

**THE HISTORY CHANNEL® PRESENTS:
10 DAYS THAT UNEXPECTEDLY CHANGED AMERICA™**



Scopes: The Battle Over America's Soul
(JULY 21, 1925)

The origin of the human species, and how to teach it, has long been a matter of debate in American society. When Charles Darwin's theory of evolution became more popular in the 1920s, Christians throughout the nation argued that these theories countered the Bible's teachings and should be forbidden. Favoring a creationist interpretation of the human species, states and local communities passed laws making it illegal to teach evolution in the classroom. This conflict came to a head in 1925 when a school teacher named John Scopes was arrested in Dayton, Tennessee for presenting Darwin's ideas to high school studies.

Following from Scopes' arrest, a high publicized trial dubbed "The Monkey Trial" mesmerized the nation. Broadcast live over the radio, people throughout the country and the world listened intently as a showdown between faith and reason ensued. Prosecuting attorney William Jennings Bryan passionately argued the creationist point of view while Clarence Darrow, backed by the American Civil Liberties Union, fiercely defended Scopes' right to teach evolution. ***Scopes: The Battle Over America's Soul*** is a riveting exploration of the Scopes Trial and its meaning in significance in American history. This program will engage students to discuss and debate a historical issue that continues to resonate in contemporary American society.

Curriculum Links:

Scopes: The Battle Over America's Soul would be useful for American History, American Culture, Ethics, Science and Technology, and Religion courses. It is appropriate for middle school and high school students. It fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education: (1) Values, beliefs, political ideas, and institutions, (2) Conflict and cooperation, and (3) Patterns of social and political interaction.

Key Terms:

Students should identify the following terms. Visit www.merriamwebster.com for definitions.

Evolution
Atheist
Agnostic
Mores
Dogmatic
Caricature
Pragmatic
Reason
Darwinism

Comprehension Questions:

1. Why do you think evolution became such a hot button issue in the 1920s? What else was going on during this period that explains the increased attention given to evolution?
2. What was the Butler Act and what role did it play in the Scopes trial? Who supported its passage and why?
3. At the time of the Scopes trial, Americans were divided about the issue of teaching Darwin's theories. Explain these diverse views.
4. The Scopes trial was deemed the "Trial of the Century." Why? How did most Americans learn about and follow the trial? Do you think it would have similar appeal today?
5. Describe the diverse views between the two lawyers on the case: Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan. Do you feel that one had a stronger case than the other?
6. How would you explain the concept "survival of the fittest"? How did this concept become a factor in the Scopes trial?
7. Were you surprised to learn that the arrest of John Scopes was not spontaneous, but the result of a plan by the American Civil Liberties Union? What do you think the motivations of Scopes and the ACLU were in pressing the issue of evolution? What do you think the motivations of William Jennings Bryan were in arguing for the prosecution?
8. What was the central issue at stake in the jury's decision to either convict or acquit John Scopes? Discuss.
9. In 1957, with the launching of the Russian spacecraft Sputnik, interest in Darwin's theory of evolution gained popularity. Why?
10. The Scopes Trial was the first time court had been used to decide social issues. Do you think that court is the appropriate place to make such decisions? Why or why not?
11. How did the Scopes Trial change the United States? Do you think these issues are still of relevance today? Discuss.

Extended Activities:

1. One of the major texts at the core of the evolution debate and the Scopes trial was Charles Darwin's *Origins of the Species*. Darwin's book has been associated with the teaching of evolution and a scientific view of the origins of humankind. Ask students to research Darwin's study online or at the library and to read passages of the text if possible. Then, ask students to write a one page synopsis of the book and its central arguments. These synopses can also be presented in bullet-point format. In a larger discussion, ask students to share their conclusions with the entire class or group.
2. The enormous interest in the Scopes Trial was made possible in large part because of the increased availability of radio. The entire trial was broadcast live over the radio, pulling Americans into the drama in real time. Students will be able to gain a broader context for understanding American culture during this period by researching the radio programs and music of the era. In small groups, ask students to research the history of radio and its popularity in the 1920s. Ask students to create illustrated timelines graphing the history of the radio and its rising popularity. Students can decorate these timelines with images of radio programs or other pertinent visuals they come across during their research.
3. The dramatic court showdown between Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan is at the center of this documentary. Ask students to research and review the perspectives of both men. Then, ask students to choose one of the two lawyers and write a 2-3 minute speech encapsulating their point of view on the evolution debate. Students should present their speeches to the larger class or group.

Primary Source Exploration:

After Clarence Darrow declined to make a closing argument in the Scopes Trial, prosecutor William Jennings Bryan was prevented from delivering his, in keeping with legal rules. The following is an excerpt from Bryan's closing argument that jurors never heard. After reading the excerpt, ask students to answer the questions that follow.

"It is for the jury to determine whether this attack upon the Christian religion shall be permitted in the public schools of Tennessee by teachers employed by the state and paid out of the public treasury. This case is no longer local, the defendant ceases to play an important part. The case has assumed the proportions of a battle-royal between unbelief that attempts to speak through so-called science and the defenders of the Christian faith, speaking through the legislators of Tennessee." – from William Jennings Bryan's closing statement in the Scopes Trial, 1925 (never publicly delivered)

Additional Resources:

Books

Larson, Edward J. *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*, (Harvard University Press, 1998).

Moran, Jeffrey P. *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents*, (Bedford/St. Martins, 2002).

National Academy of Sciences. *Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Sciences*, (National Academy Press, 1999).

Darwin, Charles and Julian S. Huxley (Introduction). *The Origin of the Species*, (Signet Classics, 2003 edition).

Web sites

An extensive site with background information and primary sources:

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/scopes/scopes.htm>

A site which includes several cartoons related to the Scopes Trial:

<http://www.msu.edu/course/mc/112/1920s/Scopes/>

A helpful website on evolution from the BBC:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/darwin/leghist/bowler.htm>