

David W Fletcher, March 1999, Revised December 2014

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THE RHEA COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Dayton, Tennessee seems an unlikely place for a world famous trial, but that is exactly what occurred at the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton during the summer of 1925. Dayton, the county seat of Rhea County, is a small southeast Tennessee town of about 6,000 population. Situated in the Valley and Ridge section of East Tennessee just north of the confluence of the Hiwassee River into the Tennessee River about 25 miles northeast of Chattanooga, Dayton is easily accessed by U.S. Highway 27 from the north or south or by State Highway 30 from the east or west.¹

Traveling the slender valley north to Dayton, you pass through the unincorporated village of Bakewell, and you cross Big Opossum Creek. Such unassuming places remind the visitor of the relative insignificance of Dayton in light of events that happened here in Summer 1925. Why

¹To avoid the interstate and Chattanooga, I decided to take the scenic route from Manchester to Dayton. Highway 55 from Manchester passes pleasant farmland and provides nice views of the mountains. Just a few miles east of McMinnville, Highway 8 ascends the Cumberland Plateau. Near Cagle close to Savage Gulf, Highway 111 descends into Sequatchie Valley. Marvelous sandstone cliffs line the route. Trickling waterfalls reflect the bright morning sun. The winding road glistens toward the valley which you can see from miles away. You can also see the road ascending on the other side of Sequatchie Valley. It's quite breathtaking. The valley floor north of Dunlap is about two or three miles across. The scenic overlook east of Dunlap gives a spectacular view of the Sequatchie Valley. The effects of Winter linger—the grass is yellowish-brown and the trees are without leaves. But Spring approaches—the chirping of the birds can be heard and the buds are ready to blossom. If you listen carefully, you can hear the lowing of a lone cow in the distance. Better these sounds than the incessant noise of the interstate. Across the Valley and Ridge section on Highway 111 is the descent into the Tennessee River Valley just north of Soddy-Daisy. Here, the view of endless rippling hills is fantastic. At Highway 127 is the turn northward toward Dayton.

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Dayton? Why national and world interest in a small Tennessee town? “Dayton is a sleepy little town. Few people outside the state, and in fact not many within [the state] had heard of it before the summer of 1925.”² The town itself, a railroad or “T” plan rather than a square, is not so impressive, and the courthouse proper is not so prominent since the terrain is flat. But up close the late nineteenth-century Romanesque Revival Italian Style courthouse with its distinctive bell tower presents a magnificent sight.

The courthouse faces North Market Street, the town’s historic thoroughfare, between West 2nd Avenue and West 3rd Avenue. As hub of Rhea County’s government, the courthouse is busy with people shuffling to and fro. The lawn is landscaped nicely with scrubs, bushes, and several tall oaks. A war monument in front honors local veterans of World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The United States, Tennessee, and POW/MIA flags fly proudly on the courthouse flagpole.

Floodlights around the entire courthouse provide lighting at night. Parking is very easy and is available on all four sides. However, I noticed only one handicapped parking place that was across West 2nd Avenue at the HRMC-TV, Channel 2 building. Signs at the courthouse entrance indicated handicapped access in the rear. I checked on this and found two additional handicapped parking places at the back, along with an access ramp to the main level of the

²Brandt Aymar and Edward Sagarin, *A Pictorial History of the World’s Great Trials: From Socrates to Jean Harris* (New Edition; New York, NY: Bonanza Books, 1985), 247.

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courthouse. Sidewalks line all streets around the courthouse, and four walkways lead to the front entrance.

The courthouse itself is impressive and worthy of note.³ But the historic marker out front tells another fascinating story. Appropriately, while I stood copying the marker, the bell tower rang out the hour—eleven o'clock!

THE SCOPES TRIAL

Here, from July 10 to 21, 1925 John Thomas Scopes, a county high school teacher, was tried for teaching that a man descended from a lower order of animals, in violation of a lately passed state law. William Jennings Bryan assisted the prosecution: Clarence Darrow, Arthur Garfield Hays and Dudley Field Malone the defense. Scopes was convicted.

