People and Places: George Rappleyea (1894–1966)

Randy Moore

Figure 1. George Rappleyea (right) instigated the Scopes Trial, the most famous event in the history of the creationism/evolution controversy. Rappleyea is shown here with John Scopes. From the Smithsonian Institute Archives, image #2005-35069.
George Washington Rappleyea was born on July 4, 1894. After serving in the Corps of Engineers during World War I, he was placed in charge of the six struggling coal and iron mines of the Cumberland Coal and Iron Company (and its 400 employees) just outside of Dayton, Tennessee.

In 1925, the 31-year-old Rappleyea noticed an ad in the May 4 issue of the Chattanooga newspaper placed by the ACLU looking for a teacher to test Tennessee's newly passed Butler Law banning the teaching of human evolution in the state's public schools. Rappleyea went to Robinson's Drug Store, where he showed the ad to FE Robinson (a local druggist and head of the county board of education), Walter White (county superintendent of schools), and other local leaders. The group eventually asked coach and substitute science teacher John Scopes if he would help the community publicize Dayton by being arrested for violating the statute. Scopes agreed, and Rappleyea swore out a warrant against Scopes and wired the ACLU for help. The result was the Scopes trial, the most famous event in the history of the creationism/evolution controversy. Rappleyea—Scopes's original prosecutor and most vocal and visible local supporter—was represented by attorney Sue Hicks, a friend of Scopes. Hicks was later immortalized by Chicago writer Shel Silverstein in “A Boy Named Sue,” a song popularized by Johnny Cash's live recording At San Quentin.

Rappleyea gave visitors tours of Dayton, spoke with reporters, and remodeled an abandoned 18-room house for the defense lawyers and expert witnesses. That house, located about a mile south of Dayton, was the largest in Rhea County and was known as “The Mansion”. (In Inherit the Wind, several of the participants in the trial stayed at a fictitious hotel by the same name.) In 1927, Rappleyea attended Scopes's appeal, which resulted in the original conviction's being set aside.

After Scopes's famous trial, Rappleyea returned to his work at Cumberland Coal and Iron Company. On November 29, 1925, The New York Times reported that Rappleyea had been ordained a bishop in the Liberal Church of Denver, Colorado, the same position that the church had offered to Scopes during his trial. Unlike Scopes, however, Rappleyea accepted the position and announced that his official title was “Doctor of Liberal Religion”. Rappleyea did not establish a branch of the church in Dayton, but he liked having the power to perform weddings and other duties ordinarily performed by the clergy.

Later, Rappleyea and his wife left Dayton for a job in the boating industry in Mobile, Alabama. In January 1937, Rappleyea went to New York and helped form the American Boat Builders and Repairers, and later that year staged a widely-publicized mock battle on and over Long Island Sound between nineteen planes and ten powerboats. In the late 1930s, Rappleyea—then an officer of Higgins Boat Industries in New Orleans—helped charter the United States Power Squadron, and developed equipment to help build landing-strips on beach sand for the Marines. Rappleyea then became a vice president of the American Power Boating Association, and in the following three years wrote several books and pamphlets about boating. In September 1944, Rappleyea patented an improvement in aerial mapping cameras, after which he became treasurer of Marsalis Construction Company in New Orleans. There, on March 2, 1947, Rappleyea was arrested for conspiring to violate the National Firearms Act. On March 31, 1948, Rappleyea pleaded guilty in federal court in Biloxi, Mississippi, to conspiracy to ship arms and ammunition to British Honduras, and on
April 24, 1948, he began serving a 366-day sentence in the Federal Correction Institution at Texarkana, Texas.

After being released from prison, Rappleyea moved to Southport, North Carolina, and resumed his work as a chemical engineer. The September, 1951 issue of Popular Mechanics reported that Rappleyea had developed a way to build houses out of molasses (for only $1000 per house), and in 1955 Rappleyea patented Plasmofalt, an asphalt-molasses stucco-like material used to stabilize adobe.

Rappleyea spent his final years in Miami, Florida, where he directed the Tropical Agricultural Research Lab. Rappleyea died on August 29, 1966, and was buried near the entrance of Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.

About the Author

Randy Moore is the HT Morse–Alumni Distinguished Professor of Biology at the University of Minnesota. His latest book, coauthored with Sehoya Cotner, is Arguing for Evolution: An Encyclopedia for Understanding Science (Santa Barbara [CA]: Greenwood, 2011).

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