



## High-Profile Crime in the 1920s

By the 1920s, the world was changing from rural to urban, causing changes in every aspect of daily life. Radio, silent films, telephones and the automobile had expanded the flow of information to the public. Household appliances had made household work faster and less strenuous, and the soap operas became a new form of entertainment. The shift from rural to urban can be seen in the John Thomas Scopes trial in 1925.

Tennessee had passed the Butler Act in on March 28, 1925, which made the teaching of evolution an illegal act. John T. Scopes, a biology teacher, challenged that law and was arrested. The case became known as the Monkey Trial and was later made into a film, *Inherit the Wind*, in 1960. Famous names like Clarence Darrow, William Jennings Bryan and H.L. Mencken made the case a national event. The result was that a yeoman farmer became known as a “hick” or a “country bumpkin” and was seen as backward and resisting the modern world.

This new, modern world saw the movement from gangs to organized crime. Prohibition gave the underworld a common source of wealth. Al Capone moved to Chicago in 1920 and began to organize the gangs. The Red Scare was still on the American public mind when Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, both anarchists, were arrested for robbery and murder of a paymaster in 1920. Their lawyer, Fred Moore, had represented the International Workers of the World (IWW), which was associated with the Red Scare. Then, the Communist Party began a campaign to free the pair and paid Moore. The FBI was investigating “reds,” crime and the Ku Klux Klan. By 1924, the new director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was J. Edgar Hoover.

The second empire of the KKK became strong enough to march down Washington, D.C., on Pennsylvania Avenue, 500,000 strong. Their growth would diminish when Indiana’s head Klansman, David Stephenson, was convicted of rape and murder. The Klan had controlled Texas, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Indiana state governments and major political factors in Maine, Florida, Alabama and California.

Bobby Frank was kidnapped and murdered by the sons of wealthy men. The sons, Richard A. Loeb and Nathan F. Leopold, in 1924 wanted to commit the “perfect crime.” They were defended by Clarence Darrow and were given life in prison instead of the death sentence. Loeb was killed in prison, and Leopold was released in 1958 after being a model prisoner and working on medical experiments that saved lives.

Then there was Marcus Garvey, who raised African American pride with “Black is Beautiful” and a Back to Africa movement. His ship line, the Black Star Line, and other situations involving money caused the government to charge him with mail fraud in 1923. He was convicted and later deported, and ended his life in London, England.

The 1920s also saw the first scandal in the film industry of Fatty Arbuckle. This case went through three trials before Arbuckle was acquitted. The 1920s may not have been that different from 2020!

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. [www.HistoryDepot.com](http://www.HistoryDepot.com)