



WILLIAM B. RILEY

and the Fight Against

Teaching of EVOLUTION in Minnesota

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SHOULD THE THEORY of evolution be taught in tax-supported schools? That question became a momentous one not only in Tennessee and other southern states but also in Minnesota in the 1920s. It was debated often and not always calmly in Minnesota schools (especially at the university), in churches, public halls, newspapers and other media — and finally at the State Capitol. Excitement over the matter reached a climax in March, 1927, when an attempt to put through an anti-evolution bill was defeated in the legislature.

The man most responsible for the dispute in Minnesota, and one of the key anti-evolution leaders nationally, was the Reverend William Bell Riley, long-time fundamentalist pastor of the First Baptist Church in Minneapolis. Although time has somewhat dimmed his notoriety, Riley was Minne-

sota's most famous minister for much of the fifty-year period between his arrival in Minneapolis in 1897 and his death in 1947 at the age of eighty-six.

At a testimonial dinner in 1932, Mayor William A. Anderson of Minneapolis called Riley "a fragment of the Rock of Ages" as well as "an institution." In 1944, when he was asked to address the Northern Baptist Convention, the entire body rose to its feet in a gesture of respect as Riley mounted the platform. The Northwestern Bible College that he founded in 1902 (a seminary was added later) had by 1947 sent out close to 2,000 graduates, and more than 70 per cent of the state's 125 Baptist churches were led by pastors trained at the school. Riley was so successful with his "sawdust-trail" preaching and frequent voicing of "fiery opinions on public affairs" that the First Baptist Church grew from some 600 members in 1897 to more than 3,000 in the 1930s. Riley resigned from the First Baptist pulpit in 1941, and the church is still flour-

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*William B. Riley
gestures in this
early, undated
photograph taken
sometime after he
became pastor of the
First Baptist Church
in Minneapolis.*



ishing today under his successor, the Reverend Curtis B. Akenson.¹

Riley's prominence doubtless could be attributed in part to a flair for publicity that often put his name in the newspapers and also to an arresting personal appearance. One of his opponents of 1927 later described him as "a tall, strikingly handsome man with a leonesque mane of white hair, a resonant voice, and a commanding presence. If he had not been a preacher he could have been an actor."²

The main reason for his being widely known, however, was that he was almost continuously involved in controversy. An Irishman who dearly relished combat, he quickly took his stand whenever an issue arose and then, confident that he was right, plunged in with reckless abandon. As far as those who knew him best could tell, "he was never afraid of anything."³

Riley, for example, had hardly arrived from the church he served in Chicago to take over his Minneapolis pastorate before the turn of the century when he became embroiled in a social conflict with several families of his congregation. At that time First Baptist was very much a church of

silk-stockings and blue bloods. It boasted prominent names like Pillsbury, Dunwoody, and Jewett, among others, all of whom were anxious to keep the existing class lines intact. Riley decided it was time to end the aristocratic regime, so he moved to abolish the old system of pew rentals and opened church services to servants, factory workers, and the like. He defended this by pointing

¹ *Minneapolis Journal*, March 2, 1932, p. 1 (quotes); *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 6, 1947, p. 5; October 19, 1952, p. 8 (quotes). The only biography, by Riley's second wife, is Marie Acomb Riley, *The Dynamic of a Dream: The Life Story of Dr. William B. Riley* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1938).

² Howard Haycraft to Virginia Walker, October 16, 1959, Haycraft Papers, University Archives, University of Minnesota (quoted by permission). Mr. Haycraft is now chairman of the board of the H. W. Wilson Company, New York City, publisher of indexes and reference works for libraries.

³ The Reverend Billy Graham, "Dr. W. B. Riley, the Man," in the *Northwestern Pilot*, 28:186 (March, 1948). In this published version of a memorial service tribute of December 9, 1947, four days after Riley's death, Mr. Graham, then interim president of Northwestern Schools, also said of Riley: "I think there was one thing that he was afraid of. . . . I think that he shared with Paul . . . that constant dread of somewhere lowering of principles . . . or compromising a point."

to the democratic aspects of the Gospel tradition. He further alienated his basically Republican congregation by taking a firm stand against the Spanish-American War of 1898. Attempts to get rid of Riley failed, with the result that more than a hundred families eventually left to form the Trinity Baptist Church in Minneapolis.⁴

This was just the beginning. Twenty years later he was a central figure in the organizing of American fundamentalism. This began as a movement of protest among some conservative Baptists and Presbyterians, but before long it turned into the most disruptive religious struggle the country had seen since the Great Awakening of the 1740s. Riley ranked with William Jennings Bryan and John Roach Straton, pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church in New York City, as among the most important national fundamentalist leaders. In the 1930s Riley devoted much time and concern to an aggressive campaign of anti-Communism and at times was labeled "fascist and anti-Semitic." He ended his career a bitter opponent of the New Deal and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Riley was a social radical on the left when he arrived in Minnesota and a social radical on the right when he died. He stood with the same position on the cor-

ner for half a century and the parade slowly passed him by.⁵

Of all of Riley's battles, the one most responsible for his national reputation was that which erupted over the question of evolution and the teaching of it in the public schools and universities. The college generation of the 1920s basically met the world with frivolity and cynicism, but the right to teach evolution was an issue to which students responded in a serious fashion. The populace in general also felt considerable pressure to take a position on the theory, which stemmed largely from popularization of Charles R. Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. This was published in 1859, two years before Riley's birth in Indiana. The surprising thing is not that five states put legal obstacles in the way of teaching evolution but that so few did so. Threats of anti-evolution bills hovered over virtually all the state legislatures. As the rhetoric mounted in frenzy, the term "evolution" came to be used so loosely that to many people it meant virtually everything that was wrong with the country.

