



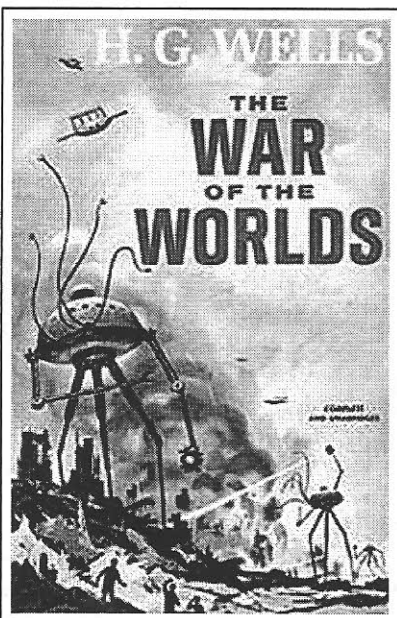
WAR OF THE WORLDS

by Dr. Charles Beckett

The science-fiction novel, *War of the Worlds*, was written by Englishman, H. G. (for Herbert George) Wells in 1898. When he wrote it, he couldn't possibly have envisioned the impact it would have on millions of Americans forty years later.

Orson Welles wanted an appropriate Halloween theme for an October 1938 broadcast of his Mercury Theater on the Air program. He decided that H.G. Wells' fantasy would well suit his requirements. Earlier that year, he and his partner/producer/writer, John Houseman had hired Howard Koch, for \$75 a week, as a scriptwriter. Little did Koch know, as writer of the working script for what would become, in the words of author and old time radio historian and broadcaster, John Dunning, "the most famous single radio show ever broadcast," or that it would secure for him (and Welles) a place in radio history.

As could be expected, there were dissenting opinions among CBS officials and staff about converting a 19th century English tale into a Halloween radio show. Welles was told that a *War of the Worlds* translation to radio would end up "hopefully dated and dull on the air." But Welles was determined. Koch was told he had six days to write a script. After reading Wells' novel, he had some major concerns about the assignment. For one thing, Wells' story takes place in 19th century England. For another thing, his style of writing was considered out of date for a modern American audience. Koch later stated in his memoir, "I realized I could use very little (other than) the author's idea of a Martian invasion and his description of their appearance and machines. In short, I was being asked to write an almost entirely original play in just six days."



The easiest part of the project for Koch was selecting the location where the Martian's invasion would begin. He accomplished this by closing his eyes and poking a pencil at a road map. The point fell on the rural village of Grover's Mill, New Jersey. That would be the landing site of the aliens. The rest came harder. Realizing that he couldn't provide a decent script in such a short time, he turned for help to fellow writer John Houseman. Together, they worked night and day. Sleep became a luxury-or non-existent. However, in spite of their heroic efforts, the finished rehearsal script turned out-as predicted-to be dull and unbelievable. This compounded the problem. Now, the two writers had only three days left before air time to redo the script. They did a hurried rewrite, and gave the finished script to Welles - the afternoon of the broadcast - for his review. He made some last minute changes, and amazingly, the writers were able to meet their deadline, and the program was broadcast on the CBS radio network on schedule - 8 PM, Sunday, October 30, 1938.

The program began with announcer Dan Seymour saying, "...affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater on the Air, in *the War of the Worlds*, by H.G. Wells." Brief music. Then, Seymour continued, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the director of the Mercury Theater and star of this broadcast - Orson Welles." Welles gave a short prologue, setting the background and time of the story in the near future. This was followed by announcer Seymour introducing a program of music by Ramon Raquello and his orchestra (actually, Bernard Herrmann and his orchestra), from the fictional "Meridian Room of the Park Plaza Hotel in downtown New York." Shortly afterward, the music was interrupted by a news bulletin, announcing that a Chicago observatory "...reports several explosions of incandescent gas occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars... moving towards earth with enormous velocity... like a jet of blue flames shot from a gun." Back to the music. Then, other

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Convention Schedules

30th Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 20 - 23, 2005 at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ; For information contact Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887 JayHick@aol.com, or check our web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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RETURN WITH US NOW...

bulletin interruptions, and a report by a noted astronomer, that he and a reporter were leaving for Grover's Mill to investigate a shock of "almost earthquake intensity" that had just been reported there. Additional bulletins provided updated information on events, including an in-progress report of a Martian invasion. The invaders, crawling out of a spaceship were described as having "two luminous discs... might be eyes, might be a face." Then there was a follow-up report of "something wriggling out of the shadow like a gray snake... tentacles... another one... and another one and the things body, large as a bear... and the face-the eyes black, gleaming like a serpent's, with a V-shaped mouth dripping saliva from rimless lips... "...large bodies of troops were detailed... savage battles were fought on land and in the air" against blasts of the Martians heat rays.



