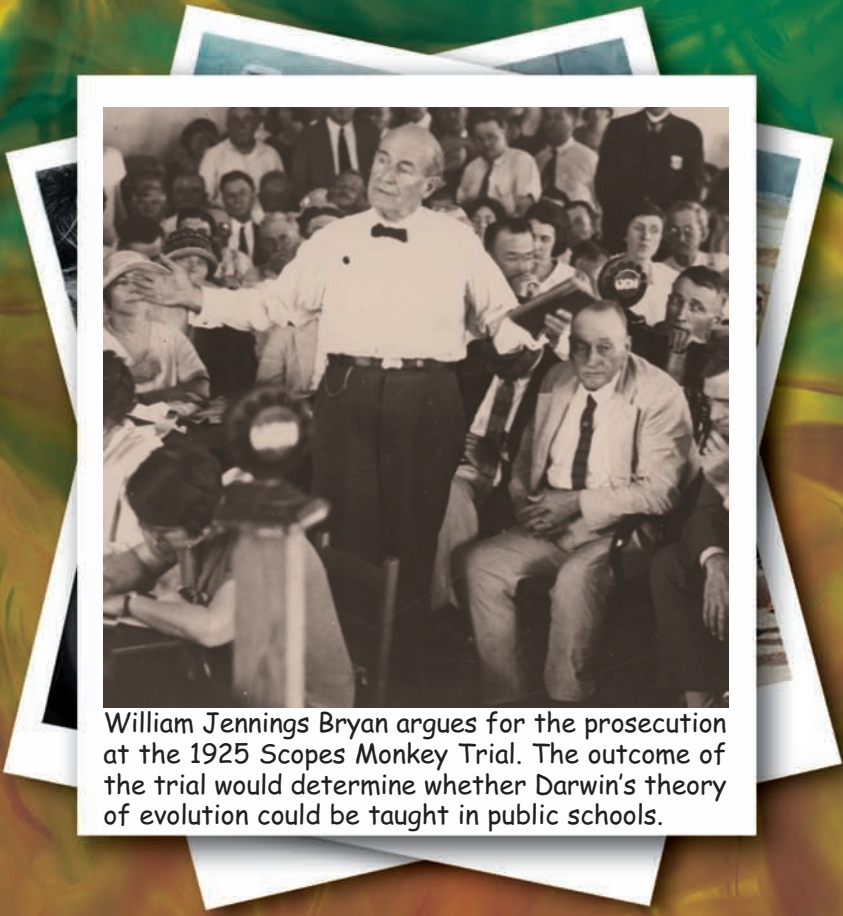


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**MONUMENTAL MILESTONES**  
**GREAT EVENTS OF MODERN TIMES**

# The Scopes Monkey Trial



William Jennings Bryan argues for the prosecution at the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial. The outcome of the trial would determine whether Darwin's theory of evolution could be taught in public schools.

**JIM WHITING**



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Printing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Whiting, Jim, 1943–

The Scopes monkey trial / by Jim Whiting.

p. cm. — (Monumental milestones)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-58415-468-3 (library bound)

1. Scopes, John Thomas—Trials, litigation, etc. 2. Evolution—Study and teaching—Law and legislation—Tennessee—History. I. Title. II. Series.

KF224.S3W485 2006

345.73'0288—dc22

2006006100

ISBN-10: 1-58415-468-3

ISBN-13: 9781584154686

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** **Jim Whiting** has been a remarkably versatile and accomplished journalist, writer, editor, and photographer for more than 30 years. He has written and edited about 200 nonfiction children’s books. His subjects range from authors to zoologists and include contemporary pop icons and classical musicians, saints and scientists, emperors and explorers. Representative titles include *The Life and Times of Franz Liszt*, *The Life and Times of Julius Caesar*, *Charles Schulz*, *Charles Darwin and the Origin of the Species*, *Juan Ponce de Leon*, *What’s So Great About Annie Oakley*, and *The Sinking of the Titanic*. He lives in Washington State with his wife and two teenage sons.

**PHOTO CREDITS:** Cover, p. 6—Getty Images; pp. 1, 3, 10, 21, 24, 25, 33—Library of Congress; pp. 15, 20, 31, 34—Smithsonian Institute Archives; p. 36—*Time*.

**PUBLISHER’S NOTE:** This story is based on the author’s extensive research, which he believes to be accurate. Documentation of such research is contained on page 47.

The internet sites referenced herein were active as of the publication date. Due to the fleeting nature of some web sites, we cannot guarantee they will all be active when you are reading this book.

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\*For Your Information

# The Trial of the Century

“Civilization is on trial,”<sup>1</sup> said one of the key figures in the courtroom, the most famous criminal defense attorney in the country.

In turn, the chief prosecutor described the defense attorney as “the greatest menace present-day civilization has to deal with.”<sup>2</sup>

“It is the first case of its sort since we stopped trying people in America for witchcraft,”<sup>3</sup> retorted the defense attorney.

“The contest . . . is a duel to the death,”<sup>4</sup> responded another prosecutor, a man who nearly became the president of the United States.

With so much at stake, it’s no wonder that many people called it the Trial of the Century.

For several weeks in the summer of 1925, the eyes of the nation were directed toward a tiny Tennessee town. Newspapers all across the country reported every development. Many of the country’s best reporters provided in-depth analyses. It was the first court case to receive gavel-to-gavel live-broadcast media coverage. Motion picture cameras filmed the highlights to show an anxiously awaiting public.

Unlike modern-day legal spectacles, the defendant wasn’t a prominent politician or a popular media figure. He was a teacher. And he wasn’t on trial for murder or another serious charge. In fact, he wouldn’t even face jail time if he was convicted. He was charged with a misdemeanor. Misdemeanors are minor offenses such as speeding, public drunkenness, and petty shoplifting. The punishment for most misdemeanors is payment of a fine.

The law this man was accused of breaking was very new. The governor who signed the law doubted that it would ever be enforced. He signed it to gain

support for another law—a new tax on tobacco that would finance far-ranging school reforms.

There wasn't any real doubt about defendant's guilt. In fact, his arrest was almost a lark. He went to court immediately—but it was a tennis court behind the high school where he taught. The city attorneys who began the prosecution were his good friends. Before charging him, they bought him a soft drink.

Some notorious trials are about a conspiracy. That was the case with this one, but the goal wasn't anything sinister. The plotters just wanted to put their small town on the map. Times had been tough, and many people had moved away. The plotters thought that a little publicity might attract out-of-town investors. They hatched their plan in one of the local drugstores.

When word of the upcoming court case began to circulate, newspapers all over the country were incredulous. Virtually no one had ever heard of the town. Editors had to comb through their atlases with magnifying glasses to pinpoint its location.

Although the location was obscure, the subject of the trial attracted some heavy hitters. A three-time presidential candidate volunteered to help the prosecution. The country's most famous criminal attorney led the defense. A fledgling civil liberties organization in New York City saw a perfect opportunity to gain invaluable publicity for itself. Even the presiding judge wanted to spend time in the spotlight.

When it was over, both sides claimed victory. Historians have endlessly debated the outcome, but the consensus is that neither side won. The issue that caused the trial—the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools—still dominates national headlines.

Officially the trial was known as the *State of Tennessee v. John T. Scopes*. Its unofficial nickname has become far more famous: the Scopes Monkey Trial.

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