With a need to satisfy my growing curiosity, I walked briskly to the front entrance. A placard invites visitors to the “Scopes Trial Trail, Rhea County Courthouse & Museum.” The top line—“Trial Trail”—looked like a mistake. I had to read it a few times. Somebody had a sense of humor. As I am to learn, this “Trial Trail” mentality is typical of the whole Scopes affair, not necessarily a joke or something trivial, but something like a good-natured monkeyshine for an important reason.

³See Carroll Van West, *Tennessee's Historic Landscapes: A Traveler's Guide* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 230-231.

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I decided to visit the courthouse first, and after I could venture down to the basement to visit the museum. The priority of the moment was to savor the atmosphere of the courtroom. Both the courtroom and the museum are open Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM until 4:30 PM. These are normal courthouse hours. They are closed on Saturday and Sunday. No special tours are offered, and no guides are available for information.

A placard at the entrance informs that the courthouse was built in 1891, became a National Historic Landmark in 1976, and was restored when the Scopes Trial Museum was completed in 1978. The dedication stone just inside the front doors adds the following information.

RHEA COUNTY TENN. C. H.
-1891-

V. C. ALLEN, Chairman
J. L. McPHERSON, Secretary
F. J. PAINE, Treasurer
DR. E. A. SHELTON
H. B. HEISKELL
C. W. HENRY

Building Committee

W. CHAMBERLAIN & CO.
Architects; Knoxville, Tenn.

WM. DOWLING
J. R. TAYLOR
Contractors; Chattanooga, Tenn.

As you enter, all facilities—water fountain, restrooms, elevator—are located conveniently to the right of a big staircase. A building directory is positioned on the wall next to the elevator.

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And the County Clerk had Scopes Trial T-Shirts for sale at \$8.00 each. The best part is the courthouse itself. The tall wooden doors, windows, and staircases are great. You can hear and feel the creaking of the stairs and floors as you walk. The old building breathes authenticity.

The courtroom is on the second floor. On the third floor are the Chancery and Probate Courtrooms and a few offices. The second floor courtroom, in which the Scopes Trial was held, is now the General Sessions Court for Rhea County. I was fortunate to be there during lunch break, otherwise the court would have been active. The courtroom looks just like the old pictures from the 1920s—high ceiling, wooden floors, wooden folding seats with iron frames and legs, and tall narrow windows. The judge’s bench and furniture are new, but the wide rectangular setting of courtroom and furniture are the same. I imagined Darrow, Jennings, Scopes, the media, and over 1,000 spectators in the room.

If the courtroom, itself a well-preserved historical setting, provides the physical context for the event, the museum in the courthouse basement fills in the details—who, what, and why. Here, the story is told in artifacts, photos, and interpretive text with attractive displays. In the museum entryway, two displays illustrate both serious and lighter sides of the trial. To the right is a cartoon by Fitzpatrick of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, a picture of a monkey with a poster on its tail that says—“Come to Dayton Tennessee for the Big Show.” To the left is a display titled “Two Viewpoints on the Origin of Man” with representative books about the Biblical Story of Creation (i.e., the Bible and *The Fundamentals* by R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon) and the Darwinian Theory of Evolution (i.e., Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* and *The Origin of Species*).

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Inside the museum, a display about “The Twenties” highlights the flamboyance of culture, fashion, music, and sports of the era as backdrop for the debate about creation versus evolution. This exhibit even had a box of Rudolph Valentino cigars. By way of contrast, the photos from Dayton during the 1920s portray a not-so-flamboyant small Tennessee town.

“The Giant Fighters for Causes” sketches the careers of William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow, the two main antagonists during the trial. A defender of the working man, the poor, and victims of injustice, Darrow’s national fame from his defense of teenage killers Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold added to a heightened sense of excitement. On the other hand, the declining political career of Bryan did not diminish his reputation as a skillful orator and a persuasive champion for conservative Christian causes. The widespread enthusiasm created by the clash of these two notables over such a hotly debated issue gives some credence to the “Great Man” theory of history in connection with events at Dayton.

But other influential players were involved in Dayton’s drama. R. M. Cornelius rightly notes that “the trial originated not in Dayton but in the New York offices of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), for it was this organization that ran an announcement in Tennessee newspapers, offering to pay the expenses of any teacher willing to test the new Tennessee anti-evolution law.”⁴ Also, as “The Issue Is Drawn” display shows, the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association actively solicited Bryan to help prosecute the case. Other important

⁴R. M. Cornelius, *William Jennings Bryan, the Scopes Trial, and ‘Inherit the Wind’* (Dayton, TN: Bryan College, 1997), n.p.

