

# Origins Insights

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## Inherit the Wind: A Historical Analysis (Part 1)

by Dr. David N. Menton  
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Rarely, it seems, does a year go by that the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee play, *Inherit the Wind*, is not produced by a local high school or college. While *Inherit the Wind* is obviously not a documentary, it is perceived by many viewers to be a documentary-drama of the famous 1925 Scopes trial. The trial pitted William Jennings Bryan against Clarence Darrow in a classic confrontation over the teaching of evolution and creation in the public schools. Considerable theatrical liberties were exercised in developing the plot, but occasional courtroom exchanges were taken verbatim from the transcript of the Scopes trial. The composite that resulted has unfortunately become widely perceived as essentially a historical account of the trial. Is the play a fair and accurate representation of the great battle of ideas and beliefs that was waged at the Rhea County Court House in Dayton, Tennessee? The answer to this question is important, in view of the impact that the frequent showing of the various versions of *Inherit The Wind* are likely to have on the attitudes and beliefs of its viewers.

The purpose of this study is to compare the play, *Inherit the Wind*, with the actual transcript of the Scopes trial, as well as with various biographical and historical accounts of the trial and its participants. All references to the play script are taken from the *Two-Act Version of Inherit the Wind* (Copyright, 1986, by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee). All references to the trial transcript are taken from the book, *The World's Most Famous Court Trial* (originally published in 1925). I used the second reprint edition, ©1990, published by Bryan College, which includes a word-for-word report of the famous Scopes trial, and also the testimony of noted scientists and the text of Bryan's proposed closing address.

Curiously, the play *Inherit The Wind* (unlike other documentary-dramas such as *Gandhi* and *Patton*) does not use the actual names of either the participants or places it portrays. Although some characters like the Reverend Jeremiah Brown and his much persecuted daughter, Rachel, are purely fictitious, the rest of the principal characters of the play clearly represent well-known participants in the Scopes trial. The character Matthew Harrison Brady represents William Jennings Bryan; Henry Drummond represents Clarence Darrow; Bert Cates represents John Scopes; and E. K. Hornbeck represents H. L. Mencken. I have chosen to use the proper names of the principals in the Scopes trial to avoid confusion since there has never been any doubt whom the chief characters in the play are intended to represent. In the observations that follow, segments from the play are enclosed in a box and preceded with the heading INHERIT THE WIND. Analysis of the segments are preceded with the heading HISTORICAL COMMENT.

**INHERIT THE WIND:** Throughout the play, great effort is made to solicit sympathy for John Scopes, the much persecuted school teacher who has been cast into jail for teaching his students evolution and is at risk of losing his job, his girlfriend, and we are repeatedly reminded that "fine and imprisonment" are possible consequences of his crime (play script, pages 8, 43, 66).

**HISTORICAL COMMENT:** Scopes was never jailed, nor was he in danger of imprisonment. The maximum penalty for violating the Butler Act was a \$500 fine. Scopes didn't have a college degree in science (he had an

undergraduate degree in law from the University of Kentucky). Scopes was not a biology teacher; he only filled in as a substitute for two weeks near the end of the school year for the biology teacher, Mr. Ferguson, who was ill. Scopes' involvement in the trial was a willful decision on his part. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was seeking a teacher willing to stand trial, with all expenses paid, in an effort to challenge the Butler Act. The ACLU placed a newspaper ad that read in part:

*"We are looking for a Tennessee teacher who is willing to accept our services in testing this law in the courts."*

A local businessman, George Rappleyea, read this ad and lost no time in seeking out John Scopes and in pressuring him to accept the ACLU offer. In his autobiography, Scopes details this conversation with Rappleyea, Robinson, and some other Dayton businessmen:

*I said, "If you can prove that I've taught evolution, and that I can qualify as a defendant, then I'll be willing to stand trial."*

*"You filled in as a biology teacher, didn't you?" Robinson said.*

*"Yes." I nodded. "When Mr. Ferguson was sick."*

*"Well, you taught biology then. Didn't you cover evolution?"*

*"We reviewed for the final exams, as best I remember." To tell the truth, I wasn't sure I had taught evolution.*