THE STORY of fundamentalism and the drive for anti-evolution legislation in the 1920s could not be told without giving major importance to Riley and the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA) that he headed. The outgrowth of meetings of conservative churchmen at New York in 1918 and Philadelphia in 1919, the interdenominational WCFA was the most important and enduring of fundamentalist organizations that combated evolution and modernism as enemies of the Biblical version of creation and of orthodox Christian beliefs. Riley traveled and debated widely and wrote prolifically for the WCFA. His *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, a magazine he edited in connection with the Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School (as it was then known), became the WCFA's official publication. Riley's leadership of WCFA and other ac-

⁴ Riley's entire career can be traced from more than seventy personal scrapbooks in the Riley Collection at what is now the combined library of the Metropolitan State Junior College and Northwestern College in Minneapolis. The collection also includes copies of Riley's numerous books and pamphlets, magazines, and several boxes of his unpublished sermons.

⁵ In the growing literature on American fundamentalism, the standard works are Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (Hamden, Connecticut, 1963, first published in 1931), and Norman F. Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven, 1954). One should also consult two perceptive articles by Ernest Sandeen of Macalester College: "The Princeton Theology: One Source of Biblical Literalism in American Protestantism," in *Church History*, 31:307-321 (September, 1962) and "Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism," in *Church History*, 36:66-83 (March, 1967). *Minneapolis Tribune*, December 6, 1947, p. 5 (quotes); October 19, 1952, p. 8.

tivities led one historian to call him "that human dynamo" and another to rate him as "the ablest executive that fundamentalism produced."⁶

Riley and the WCFA were responsible for securing William Jennings Bryan as a prosecuting attorney in the famous trial of the State of Tennessee *versus* John Thomas Scopes in 1925.⁷ They also lent support to passage of Arkansas' anti-evolution law and were active in campaigns that caused Texas and California to put legal obstacles in the way of teaching evolution as a "fact." As rabid democrats, they felt that the source of all political wisdom lay in the people; consequently they argued that the people should be the judge of what should or should not be taught in the tax-supported schools. If Christianity could not be taught legally, they said, then no philosophy which countered it should be taught legally either.

The state which Riley and the WCFA tried hardest to sway to their position was Minnesota. Successful anti-evolution legislation did not cross the Ohio River, but Minnesota came closer to passing such a bill than any other northern state. The chief reason for this was the pastor from Minneapolis. Minnesota, with its large rural (and presumably conservative) population in the 1920s, must have heartened Riley. The only notable exception to the pattern of small towns and villages was the Twin Cities, the sole major cultural center for hundreds of miles and home of the university and of the State Capitol. Minnesota was not a strong area for Baptists. The Lutheran element that dominated the state, however, was conservative theologically, and Riley felt it would give him many allies.

THE EVOLUTION QUESTION brought storm clouds over Minnesota, particularly the university, several years before the 1927 disturbance. Opposition to teaching of evolution in Minnesota public schools really began to crystalize in the fall of 1922 when fundamentalist leader Bryan, who had been a presidential candidate three times and

had served as secretary of state under Woodrow Wilson, defended the Bible and attacked science and scientists in two lectures in the Twin Cities. Sponsored by Riley's Northwestern Bible and Missionary School, Bryan addressed a full house of some 2,600 people at the State Theater in Minneapolis the morning of Sunday, October 22, and more than 9,000, including hundreds of university students in a special section, at the Hippodrome on the state fairground in the afternoon. Revealing a childlike faith and, as his enemies often pointed out, a naïveté about scientific matters, Bryan held that "evolution is a menace to civilization" and thus should not be taught. "There is more science in the twenty-first verse of the first chapter of Genesis than in all the scientific books on earth," Bryan said. Allowing himself considerable sarcasm (as Riley did later), Bryan added: "I say to you scientists, you professors, you evolutionists, that I have a right to demand to what bird or beast or reptile you pay your respects on fathers' day."⁸

⁶ Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy*, 49-56, 110 (quote); Cole, *Fundamentalism*, 233-236, 325 (quote). For a doctrinal statement of WCFA, see *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, January-March, 1923, p. 18.

Rival camps, or even persons on the same side, often could not agree on definitions. Webster's *New International Dictionary* (second edition, 1934) defines fundamentalism as "a recent movement in American Protestantism in opposition to modernistic tendencies, re-emphasizing as fundamental to Christianity the inerrancy of the Scriptures, Biblical miracles, especially the virgin birth and physical resurrection of Christ, and substitutional atonement." The same source defines modernism as "a current movement in Protestant churches arising mainly from the application of modern critical methods to the study of the Bible and the history of dogma, and emphasizing the spiritual and ethical side of Christianity rather than historic dogmas and creeds."

⁷ Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith, William Jennings Bryan: The Last Decade, 1915-1925*, 329 (New York, 1965).

⁸ *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 23, 1922, p. 10 (quotes); *Minneapolis Journal*, October 23, 1922, p. 19; "William Jennings Bryan and Fundamentalism," in *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, January-March, 1923, p. 17.

