

INHERIT THE WIND

FACT IN FICTION

I have a good friend who comes and listens to my shows and says, "You always sing about the past, you can't live in the past." And I say to him, "I can go outside and pick up a rock, that's older than the oldest song you know and bring it back in here and drop it on your foot. The past didn't go anywhere. It's right here, right now."

— Utah Phillips

Over the last few months, as we've prepared for this production of *Inherit the Wind*, assorted friends and colleagues have approached us and said, "Wow, the timing of this is so perfect. This is *exactly* what's going in our country right now." Well, not exactly. And indeed, it's important to remember that the story in *Inherit the Wind* is not exactly what happened in a Dayton, Tennessee courtroom in July of 1925. The playwrights, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, wrote the play as a response to McCarthyism and blacklisting, not as an historical treatise on the Scopes monkey trial. "*Inherit the Wind* does not pretend to be journalism," they wrote. "It is not 1925." Lawrence and Lee were intrigued by the way Maxwell An-

derson had used an historic event, the Sacco-Vanzetti case, as the inspiration for his play *Winterset*. "We asked for the same liberty . . .

to allow the actuality [of the Scopes trial] to be the springboard for the larger drama so that the stage could thunder a meaning that wasn't pinned to a given date or a given place."

The play's two giants, Henry Drummond and Matthew Harrison Brady, are not Clarence Darrow and William Jennings

Bryan. The fictional Bertram Cates is not John Thomas Scopes. Yet there is much to be learned about these real men that can enrich our understanding of the play, and the drama does serve as a startling reminder that the big questions of civilization tend to surface again and again through the ages.

AMERICA IN THE 1920S

America in the 1920s was anything but a monolithic culture. We had just come out of a brutal and costly world war, yet the promised sense of world peace had not been secured. Warren G. Harding, elected in 1920, could not have been more different than his stoic and

**BRYAN IN DAYTON,
CALLS SCOPES TRIAL
DUEL TO THE DEATH**

**If Evolution Wins, He Declares,
Christianity Goes, for Both
Cannot Survive.**

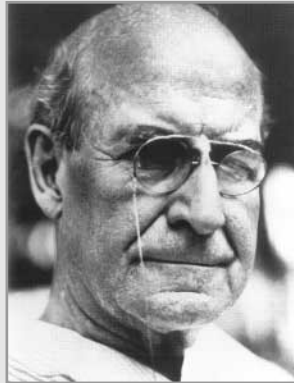
SEES THE BIBLE AT STAKE

*New York Times,
July 1925*

idealistic predecessor, Woodrow Wilson. Upon his election, Harding said that “America’s present need is not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy; not revolution but restoration; not surgery but serenity.” It was the age of Freud and Einstein, of F. Scott Fitzgerald and flappers—at least in the cities. Radio broadcasting exploded and in 1924, 2.5 million American households had a radio (compared with mere hundreds just five years earlier). Prohibition was the law of the land, but in the urban speakeasies and clubs, the jazz age was born. Small town America, however, remained largely untouched by these cultural and technological influences, and the economics of agriculture, textiles and mining hadn’t recovered from the downturn of 1920-21.

In American religious life, the early 20th century saw the beginning of the split between fundamentalists and modernists. Put simply, fundamentalists were those who believed in a literal reading of the bible and who believed that moral absolutes of right and wrong were handed down directly by God; modernists, on the other hand, viewed the bible as

instructive by metaphor and through literary interpretation, and believed that spiritual redemption was a personal journey. The division between fundamentalism and modernism, and between big city and small town America was palpable, and those schisms played a role in the actual trial and in Lawrence and Lee’s dramatization.



William Jennings Bryan, aged 65 at the time of the trial. Although Bryan was an attorney, he had not practiced law in 30 years and was the prosecution team’s leader by virtue of his national celebrity and oratorical gifts more than by his legal prowess.