*Robinson and the others apparently weren't concerned about this technicality. I had expressed willingness to stand trial. That was enough. (John T. Scopes and James Presley. Center of the Storm: Memoirs of John T. Scopes. NY: Holt, 1967, page 60)*

In his book, Scopes goes on to say that Robinson then called the Chattanooga News to report, *"We've just arrested a man for teaching evolution."* Scopes then drank the fountain drink that had been offered him, and then went back to the high school to finish playing tennis with the kids. Later, Rappleyea wrote out a telegram to the ACLU to report Scopes' willingness to participate in the test case.

So John Scopes was not being attacked at all; rather it was he that was on the attack. Scopes had willingly joined ranks with the ACLU in an attempt to repeal or nullify the Butler Act. In Sprangue de Camp's book, *The Great Monkey Trial*, a remarkable conversation between Scopes and reporter, William K. Hutchinson of the International News Service, reveals that Scopes' defense lawyers had to coach his students to perjure themselves by claiming that John Scopes had taught them evolution when in fact he hadn't. (*The Great Monkey Trial*, by Sprangue de Camp, page 432)

**INHERIT THE WIND:** Throughout the play William Jennings Bryan is portrayed as closed-minded, pompous, stupid, intolerant, hypocritical, insincere and gluttonous. The following dialogue between Darrow and Bryan appears on page 51:

DARROW: *"I don't suppose you've memorized many passages from the Origin of Species?"*

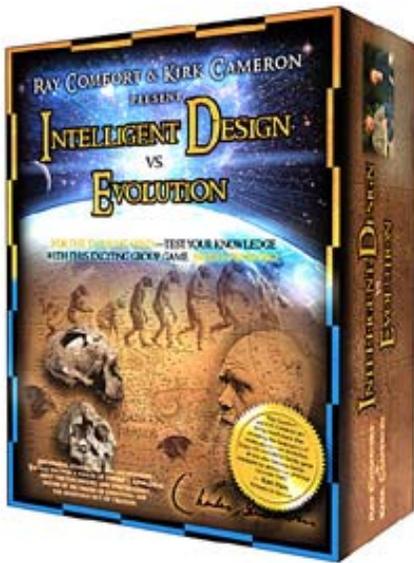
BRYAN: *"I am not the least interested in the pagan hypotheses of that book."*

DARROW: *"Never read it?"*

BRYAN: *"And I never will."*

(To be continued next month)

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**When:** Saturday, March 17th, 2007 from 8 am until 3 pm.

**Where:** South Hills Bible Chapel, 300 Gallery Drive, McMurray, Pa, 15317

The pre-registration deadline is March 3rd.

**Pre-registration fees** are: adults \$12, couples \$18 and teens over the age of 12 are \$6.

The registration fees at the door are slightly higher at \$14.00 per person and \$20.00 per couple and \$8 for teens. Pre-registration is not required, walk-ins are welcome!

**The keynote speaker:** Lenard Ransil, from Upon This Rock Foundation, will be speaking about Understanding Worldviews. 16 different workshops will also be offered benefiting the experienced homeschooler, the novice homeschooler or even those who are considering homeschooling their children in the future.

**Book vendors:** (ABeka, Christian Literary Associates, Creation Science Fellowship, Erie Diploma Program, Holcombs Know Place, Just Math Inc., Math-U-See, McCaffrey SAT Tutoring, Pa Homeschoolers, Queen Homeschool Supplies, Usborne and more) will be present so that you can determine which books, curriculums will best fit your child's educational needs.

There will be a large used **book sale**; sell or buy used books.

The **workshop** is an opportunity for anyone who is interested in homeschooling to gather information, look at various resources and to speak with experienced homeschoolers.

**Questions and Registration:** E-mail Nancy Shawgo [nancys\\_30@yahoo.com](mailto:nancys_30@yahoo.com) or call Sue Means at 412.854.4188.

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