The *Minnesota Daily*, the university newspaper, avoided editorializing on the issue at that time except to note that if Bryan's resolutions against evolution were adopted, half of the courses of the university would have to be reorganized. The paper did print a series of rebuttals by Charles P. Sigerfoos, professor of zoology, George P. Conger, assistant professor of philosophy, and others. "The opponents of evolution play on the grotesque idea of man's coming from an ape," said Sigerfoos. "They have no more right to ridicule the teachings of science than scientists have to ridicule the teachings of religion. Evolution presents a rational explanation of the existing order of things." Conger said he believed the importance of the Bible and its accuracy were two different things but that "evolution and theism are quite compatible. One can always say . . . that God began the process, or that God intervenes in it; one can also say . . . that God is in the whole process, or that the whole process is in God."⁹

In between statements by professors, the *Daily* published one from Riley in which he denied that opponents of evolution objected to true science. He asserted, however, that "organic evolution, in so far as it relates to the origin of species, has not a single proof of its hypothesis." It therefore is not a "science" and should not be taught in public schools.¹⁰

A few days after Bryan's speeches Riley invited Minneapolis ministers of several denominations to a conference at First Baptist Church. The result was a resolution asking prohibition of the teaching of "anti-Christian theories" in tax-supported schools. From this conference grew the Minnesota



William Jennings Bryan in 1920

Anti-Evolution League whose purpose (in Riley's words) was "to force the teachings of the evolutionary hypothesis from the public schools, and to lend all possible aid to evangelical denominations in ridding their schools of the same pseudo-science." Meanwhile, the Twin City Rationalist Society adopted a resolution defending the teaching of evolution and condemning church interference in education. The battle was gaining momentum.¹¹

In March, 1923, Lotus Delta Coffman, president of the university, received a resolution from the Presbyterian Ministers' Association of Minneapolis asking that he investigate and remove all textbooks of "ir-

⁹ *Minnesota Daily*, October 24, p. 1, 3 (Conger quote); October 25, p. 1 (Sigerfoos quote), 1922.

¹⁰ *Minnesota Daily*, October 28, 1922, p. 3.

¹¹ *Minneapolis Journal*, October 26, 1922, p. 1 (first quote); "The Anti-Evolution League," in *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, January-March, 1923, p. 16 (second quote); *Minnesota Daily*, November 8, 1922, p. 3.

Coffman was appalled at the prospect of examining the textbooks of 800 faculty members and was relieved to discover that the action of the Presbyterian Ministers' Association was the work of only six maverick clergymen, not all of whom were in agreement. In April, 1923, Presbyterian pastors sent Coffman a second letter offering "to co-operate with him for the good of the university and the general public." The Presbyterian ministers also said they would not join Riley and the Anti-Evolution League in militant measures against teaching of evolution. Coffman did inquire about one of the textbooks in question, however, and discovered that the part objected to

Coffman answered the first Presbyterian statement in the form of a forceful open letter to the newspapers. He said there would be no investigation of any textbooks. Wrote Coffman, in part: "The university exists to orient the students in the world of human thought, as well as in the world of natural fact, and to ignore completely controversial questions would emasculate all instruction in the humanities and to some extent the natural sciences as well." This proclamation was heartily endorsed by the students and an all-university council meeting a few weeks later. It also was applauded editorially by the press, including the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and the *Minneapolis Journal*.¹⁴

¹³ *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 20, 1923, p. 7 (quotes); P. A. Lang, conference secretary, to Lotus D. Coffman, May 18, 1923, Papers of the President's Office (hereafter cited as President's Papers), University Archives.

¹⁴ *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1923, p. 5 (quote); *Minneapolis Journal*, April 4, p. 8, April 5, p. 16, 1923; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 4, p. 10, April 5, p. 8, 1923.

books they said opposed the Christian faith. If these books were not removed from classrooms, they threatened to seek a court injunction to see that they were. Coffman privately wrote C. R. Fehr, a Minneapolis lawyer, that he doubted if they could have this done. But, he said, "I have no desire to urge this matter upon them, because persons who have taken the position that they have are likely to attempt the impossible." Fehr had written Coffman earlier that "we are of the opinion that the government of the University as to educational matters is exclusively vested in the board of regents."¹⁵

At another large meeting, in October, 1922, Riley threatened to "give attention" to the "vitiating teachings" of such professors as Sigerfoos. Early phases of the dispute were heated. They made the national press chiefly because Bryan was wrongly seen as being responsible for the agitation. The *Literary Digest* polled the state's ministers and discovered that, of the number queried, they were against the teaching of evolution 115 to 77. "Old-time religion seems good enough for a majority of Prot-

estant ministers in Minnesota," the magazine concluded. In spite of the numerous meetings and threats in 1922 and 1923, however, nothing concrete was done in Minnesota for almost three years.¹⁶

SINCE BEFORE World War I Riley had been trying to bring his message in person to the University of Minnesota campus. It was his firm belief that the majority of the students and the rest of the populace were with him and all it would take to persuade the others would be a few addresses. He had spoken at the school earlier but was annoyed that he had not received a return invitation. Consequently, in 1925 and 1926 he engaged in intermittent correspondence with university officials, especially Coffman and Frederick J. Kelly, dean of administration, about appearing on the campus.

Throughout 1925 Riley, a skilled debater, had argued evolution with a number of scientists around the country. As in earlier years, he practically always won by audience vote. In November, 1925, at the Kenwood Armory in Minneapolis, Riley bested Dr. Edward Adams Cantrell, field secretary of the Science League of America, for the seventh consecutive time. By a rising vote, a capacity crowd gave the decision to Riley, who took the negative on the question, "Resolved, That Evolution Is an Established Fact and Should Be Taught in the Tax-Supported Schools of America."¹⁷

About this time Riley requested a campus room to debate Cantrell again on the evolution issue but was told this was not in line with university policy. He then asked for a place in which to debate a faculty scientist on the same issue, but Coffman quietly ruled out a "debate" and no scientist could be found to engage in any "discussion" with him. "The feeling is as strong as ever," wrote William A. Riley (no relation), head of the department of animal biology, "that a debate with him on the subject of Evolution would be undignified and futile." Kelly made several honest attempts to find

