**Scopes Trial**

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| It made for great oratory between eminent rivals, and it put the debate over teaching evolution on front pages across the country. But one thing the Scopes "monkey trial" of 1925 did not do was settle the contentious issue of evolution in the schools, which continues to incite strong passions and court actions to this day.   Narrowly, the trial was about challenging a newly passed Tennessee state law against teaching evolution or any other theory denying the biblical account of the creation of man. Broadly, the case reflected a collision of traditional views and values with more modern ones: It was a time of evangelism by figures such as Aimee Semple McPherson and Billy Sunday against forces, including jazz, sexual permissiveness, and racy Hollywood movies, which they thought were undermining the authority of the Bible and Christian morals in society.   John Scopes, the 24-year-old defendant, taught in the public high school in Dayton, Tenn., and included evolution in his curriculum. He agreed to be the focus of a test case attacking the new law, and was arrested for teaching evolution and tried with the American Civil Liberties Union backing his defense. His lawyer was the legendary Clarence Darrow, who, besides being a renowned defense attorney for labor and radical figures, was an avowed agnostic in religious matters.   The state's attorney was William Jennings Bryan, a Christian, pacifist, and former candidate for the U.S. presidency. He agreed to take the case because he believed that evolution theory led to dangerous social movements. And he believed the Bible should be interpreted literally.   The weather was stiflingly hot and the rhetoric equally heated in this "trial of the century" attended by hundreds of reporters and others who crowded the Rhea County Courthouse in July 1925. Rather than the validity of the law under which Scopes was being charged, the authority of the Bible versus the soundness of Darwin's theory became the focus of the arguments.   "Millions of guesses strung together," is how Bryan characterized evolutionary theory, adding that the theory made man "indistinguishable among the mammals." Darrow, in his attacks, tried to poke holes in the Genesis story according to modern thinking, calling them "fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on earth believes."   The jury found Scopes guilty of violating the law and fined him $100. Bryan and the anti-evolutionists claimed victory, and the Tennessee law would stand for another 42 years. But Clarence Darrow and the ACLU had succeeded in publicizing scientific evidence for evolution, and the press reported that though Bryan had won the case, he had lost the argument. The verdict did have a chilling effect on teaching evolution in the classroom, however, and not until the 1960s did it reappear in schoolbooks. |
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