**THE BUTLER ACT
& WILLIAM
JENNINGS BRYAN**

In the spring of 1925, Tennessee passed the Butler Act. The law stated that “it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals, and all other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the bible,

and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.” Tennessee was the first state to pass such a law, but it was a subject that had been widely discussed in a number of state legislatures—discussions that had been encouraged substantially by William Jennings Bryan. Bryan had been a congressman (representing Nebra-

ska) and had run three times—unsuccessfully—as the Democratic nominee for President. He had served as Wilson’s Secretary of State but resigned in 1915 as he saw the U.S. moving irrevocably toward war. Bryan was a pacifist and preached the “social gospel,” which held that humankind has a

responsibility to care for the less fortunate among us. Bryan feared what he saw as a move towards “Social Darwinism”—survival of the fittest—a philosophy that, in his mind, justified greed, brutality and even eugenics (the manipulation of genetic information—an important aspect of the Nazis’ goal in WWII of creating a master-race). For Bryan, the teaching of evolution was stripping America’s youth of its faith, without which basic human

decency and compassion were in jeopardy. Bryan was not simply a religious fundamentalist (though he was also that); he was a liberal Democrat who fought for women’s suffrage and the rights of the working man—and though he was unsuccessful in his bid for president, he was extraordinarily popular with the American people who hailed Bryan as “the Great Commoner.”

SETTING THE STAGE IN DAYTON

When the Tennessee legislature passed the Butler Act outlawing the teaching of evolution, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)—then a relatively new organization—was eager to put the law to the test. The ACLU was not interested in a



Defense attorney Clarence Darrow was 68 at the time of the Scopes trial. He cultivated a folksy charm which served him well and he is considered one of history’s most charismatic, persuasive trial lawyers.

debate between science and religion, however. Their focus was the defense of individual rights. They placed advertisements in every Tennessee newspaper offering to pay the court costs for anyone willing to be part of a test trial—a case meant to test the constitutionality of the law itself. In 1925 Dayton, Tennessee was a town that had fallen on hard times and saw the trial as an opportunity to lift itself economically. Dayton’s population had shrunk from 3,000 to

1,800 in less than 50 years; the town’s blast furnace had shut down earlier in the century and the town leaders were eager to attract new industry to the area. When an engineer named George Rappleyea (who had moved to Dayton from New York) saw the ACLU’s newspaper ad, he and other town leaders saw an opportunity at hand.

In the play, the teacher Bert Cates is persecuted for his views.

The truth was not nearly so dramatic. John Scopes was the high school football coach and substitute biology teacher who was well-liked about town. Dayton's town leaders, including school board president Fred Robinson (owner of the drugstore that served as a watering hole and informal gathering place), asked Scopes if he had used the standard textbook, Hunter's *Civic Biology* in his teaching. Scopes had. Then they asked Scopes if he would be willing to let himself be arrested and be the defendant in a trial that would test the new law. Again, Scopes said yes. After all, it would be good for the town. Little did any of them realize a firestorm was about to erupt.



John Thomas Scopes was 24 at the time of the trial and had just finished his first year of teaching in Dayton.

BRYAN & DARROW

Once the case was set in motion, it took off like a rocket. William Jennings Bryan agreed to lead the prosecution; his participation alone would have secured the trial's place in national headlines. But the atmosphere would grow hotter still with the announcement that Clarence Darrow was volunteering his services for the defense. Darrow was America's leading defense attorney at the time, and still stands as perhaps the greatest legal mind of the 20th century. In 1896, Darrow campaigned for Bry-

an during his first bid for the presidency but as the first decades of the 20th century progressed, the two took ideologically divergent paths. Bryan believed in majority rule and Darrow was an unshakable defender of the rights of the individual. Darrow was also a noted agnostic, and as such was not the ACLU's

first choice to defend Scopes, since they feared the trial would become a broadside attack on religion. The meeting of these two great voices in American society in the 1920s was a clash of titans that drew the attention of people from around the country and around the world. Newspapers from all over the U.S. sent reporters to Dayton; H.L. Mencken (writing for

the *Baltimore Sun*, and a vitriolic critic of Bryan) was the most famous and least diplomatic of the bunch. WGN Radio from Chicago paid \$1,000 per day for use of telephone lines to transmit the broadcast—the first live broadcast of a court trial in the United States.