¹⁵ Coffman to Frank A. Weld, coeditor of *American Educational Digest*, Lincoln, Nebraska, April 10, 1923; Coffman to Fehr, May 8, 1923; Fehr to Coffman, April 30, 1923, all in the President's Papers. The four textbooks condemned for passages on evolution were: Edward Alsworth Ross, *Social Psychology* (1908); F. Stuart Chapin, *Introduction to the Study of Social Evolution* (1913); Charles Abraham Ellwood, *Sociology and Modern Social Problems* (1913); and Maurice F. Parmelee, *Criminology* (1918). See *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 5, 1923, p. 1, and *Minneapolis Journal*, April 5, 1923, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Minnesota Daily Star*, October 30, 1922, p. 5 (quote). For a report of another mass meeting against evolution at the Swedish Tabernacle in Minneapolis, March 18, 1923, see the *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 19, 1923, p. 1, and the David F. Swenson Papers, University Archives. At this meeting Professor Conger attacked "medieval" attempts "to club the evolutionists into silence." For the poll, see "Shall Moses or Darwin Rule Minnesota Schools?" in *Literary Digest*, 76:31 (January 13, 1923).

¹⁷ *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 21, 1925, p. 10.



Lotus D. Coffman in 1921

a scientist to meet Riley. He even wrote to professors at Princeton and Chicago universities but to no avail. "I am not very fond of discussions of the kind you describe," replied botanist John M. Coulter, formerly of the University of Chicago, in refusing.¹⁸

The matter was thought to be resolved when university officials reluctantly gave Riley permission to speak alone on the subject, "Evolution Is a Fallacy and Should Not Be Taught in Our Public Schools and Colleges," on Wednesday, March 3, 1926. On the preceding Monday, however, Kelly discovered that Riley had submitted an advertisement to the *Minnesota Daily* in which the subject now was worded, "Should the Teaching of Evolution Be Longer Tolerated in This State University?" Riley also sought to have the following sentences printed: "Dr. W. B. Riley, Pastor of the First Baptist Church, Minneapolis, who has won so many debates in America against Evolution, proposed to the University of Minnesota recently to put on a debate in the Armory.

They accepted the proposition and have assiduously sought a noted biologist to meet Dr. Riley and having failed have requested him to speak at the Old Library building, Wednesday, March the 3rd, at 4:30 P.M." The wording of the statement angered Kelly, and he decided to withdraw Riley's invitation to speak. Unable to reach Riley by telephone, he nevertheless told the *Daily* to publish his withdrawal and not Riley's statement.¹⁹

Kelly was to regret this action later. Furious at what had happened, Riley charged him and the university with a conspiracy to keep him away. "Candidly, Dean Kelly," Riley wrote, "I do not blame you for trying to keep me off the University grounds for it has been demonstrated every time I have been privileged [*sic*] to argue with a representative of this philosophy that it cannot be successfully defended."²⁰ Such an action just confirmed him in his belief that the people were behind him and that a small clique had combined to keep the truth from the student body. Both Riley and Kelly blamed each other for the affair. Surely one cause of the controversy occurred when Kelly answered a Riley letter addressed to Coffman, saying he could use university grounds for a debate when Coffman had said he could not. Also, Kelly should have clarified the exact title of the talk before that Monday. Riley had earlier claimed that he did not care how the subject was worded. Coffman handled all future Riley correspondence and Kelly remained quietly in the background.

¹⁸ Coffman to Riley, November 2, 1925; W. A. Riley to Kelly, January 20, 1926; Coulter to Kelly, December 2, 1925, all in the President's Papers.

¹⁹ *Minnesota Daily*, March 3, 1926, p. 1; *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 3, 1926, p. 1, 14; Kelly to Roe Chase, March 24, 1926, President's Papers.

²⁰ Riley to Kelly, March 3, 1926, President's Papers; *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 4, 1926, p. 1, 4; *Minneapolis Journal*, March 4, 1926, p. 28. Kelly was quoted as saying, "If Dr. Riley can get three columns in the newspapers he is satisfied. That is all right with me." See *Minneapolis Journal*, March 8, 1926, p. 1.

Denied a voice at the university, Riley, on Sunday, March 7, 1926, filled the large Kenwood Armory to overflowing. Since the *Minneapolis Tribune* had given much space to the incident, he spoke to a crowd of several thousand on "Evolution: Shall We Tolerate Its Teaching?" In this speech, one of his most powerful polemics on the subject, Riley singled out several textbooks by name and demanded they be immediately removed from the campus. He accused the university of being eager to hear modernist Protestants such as Harry Emerson Fosdick and Shailer Mathews but refusing to invite fundamentalists like evangelist Amzi C. Dixon whom he had brought to the city. This he declared was favoritism and unfair tactics. The key issue in the land was evolution, he said, and the students were allowed to hear only one side of the argument. He declared that most people in Minnesota were fundamentalists, and they had a right to keep their school free from such doctrines if they desired.

He closed the meeting with a dramatic appeal: "That is the teaching you are getting in the University of Minnesota. Do you want it? (Voices: No! No!) Then don't have it . . . You don't have to. Whose university is it over there, will you tell me? Does it belong to a dozen regents? (A voice: No sir!) Does it belong to fifty or seventy-five or a hundred professors? Does it? (No!) And now my final appeal is to parents and taxpayers. . . . Speak now, and speak in no uncertain terms. Tell those of us who make up the Anti-Evolution League that you are back of us; that we can depend upon your fellowship in our fight for the faith of Americanism; that if the courts

need to be applied to or the legislature asked to aid in our campaign, that you will make your personal and financial sacrifice if need be, and will stand at our side for Americanism that it may not perish out of America, and that our education may be of that sort which shall give young men the right to hear two sides of a controverted subject; and that neither a dozen regents nor a hundred deceiving and faithless professors shall be the owners or controllers of the University of Minnesota. If you will back us up in a fight for the God-fearing majority, say so. Will you do it? (Voices: Yes! yes! yes!) All right now we will find out in just a few minutes, when we take up a collection. Those of you who mean that will chip in." Then the meeting ended with the singing of "America."²¹