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influences include the media and a group of local leaders who “saw the trial as a great means of publicity that would attract business and industry to Dayton.”⁵

Perhaps the most important person in the whole affair was one of the least conspicuous. John Thomas Scopes, a young high school math and science teacher (but not a biology teacher), had agreed to test the anti-evolution law. He could not “remember ever teaching evolution, having only briefly substituted in biology.”⁶ Of interest is the fact that during the trial he did not take the witness stand. Cornelius notes, “The people of Dayton liked him, and he cooperated with them in making a test case of the trial.”⁷

The museum room dedicated to “The Trial” reveals the drama—the celebrities arrive, Dayton buzzes with activity and a little monkeyshine, the drama begins and continues, and the trial proceeds to a bizarre climax. The historic photos tell a vivid story. At the trial’s conclusion, Bryan, under examination by Darrow, undercut a vital principle of fundamentalism by denying the literalness of the six days of biblical creation. After this, the defense along with Darrow, who wished to appeal the case in order to challenge the legitimacy of Tennessee’s anti-evolution law, the Butler Act (enacted March 1925), conceded Scopes’ guilt. Judge John T. Raulston quickly brought the trial to conclusion. The jury deliberated only nine minutes and rendered a guilty verdict. Scopes was fined \$100 plus costs. This seemingly trivial amount becomes more

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

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substantive when compared with Scopes' monthly salary as a teacher of only \$150.⁸ But the ACLU paid the fine for Scopes.

Among the artifacts I found interesting were Bryan's pith helmet, the photos of the courtroom and bell tower (almost identical to what you see today), a Dayton–Monkey Town license plate (black with yellow letters), the “Why Dayton–Of All Places?” booklet, photos of Mindy the monkey, and J. R. Darwin's store in Dayton. Truth must be stranger than fiction!

Most instructive are exhibits about the press, stage and screen, radio, and newsreel that demonstrate the broad cultural impact of the Scopes Trial. Newspapers reported on the trial daily. Magazine articles in *Harpers Magazine*, *The American Mercury*, and *The Literary Digest* appeared within the year. Books quickly followed. Hollywood's version of the trial, *Inherit the Wind*, came much later in 1955. Perhaps the greatest impact resulted from radio and newsreel. In an unprecedented action, Judge Raulston permitted rearrangement of the courtroom furniture to accommodate installation of four microphones. WGN Radio of Chicago brought live coverage of the trial to the American public. Newsreel, in its infancy like radio, made an enormous impact. People could see what they read about in the papers. It is little wonder that the trial attracted national and even world attention.

With the successful prosecution of Scopes' violation of Tennessee's Butler Act, the aftermath is understandable. In many states, particularly in the South, anti-evolution bills were

⁸*The World's Most Famous Court Trial: Tennessee's Evolution Case* (Reprint ed.; Dayton, TN: Rhea County Historical Society, 1978), 307.

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introduced in legislatures and passed. But, on the whole, the legal and moral ramifications of teaching evolution in secondary schools remained, at best, ambiguous.⁹ Aymar and Sagarin sum it up nicely:

Dayton is a sleepy little town in Tennessee. Few people outside the state, and in fact not many within had heard of it before the summer of 1925. But in that year, for a period of about two weeks, it held the spotlight of world attention. An unassuming and modest young school teacher, charged with violating a state law prohibiting the teaching of evolution, was a defendant in a trial that brought two giants of American intellect into sharp collision, each a leading spokesman for warring antagonist forces. Repercussions were of a magnitude that could hardly have been foreseen when Scopes reluctantly consented to a technical arrest in order to make a test case challenging the constitutionality of the anti-evolution law.¹⁰

Such is the story of Rhea County Courthouse and the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. So much monkeyshine? Probably. High drama? Definitely. A great historic site in Tennessee. Undoubtedly! Visit and enjoy!

⁹See George E. Webb, “The Scopes Trial,” *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, edited by Carroll Van West (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 830.

¹⁰Aymar and Sagarin, *A Pictorial History of the World’s Great Trials*, 247.

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