonic H. L. Mencken. All this focused attention on the tiny town and biology education to such a degree that neither has ever been the same since. Newspaper reports and live radio streamed over new telephone and telegraph lines while scores of individuals flooded into the local station on special excursion trains to witness history in the making. The crowd grew so huge that the trial moved outside the courthouse with fear that the floor might collapse and, to the relief of those in attendance, because it was stifling hot.

Much has been written about the trial, including in the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Summer for the Gods* by Edward Larson and Brenda Wineapple’s new account *Keeping the Faith*. In due course Scopes was found guilty, and the judge levied a \$100 fine that was later deemed inappropriate because the jury was not consulted. Ultimately the Tennessee Supreme Court, on appeal, dismissed the case saying “nothing is to be gained by prolonging the life of this bizarre case.” So, little changed from a legal perspective. The law remained on the books in Tennessee and other states for more than four decades. However, many issues from the trial still remain.

The case brought up the important issue of majority rule when local control of education contrasted with the minority rights of those who wanted their children to learn about topics such as evolution. The bombastic writing of Mencken, who left before the conclusion of the trial, painted an inaccurate view of southerners calling them “yokels,” “hillbillies,” and “ignorant,” words that still sting. Moreover, the fact that a scientific idea was on trial suggested that there must be something wrong or evil about evolution, and publishers quickly removed all such content from their biology textbooks. Even today we find that some biology teachers fail to emphasize this key dimension of the life sciences for fear of backlash, or worse because they personally do not accept the validity of evolution. Sadly, countless laws continue to be proposed in one state after another attacking teaching of the science of evolution with a variety of schemes that curiously often mirror one another.

It is time to lift the shadow of the Scopes trial and rededicate ourselves to teaching evolution and honor Scopes who allowed himself to be a vital test in a trial of ignorance vs. reason during a sultry summer in 1925. We hope that this theme issue of *The American Biology Teacher* contributes to both goals.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/abt.2025.87.2.75>