The following Sunday night, March 14, Riley promised his congregation a fight to the finish. "As to the methods we shall use, I can only say, 'Wait a year and see.' Last Sunday I celebrated my twenty-ninth anniversary in this church. In all that time have you ever seen me enter a fight and give it up before it was won? I had to fight my way into this church. I fought the saloons on the Sunday closing law and the Sixth street limit—and they closed up. I expect to live to see this materialistic, atheistic philosophy absolutely eradicated from the schools."²²

The next October there was a brief pause in Riley's battle with the university while he concentrated for a time on "rankly liberal" Carleton College, most of whose faculty (Riley claimed) believed in and taught evolution. Riley submitted a resolution at the state Baptist convention in Rochester, demanding that Baptists withdraw support of Carleton. The matter was deferred for a year. Meanwhile, Carleton's football team acquired a new mascot—a monkey that the students christened "W.B." for Riley.²³

Riley then wrote university officials again asking to make not one but several talks on fundamentalism on the campus. Coff-

²¹ Stenographic copy of the address of March 7, 1926, in Swenson Papers. See also *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 8, 1926, p. 1.

²² *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 15, 1926, p. 11.

²³ *Minneapolis Journal*, October 13, 1926, p. 1 (quote); *Minnesota Daily*, October 20, 1926, p. 1; Bruce Tarrant, "Minnesota: Modern or Mediaeval?" in *The Independent*, 118:8 (January 1, 1927).



From left: David F. Swenson, Frederick J. Kelly, Howard Haycraft

man and Kelly had done their best to smooth over the incident of the previous March. Kelly noted that he had never denied Riley the *right* to speak at the university but had only withdrawn his official invitation at that time. At last, in November, 1926, Riley was allowed to speak four times at the university. His first lecture, "Fundamentalism and the Scopes Trial," was heard by more than 3,000 students as a regular convocation at the university Armory. When a student let a monkey down on a string at the start of Riley's talk, Coffman apologized. Riley laughed off the prank and continued with his speech. His other three talks, given to reduced audiences of 300 to 400 in the smaller Old Library auditorium, were: "The Bible—Is It an Evolution or a Revelation?"; "Civilization—Is It a Product of Evolution or of Religion?"; and "Man—Is He a Natural Evolution or a Divine Creation?" In his first lecture Riley claimed that the 15 per cent of freshmen who did not believe in the Christian faith were increased by the teaching of evolution to 45 per cent or more by the time of graduation.²⁴

Under such headings as "A Very Nice Looking Man" and "A Very Fine Speaker," the *Minnesota Daily* editorialized that students "were in the main disappointed" with Riley's talks. They were full of "hasty generalizations and assertions" and "failed to

impress his hearers as making any sort of a case for him." The *Daily* also said it was unfortunate that Riley never admitted the existence of Christian evolutionists. "I am fully convinced that it was a wise thing for us to permit him to speak here," Coffman wrote a friend at Princeton University. "We have been very careful to see that speakers representing the scientific point of view with reference to this matter have been brought before the students."²⁵

Riley challenged the *Daily* to publish all of his first lecture. In his answer, published on November 23, managing editor Howard Haycraft, who thereafter became one of Riley's main targets, said that it would take five and a half columns of solid type to do this. "Frankly," wrote Haycraft, "aside from mechanical limitations, we do not be-

²⁴ Kelly to Riley, October 21, 1926, President's Papers; *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 25, p. 3, November 19, p. 10, 1926; *Minneapolis Journal*, November 18, 1926, p. 2; *Minnesota Daily*, November 19, p. 1, November 23, p. 1, November 24, p. 1, 1926; "Five Addresses on Evolution in the State University of Minnesota," in *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, January-March, 1927, p. 20. Riley counted a talk on "Evolution— or Faking Arguments in Favor" at the Medical Club as his fifth address.

²⁵ *Minnesota Daily*, November 19, p. 2 (quotes), November 24, p. 2, 1926; Coffman to E. G. Conklin, professor of biology at Princeton, November 29, 1926, President's Papers.

lieve your address would have sufficient news value at this time to warrant any such space."²⁶

JUST AFTER the first of the year (1927) Riley at last put in motion his long-time threat to take the evolution matter to the legislature. This was done in spite of administration protests that any complaint about the university should be directed to

