The Courage of His Convictions

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In July of this year, thousands of people will descend on tiny Dayton, Tennessee to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Scopes "Monkey Trial." The Scopes Trial Play and Festival, which will be held July 13-16, will include a lecture by Pulitzer Prize winner Edward J. Larson (author of Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion), a reunion of guests related to participants in the trial, tours of important sites associated with the trial, an arts and crafts fair, and several historically accurate reenactments of the trial in the courtroom where the trial took place. The festival is always an enlightening and fun event; if you're looking for a good place to go this summer, you'd have a hard time beating this festival.1

Although a visit to Dayton can be very instructive in understanding the Scopes trial and its role in the creationism/evolution controversy, two long-forgotten sites associated with two of the trial's principals aren't in Dayton. These sites, each of which humanizes and carries a subtle message about the trial, are the tombstones of William Jennings Bryan and John Thomas Scopes.

William Jennings Bryan lived an incredible life; he represented Nebraska in the US Congress (1891-95), was a three-time Democratic nominee for President (1896, 1900, 1908), was Secretary of State for Woodrow Wilson, taught a Bible class attended by 4,000-5,000 people each Sunday, and championed numerous progressive causes -- for example, the popular election of US Senators, a graduated income-tax, women's suffrage, the Federal Reserve Act, workman's compensation, and minimum wage, to name a few -- that eventually became law. Indeed, few statesmen have been more vindicated by history than William Jennings Bryan. Although Bryan's performance at the Scopes trial disappointed many fundamentalists, his death just five days after the trial made him a martyr for fundamentalists' causes. He was buried with much fanfare in Arlington National Cemetery beneath the inscription "He Kept the Faith" (Figure 1; also see Moore 1999a).2 Bryan's epitaph personifies the populist, faith-based message that typified the lives of Bryan and his fundamentalist followers.

John Scopes led a remarkably different life. Whereas Bryan often sought public attention, Scopes was quiet and shy. After his trial, while Bryan spoke at public events and prepared a lengthy "message" for the media, Scopes quietly left town to ponder his future. He rejected many lucrative offers to cash-in on his celebrity, and instead went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, where he studied geology and became close friends with Clarence Darrow, one of the attorneys who defended him at Dayton.

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Figure 1.** a) The tombstone of William Jennings Bryan in Arlington National Cemetery. b) Bryan is buried beneath a tiny inscription "He Kept the Faith."

Although Scopes sought quiet and anonymity, he could not escape his notoriety. For example, in 1927 the president of the University of Chicago eliminated Scopes from consideration for a fellowship, telling Scopes that "You can take your atheistic marbles and play elsewhere." Feeling that he had no future as a teacher (he had wanted to get a Ph.D., but never did), Scopes accepted a job with Gulf Oil of South America and worked in Venezuela. Although he considered himself a "good agnostic," he married his wife Mildred
in a Roman Catholic church to please her. In 1930, Scopes re-entered the University of Chicago but when he ran out of money accepted a job with United Gas in Shreveport, Louisiana. In 1960, his wife persuaded him to return to Dayton for the world premier of *Inherit the Wind*. There, in front of the second-largest crowd in Dayton's history, Scopes was honored with a parade and key to the city, but was also criticized and called "the devil." While in Dayton, Scopes learned that teachers at his former school were required to sign a pledge not to teach evolution, and also realized that he'd have been convicted in 1960 for teaching human evolution as he had been 35 years earlier. Even today, creationism continues to be taught at Scopes' school (Moore 1999b). After his trial, Scopes sought anonymity and a quiet life away from the storms associated with Dayton. For the rest of his life, Scopes refused to exploit his accidental fame. When he rarely spoke about his case, his message was steady:

"The basic freedoms of speech religion, academic freedom to teach and to think for oneself defended at Dayton are not so distantly removed; each generation, each person must defend these freedoms or risk losing them forever."

Although Scopes was overshadowed in Dayton by the clash of Bryan and Clarence Darrow, his courage was remarkable. He received thousands of letters denouncing him as evil and labeling him an atheist, but he held his ground. Whereas William Jennings Bryan's tombstone includes a biography and proclaims Bryan's faith, the inscription on Scopes' tombstone is much simpler: "A Man of Courage" (Figure 2). Scopes is buried beside his wife Mildred, mother and father (who attended his trial), and sister Lela, who lost her job as a teacher in Paducah, Kentucky when she would not renounce evolution.

![Figure 2](image)

For more information about the Scopes Trial Play and Festival, go to [http://www.bryan.edu/Scopes](http://www.bryan.edu/Scopes); to order tickets for the trial reenactments, call 423-775-0361.

Bryan is buried atop a tree-covered hill in grave 3121 of Area 4 in the southern part of Arlington National Cemetery.

Darrow, the third principal at the Scopes Trial, had earlier achieved fame with his involvement in the Leopold and Loeb case in 1924 (the first case involving a 'thrill killing', the Sweet case in 1926 (in which blacks were indicted for defending themselves against a mob), and the Kidd case of 1898 (about union organizing). Darrow worked on only one more case after the Scopes trial. He then retired, during which time he wrote his memoirs and spent much time with John Scopes. When Darrow died in 1938, his body was cremated.

Scopes is buried at the corner of Hope Avenue and Myrtle Avenue in Section 7, Lot 104 of Oak Grove Cemetery in Paducah, KY.

References