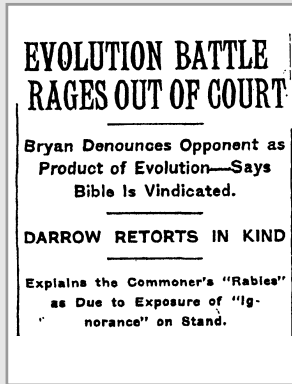
FACT & FICTION

In a climactic scene in *Inherit the Wind*, the prosecutor Matthew Harrison Brady takes the stand, under the interrogation of defense attorney Henry Drummond. Lawrence and Lee did borrow from his-

tory for this; Darrow really did ask Bryan to testify in what still stands as one of the most famous courtroom scenes in history. In the play, the outcome is clear and the victory decisive. Reality, of course, is always more complex. The very success of the stage and film versions of *Inherit the Wind* have colored our perspective of what really happened in July 1925. Paleontologist and author Stephen Jay Gould has described the mythology of *Inherit the Wind* as follows: "John Scopes was persecuted, Darrow rose to Scopes' defense and smite the antediluvian Bryan, and the antievolution movement then

dwindled or ground to at least a temporary halt. All three parts of this story are false." Scopes was not only *not* persecuted; the town was grateful for his willingness to volunteer for the trial. Darrow certainly did make a significant attack on Bryan's case through his interrogation, but the prosecution ultimately prevailed as the jury handed down a guilty verdict. And the antievolution movement didn't weaken following the trial. Indeed,

Bryan's death five days after the trial's end only strengthened the movement's fervor and it wasn't until the 1950s—when Lawrence and Lee wrote the play—that the movement lost any significant footing (although it continued to thrive within its own subculture and has gained renewed strength since in the 1980s).



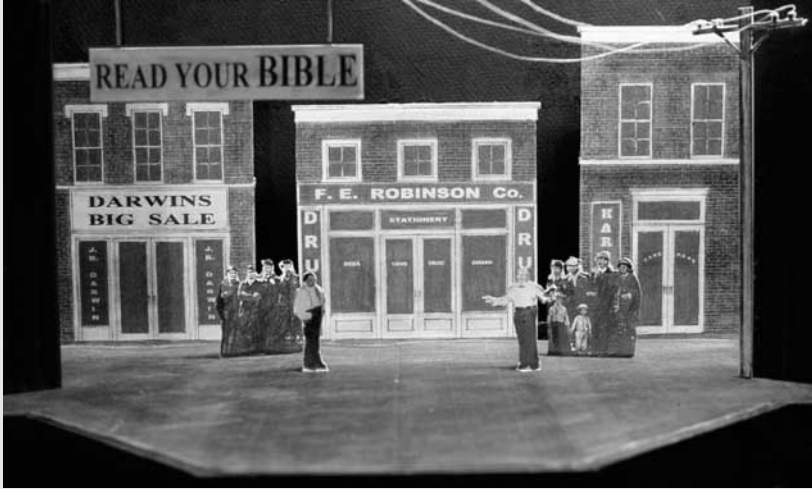
New York Times,
July 1925

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

Then why do the play? Because theatre itself is a lie, an artifice, that lets us examine truths. Though the events of 1925 have been simplified and manipulated for the sake of a dramatic interpretation, the essential

questions of the Scopes trial and of Lawrence and Lee's dramatization are the same: questions of fundamentalism versus modernism, of the rights of the individual versus the rule of the majority. They were meaningful to the townspeople of Dayton in 1925; they were meaningful to the audiences who first saw *Inherit the Wind* in 1955, and they are meaningful to us as we read the headlines in Rochester in 2006.

Marge Betley
Dramaturg



*Set model for Geva's production of **Inherit The Wind**. Scenic designer Erhard Rom incorporated some visual images from Dayton, Tennessee, the location of the actual Scopes trial.*

ABOUT GEVA'S PRODUCTION

As we worked on Geva Theatre Center's production of *Inherit the Wind*, there were some central images and ideas that formed the foundation of our collaboration and influenced our design decisions. One was the image of community. We hope that you will feel that you are a part of the community that is wrestling with the questions in the play. We have even asked people from the Rochester community to join us as jurors on stage, and the set has been designed in a way that blurs the lines between audience and performers.

A central visual image is the sky full of stars that twinkle above the town in our set. As we began rehearsals, director Skip Greer asked

us all to remember a time when we stood in a dark field and looked up at the stars in the sky. Can you picture it? When you look up at that dazzling night sky, do you see God . . . or do you see science . . . or do you see both? And does what you see up there begin with whatever you carried in your heart when you stepped onto that field? When you look out, are you searching inward? And how does what you see in the night sky affect what you carry in your heart as you walk away? When you leave the theatre tonight, will you be the same person who walked in just a few hours earlier, or will you view the world a little differently?