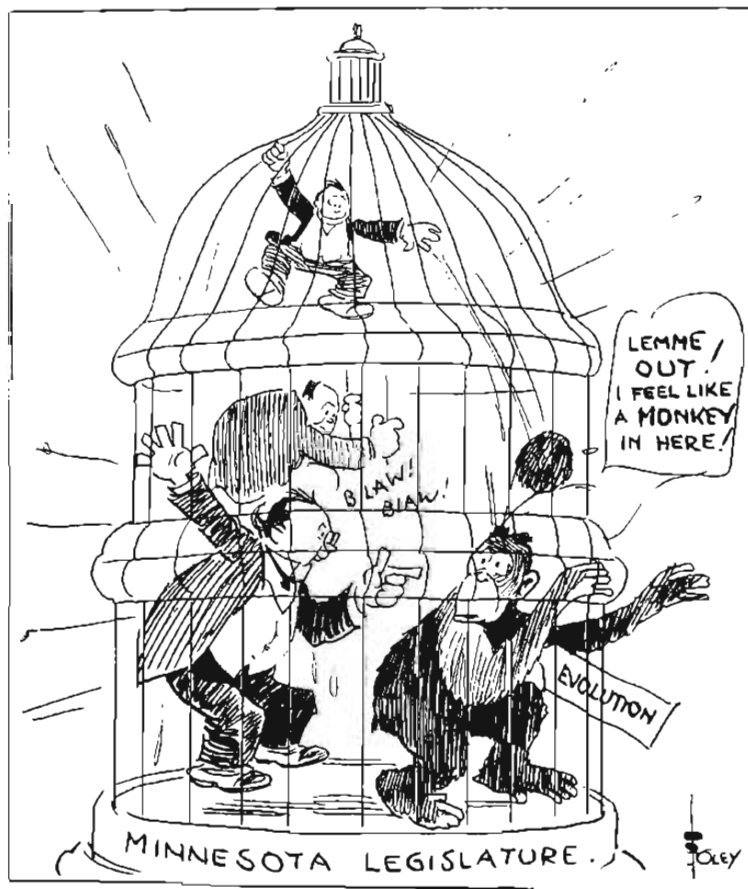
the board of regents instead of state senators and representatives. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that personal pique played a large role in this, the most extensive of Riley's anti-evolution fights. Riley drew up an anti-evolution bill with the aid of Gerald B. Winrod, fundamentalist from Wichita, Kansas, who gave the proposed measure its first public reading on January 7 at the First Baptist Church. Winrod also defended the bill.²⁷

It was not until February 25 that Senator K. K. Solberg of Clarkfield introduced in the state senate a bill for an act "to prohibit the teaching that mankind either descended or ascended from a lower order of animals and the adoption or use of textbooks which teach that mankind either descended or ascended from a lower order of animals, in all the public schools, colleges,

²⁶ *Minnesota Daily*, November 23, 1926, p. 2. Riley took exception to Haycraft's assessment of the pastor's efforts as "superficial," "unscientific," and "unscholarly." Riley wrote: "This is interesting from a boy of very ordinary talents, who will need at least forty years to complete the studies through which we have gone in connection with this subject." See *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, January-March, 1927, p. 20.

²⁷ *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 8, 1927, p. 1.

"Monkey Business Before the House" was the overline on this cartoon from the Minneapolis Daily Star of January 5, 1927.



State Teacher's Colleges, and University of Minnesota, supported in whole or in part by the public education funds of the State of Minnesota." The bill declared violations to be a misdemeanor and provided for penalties. The bill was referred to the committee on education. A like bill was introduced in the house of representatives on March 2 by Representative Hemming S. Nelson of Lake Lillian and sixteen coauthors, some of whom later asked that their names be stricken as sponsors.²⁸

To gain support for the proposed bill throughout the state, Riley, Winrod, and other self-styled "Flying Defenders of Fundamentalism" like Harry Rimmer of Los Angeles, California, the field secretary of WCFA, spoke in at least two hundred towns. Riley spoke sixty-five times. One of Riley's speeches, on January 28, was at Hastings where he declared that fundamentalists were not out to combine church and state but "to put an end to the taking of the money of believing taxpayers for the support of teachers and the purchase of text books that destroy the faith of their children."²⁹

D. A. Leonard of the extension division of the university was appalled. He noted that while a concert staged in one of the northern small towns took in a mere \$6.00 in door receipts, a church-sponsored mass meeting against evolution that same evening garnered a freewill offering of \$200. The traveling speakers listed authors used at the university who were "atheistic," and the crowd was urged to petition its legislators to keep evolution out of the campus. Leonard saw the whole program as the work of a well-organized machine to capitalize on the ever-present rural discontent. "In fact," he noted, "this looks like one of the best grafts on the market, since Townley gathered the shekels from the embattled farmers of Dakota."³⁰

Coffman in the meantime wrote the presidents of other Minnesota institutions of higher learning requesting their assistance. Hamline University adopted resolutions

against the bill, and presidents Donald J. Cowling of Carleton, J. C. Brown of St. Cloud Teachers College, and L. W. Boe of St. Olaf College promised help, but otherwise Coffman had little success. President O. J. Johnson of Gustavus Adolphus College reluctantly said he was unable to co-operate because he felt it might be seen as favoring "the teaching of evolution as an anti-Christian philosophy in our public schools." President John C. Acheson of Macalester College wrote that while all faculty members were against the bill his school's position as a private institution seemed to make silence the best policy. President Alcuin Deutsch of St. John's University noted that while Catholics were not in favor of banning the evolution doctrine they nonetheless had to step softly on this issue lest they be misunderstood as favoring the materialistic theories of evolution. Later, however, the St. John's faculty passed a resolution against the bill.³¹

ALTHOUGH the newspapers of the Twin Cities covered many of the events leading to introduction of the anti-evolution bill, they commented editorially and used banner headlines mainly when the matter came to a peak in March. Many of the small town editors were bolder. Alvah Eastman of the

²⁸ Minnesota, *Senate Journal*, 1927, p. 337; Minnesota, *House Journal*, 1927, p. 485.

²⁹ Riley, *The Dynamic of a Dream*, 109; Robert Sheldon McBirmie, "Basic Issues in the Fundamentalism of W. B. Riley," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1948 (copy in Metropolitan State Junior College Library); Cole, *Fundamentalism*, 313; "The Anti-Evolution Fight in Minnesota," in *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, April-June, 1927, p. 12. The last two sources say speakers visited seventy-five communities. *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 29, 1927, p. 26 (quote).

³⁰ Leonard to Coffman, March 6, 1927, President's Papers.

³¹ Cowling to Coffman, March 5, 1927; Brown to Coffman, March 7, 1927; Boe to Coffman, March 8, 1927; Johnson to Coffman, March 8, 1927; Acheson to Coffman, March 9, 1927; Deutsch to Coffman, March 6, 1927, all in President's Papers; *Minneapolis Journal*, March 10, 1927, p. 8.

