

THE TWENTIES

Biography

Directions: Read the following biography. Then, answer the questions that follow.

John Scopes (1900–1970)

John Scopes was a bright, clean-cut teacher and football coach, well liked by his students at Rhea County High School in Dayton, Tennessee. When Scopes was a youngster, his parents had insisted that all of their children read literature and philosophy, and they often quizzed the children on this material. Not surprisingly, Scopes grew up to be intellectually curious and committed to academic freedom, the idea that teachers should not be restricted from teaching specific subjects or information.

Shortly after the 24-year-old Scopes began teaching general science, Tennessee passed the Butler Act, making it a crime to teach evolution in public schools. Some prominent members of the Dayton community asked Scopes whether he taught evolution in his biology class and whether he would be willing to fight the new law. Although Scopes said that he didn't remember teaching the theory of evolution, he did believe in it, so he

agreed to be a defendant. Yet Scopes would soon regret his decision, and only his father's insistence that the trial was an opportunity to serve the country kept Scopes involved.

When Scopes was found guilty, he said these words to the judge: "Your honor, I feel that I have been convicted of violating an unjust statute [law]. I will continue in the future, as I have the past, to oppose this law in any way I can."

Yet Scopes gave up teaching after the trial, and instead studied geology and eventually moved to Venezuela, where he worked as a petroleum engineer.

However, Scopes could not escape his past. In 1960 he returned to Dayton for a premiere of *Inherit the Wind*, a film about the famous trial. Today, the Scopes "Monkey Trial" is considered an early proving ground for the conflict of modernism and fundamentalism, a debate that is still being carried on around the world.



Photo of John Scopes,
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Questions to Think About

1. What groups or individuals prompted the actions that resulted in the "Monkey Trial"?
2. Why did Scopes agree to be a defendant, even though he couldn't remember teaching evolution?
3. **Draw Inferences** What does the passage tell you about the type of person that John Scopes was?
4. **Link Past and Present** Would you go on trial to defend your beliefs as Scopes did, even though your beliefs were unpopular or controversial? Explain.