

Differences between the Scopes Trial and Inherit the Wind from R.M.Cornelius' William Jennings Bryan, The Scopes Trial, and Inherit the Wind

In spite of the hundreds of journalists who visited the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee, during the Scopes Trial and in the years since, very few accurate accounts of the event have been published. The authors of *Inherit the Wind* (Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee) state the following in the Preface: "*Inherit the Wind* is not history.... Only a handful of phrases have been taken from the actual transcript of the famous Scopes Trial. Some of the characters of the play are related to the colorful figures in that battle of giants; but they have life and language of their own--and, therefore, names of their own.... So *Inherit the Wind* does not pretend to be journalism. It is theatre. It is not 1925." In brief, *Inherit the Wind* may be viewed as arresting theatre, but it should not be considered accurate history. Here are some of the instances wherein *Inherit the Wind* differs from the historical facts of the trial record and the events surrounding it.

(For convenience, the names of the historical characters which the play supposedly involves are used.)

- 1) The trial originated not in Dayton but in the New York offices of the American Civil Liberties Union, for it was this organization that ran an announcement in Tennessee newspapers, offering to pay the expenses of any teacher willing to test the new Tennessee anti-evolution law.
- 2) When a group of Dayton leaders decided to take advantage of this offer, their main reason was not so much defense of religion as it was economics, for they saw the trial as a great means of publicity that would attract business and industry to Dayton.
- 3) Others responsible for the trial were the media, who worked hard to persuade Bryan and Darrow to participate in the trial.
- 4) John T. Scopes was not a martyr for academic freedom. He volunteered to help test the law even though he could not remember ever teaching evolution and probably never did since he was a mathematics teacher and a coach and had only briefly substituted in biology. He was never jailed, nor did he ever take the witness stand in the trial. The people of Dayton liked him, and he cooperated with them in making a test case of the trial.
- 5) William Jennings Bryan was not out to get Scopes. Bryan thought the Tennessee law a poor one because it involved firing an educator, and he offered to pay Scopes' fine if he needed the money. 6) Bryan was familiar with Darwin's works, and he was

not against teaching evolution--if it were presented as a theory, and if other major options, such as creationism, were taught.

7) The trial record discloses that Bryan handled himself well and when put on the stand unexpectedly by Darrow, defined terms carefully, stuck to the facts, made distinctions between literal and figurative language when interpreting the Bible, and questioned the reliability of scientific evidence when it contradicted the Bible. Some scientific experts at the trial referred to such "evidence" of evolution as the Piltdown man (now dismissed as a hoax).

8) Bryan and his wife were on good terms, and she did not admire Clarence Darrow. Scopes dated some girls in Dayton but did not have a steady girlfriend

9) The defense's scientific experts did not testify at the trial because their testimony was irrelevant to the central question of whether a law had been broken, because Darrow refused to let Bryan cross-examine the experts, and because Darrow did not call on them to testify. But twelve scientists and theologians were allowed to make statements as part of the record presented by the defense. 10) The topic of sex and sin did not come up in the trial. Neither did Bryan believe that the world was created in 4004 B.C. at 9 a.m.

11) Instead of Bryan's being mothered by his wife, he took care of her, for she was an invalid.

12) The people of Dayton in general and fundamentalist Christians in particular were not the ignorant, frenzied, uncouth persons the play pictures them as being.

13) Scopes was found guilty partly by the request of Darrow, his defense lawyer, in the hope that the case could be taken to a higher court.

14) Bryan did not have a fit while delivering his last speech and die in the courtroom