St. Cloud Journal-Press, for instance, wrote: "Be it said to the credit of hundreds of the able churchmen of Minnesota of every faith that they are opposed to the vicious attempts of Reverend Riley to inject a bitter, hate-making controversy on the people, which will be futile in results. You cannot change the opinions of thinking people by legislation." Roe Chase of the *Anoka Herald* commented that "there is nothing more fruitless than a religious controversy. Nobody ever convinces anybody of anything." H. M. Wheelock of the *Fergus Falls Tribune* said that if the bill passed the dictionary would have to go because of its many references to evolution. A. M. Welles of the *Worthington Globe* wrote of Riley: "For several years he has been a bull in the china shop of the Baptist denomination." Several other editors made similar comments.³²

The American Association of University Professors joined the controversy, as did the International Theistic Society, under Dr. Arvid Reuterdaahl of St. Paul, which hoped to serve as a clearinghouse for those opposed to the bill. But neither was very effective. Consequently, the brunt of the struggle fell on Coffman, who moved behind the scenes; David F. Swenson of the philosophy department, who entered into an open exchange with Riley in the newspapers; and editor Haycraft of the *Daily*, who marshaled the support of the students.

Swenson criticized the bill in an article

for the *Journal of the Minnesota Education Association* and engaged in open debate with Riley in the pages of the *Daily*. He scoffed at Harry Rimmer's academic credentials and claimed he was not qualified for intelligent scientific discussion. He laughed at the idea that an audience could be instructed within an hour to decide on the validity of a complex scientific question. He also exchanged several private letters with Riley in which he assured him he had nothing but the warmest personal regard for him. Riley answered both privately and in the *Daily*, and once the two met in a debate at the Leamington Hotel. No news reports emerged from this encounter, which was held before a closed session of the faculty campus clubs and members of the Town and Gown Club. Their correspondence on evolution continued into the early 1930s when Riley, upon reading Swenson's 1932 article on "Evolution and Life Values," sent him copies of "The Bible — Is It an Evolution or an Inspiration?" and "Why Pass a Law Against Evolution in Minnesota?"³³

The days preceding March 8, 1927, the date set for the public hearing before the senate and house committees on education in the house chamber, found the bill the universal topic of discussion. Newspapers gave the subject considerable space. Rumors were rife that the legislators were receiving twenty-five letters a day in favor of the bill and that fifty-four house members were already pledged to support it. University students called a mass rally on March 8. Classes were dismissed a half hour early, and the meeting attracted 5,000 of the 9,600 students. Several hundred were turned away. The students unanimously condemned the bill, passed a resolution urging that the state kill it, and began circulating petitions to this effect in the classrooms. The *Daily* of March 9 called student reaction "one of the greatest undergraduate protests against a legislative measure ever felt at the University."³⁴

The seats at the public hearing were filled three hours before it was scheduled

³² *St. Cloud Journal-Press*, March 8, 1927, p. 10; *Anoka Herald*, March 30, 1926, p. 3 (Chase's article on "Evolution" was praised by Coffman); *Fergus Falls Tribune*, January 13, 1927, p. 4; *Worthington Globe*, March 24, 1927, p. 2.

³³ David F. Swenson, "The Proposal to Limit Science Teaching by Law," in *Journal of the Minnesota Education Association*, 7:41 (February, 1927); *Minnesota Daily*, February 4, p. 2, March 11, p. 3, March 12, p. 2, 1927; Swenson to Riley, March 15, 1927; Riley to Swenson, November 7, 1932; undated clipping, all in the Swenson Papers, University Archives.

³⁴ *Minnesota Daily*, March 8, p. 1, March 9, p. 1 (quote), 1927. See also Virginia Walker, "Minnesota's Anti-Evolutionists," in *Minnesota Daily*, *Ivory Tower* edition, September 28, 1959, p. 7, 21.

to begin. Coffman needed a police escort to reach the stage where he was to deliver a fifteen-minute address following shorter statements against the bill. Coffman's speech was a masterpiece. He noted that the territorial assembly of 1851, when adopting the resolution to establish a university, had no thought of limiting its work or activities. He credited the progress of American civilization to the freedom of teaching in the schools and colleges and noted that error could only be corrected by additional study, not by the votes of a majority nor the complaints of a minority. He summarized his remarks as follows: "I am opposed to this bill for the reason that I can think of no reasonable justification for it. It will stifle learning, cripple research, destroy intellectual integrity, doom the University to mediocrity or less, and it will not make students

more religious. It involves the intrusion of a principle into education, that of passing upon the validity of facts by legislation, that is pernicious in the extreme. It will place the control of the University in the hands of an effective minority. . . . To pass this bill will be tantamount to serving notice on the scholars of America, if they value their reputation and their peace and happiness, to keep away from Minnesota."³⁵

Debate time for both sides was limited. Riley and his group presented their case relatively briefly. The fundamentalist pastor, apparently less effective than usual,

³⁵ Coffman's address was printed in full in "The President's Report for the Year 1926-1927," in the *Bulletin of the University of Minnesota*, 30:11-16 (February 15, 1928). It also was published in the *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 10, 1927, p. 7, and the *Minnesota Daily*, March 10, 1927, p. 3.

Titled "Right in the Midst of Everything," this cartoon appeared in the Minneapolis Daily Star of March 10, 1927.



presented five arguments in favor of the bill: it was conceded to be constitutional; it was admittedly a popular demand; it was most manifestly fair; it restricted no scientific research; and it was the one and only way of redress. Riley closed with the thought that, while the leaders of the university might be opposed to the bill, the student body favored it.³⁶

At that moment Haycraft arose and dragged up a long roll of paper containing 6,500 student signatures, gotten in a two-hour period, to the resolution: "We, the undersigned students of the University of Minnesota, hereby declare to the Honorable Legislators of the State of Minnesota, that, regardless of our individual beliefs as to the merits of the theory of evolution, we are unalterably opposed to the proposed anti-evolution bill because we believe that this bill or any such class of legislation would be a dangerous restriction upon education and the rights of American citizens to freedom of study, thought, and speech in the pursuit of truth." Haycraft mentioned the results of the student mass meeting. Interrupting him, Riley asked if he could swear that the vote was unanimous. "No," said Haycraft, "to be strictly accurate, I should have said that the vote was 4,999 to 1." Bedlam then broke loose, the meeting was adjourned, and the next morning the

bill was killed in the senate by a decisive vote of 55 to 7.³⁷

RILEY WAS BEATEN soundly, but he was seemingly undaunted. "This is only the beginning," he declared. "It is merely a skirmish and a skirmish never determines a war. This is the first time that the question has come to a straight battle, and it will not be the last." Riley observed that his forces did no lobbying at the Capitol. "The fundamentalists did their work in the State with the voters and won," he wrote. "The evolutionists did their work at St. Paul with the senators and representatives and won. We believe, however, that such a victory . . . is temporary and that the voters will, in the course of time, reverse the decision."³⁸

Actually, however, there was no serious concern that the bill would be introduced again. It was defeated on political and not theological grounds, for none of the powerful, conservative Lutheran leaders in the area believed fully in the evolutionary theory. Yet Riley was unable to gain more than a fraction of the expected Lutheran support. The two Lutheran ministers' conferences of the state refused to back his bill. The presidents of every major Lutheran college, while protesting against the uses to which evolution had been put, also came out against the bill. Dr. George Sverdrup, president of the Augsburg Seminary in Minneapolis, noted: "I am opposed to this kind of legislation. I think the backers of the bill have a case, but they are not using the proper methods to solve the situation. I am opposed to the teaching of 'evolution,' but the proper remedy cannot be secured from legislation. Science should have freedom in the pursuit of its work." Pastor J. A. O. Stub of the influential Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, corresponded with Coffman on the issue, and he and Joseph Stump, president of the Northwestern Lutheran Theological Seminary, played important roles in the bill's defeat.³⁹

Discussion on the validity of the theory of evolution hardly entered in at all. Oppo-

³⁶ For Riley's full speech, see W. B. Riley, "Five Reasons for the Adoption of This Anti-Evolution Bill," in *Christian Fundamentals in Church and School*, April-June, 1927, p. 32-39.

³⁷ A copy of the resolution is in the Howard Haycraft Papers, University Archives. See also *Minnesota Daily*, March 10, 1927, p. 1 (quote); Virginia Walker, in *Ivory Tower*, September 28, 1959, p. 8, 21; Coffman to Livingston C. Lord, president of Eastern Illinois State Teachers College, June 26, 1930, President's Papers.

³⁸ *Minnesota Daily*, March 12, 1927, p. 1; "The Anti-Evolution Fight in Minnesota," in *Christian Fundamentals in School and Church*, April-June, 1927, p. 13, 14 (quote).

³⁹ *Minnesota Daily*, March 8, 1927, p. 2 (quote); *Minneapolis Tribune*, January 2, 1927, p. 1; Stub to Coffman, January 7, 1927, President's Papers; F. W. Sardeson, "Defeat of Anti-Evolution in Minnesota," in *Science* 65:447 (May 6, 1927).

nents fought the question almost entirely on the issue of the separation of church and state. The Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Unitarians, and others also opposed the bill, and the Baptist support was not large enough to secure its passage. The violent way in which the anti-evolutionist position was presented also hurt the cause of those who wanted the bill passed. The students, too, were a strong force. Haycraft wrote much later: "The most interesting thing about the whole battle to me is the spontaneous response of an essentially frivolous college generation to a serious intellectual challenge."⁴⁰

It was suggested by the Minnesota faculty at the time that one reason behind Riley's efforts was his desire to wrest the leadership of American fundamentalism from John R. Straton. Riley and Straton were often mentioned as the men most likely to take up the fallen standard of fundamentalism from Bryan when the latter died in 1925. While it is true that this state campaign allowed Riley to break into popular national magazines like *Current History* and *The Independent* for the first time, there is no evidence that fundamentalist leadership was a major factor in his motives. He had always been conscious of publicity and had had a long interest in battling evolution.⁴¹

The Minnesota anti-evolution campaign did show, however, that the claims of mass support for such legislation were widely exaggerated. The demand for the 1927 bill did not arise overwhelmingly from the people. Agitation in Minnesota was to a large extent directed from above. But the underlying uneasiness of the nation's rural areas was too amorphous to be channeled in any one direction for long, and evolution quickly disappeared as a major item of concern. The great depression, the New Deal, and totalitarianism were of far more importance in the 1930s. The severe defeat that Riley suffered in his home state was a major blow to organized anti-evolution activities. After 1927, no further bills were introduced



Riley was a commanding figure at the First Baptist Church pulpit.

in any state legislature. Minnesota's anti-evolution fight, one of the fiercest, was also one of the last that the country would see.

⁴⁰ Coffman to George E. Vincent, former university president, April 12, 1927, President's Papers; Haycraft to Virginia Walker, October 16, 1959, Haycraft Papers.

⁴¹ W. B. Riley, "The Faith of the Fundamentalists," in *Current History*, 26:434-440 (June, 1927); W. B. Riley, "A Square Deal for Genesis," in *The Independent*, 119:470-472 (November 12, 1927).

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