H. G. Wells

Another bulletin announced that Red Cross workers were being dispatched to the scene. And reports had been received that roads and bridges were being clogged with human traffic frantically attempting to escape the onslaught of the aliens.

Another bulletin interruption. "Ladies and gentlemen, ...those strange beings who landed in the Jersey farmlands tonight are the vanguard of an invasion army from the planet Mars." News bulletins continued to interrupt "regular" programming. Then, there came an eerie silence, followed by "2X2L, calling CQ, New York... Isn't there anyone on the air?... Isn't there anyone on the air?... Isn't there anyone..." Radio transmissions ceased.

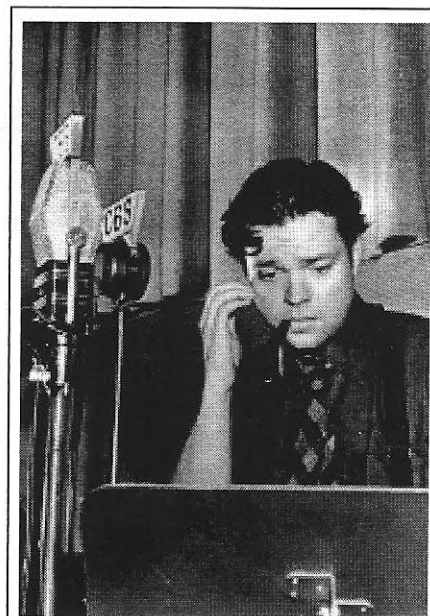
After hearing messages such as these from their radios, some New Jersey residents began to panic. People started talking about the end of the world. In Newark, vehicles ignored red lights, as drivers and passengers made frantic efforts to get out of town. A Newark hospital treated twenty people for shock. In Boston, people gathered on rooftops and imagined they could see the red glow of New York burning. There were reports of suicides, people lying dead in ditches, and other rumors of fatalities being passed from person to person. In actuality, there were no known deaths resulting from the public's panic-just bumps, bruises and a few broken bones suffered by some listeners, in their haste to flee the Martians.

At the 40-minute break of the program, announcer Seymour told the radio audience, "You are listening to a CBS presentation of Orson Welles and The Mercury Theater on the Air in an original dramatization of *The War of the Worlds*, by H.G. Wells." Then the drama continued, uninterrupted, to conclusion.

Welles ended the program with, "This is Orson Welles, ladies and gentlemen-out of character-to assure you that the *War of the Worlds* has no further significance than as the holiday offering that it was intended to be-the Mercury Theater's own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and saying boo. Starting now, we could never soap all your windows and steal all your garden gates by tomorrow night, so we did the next best thing. We annihilated the world before your very ears, and utterly destroyed the CBS. You will be relieved, I hope, to learn that we didn't mean it and that both institutions are still open for business. So, good-bye everybody, and remember please, for the next day or so, the terrible lesson you learned tonight-the grinning, glowing, globular invader of your living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch and if your door bell rings and there's nobody there, that was no Martian-it's Halloween."

During the closing theme music, police raided the studio, confiscated scripts and held the performers. Then, reporters were allowed in to interview the cast, bombarding them with questions, such as, "How many deaths had they heard of? Had they heard of the fatal stampede in New Jersey? Were they aware of the traffic deaths and suicides?" And, after the program, to be expected, there were several lawsuits brought against CBS

Probably the least effected by the commotion was writer Howard Koch. After listening to the program from his New York apartment, he went peacefully to bed, satisfied that he had done a good job in his writing efforts, unaware of the havoc it had caused. Welles had appeared contrite after audience and police reactions to his fictional story. But, forty years later, he admitted that he was amazed that people could be so gullible.



Orson Welles

The Crosley rating service estimated that 38 million people had been listening to their radios that night. A study published in 1940 by Hadley Cantril revealed that of the estimated six million people who had heard the show, 1.7 million (28%) believed it to be actual news. Another 1.2 million admitted to being frightened. Apparently, the rest of the listeners had paid attention to the opening introduction of the program.

The Mercury Theater on the Air radio series had a short life-lasting only from July 11 to December 4, 1938. On December 9, 1938, it became known as The Campbell Playhouse.

Orson Welles died October 10, 1985, at age 70--47 years after *War of the Worlds* aired. John Houseman, producer, writer and a late blooming actor, won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his roll in the 1973 movie, The Paper Chase. He died in 1998, three years after Welles, at age 86--ironically, on October 31, 1988 - Halloween.

H.G. Wells died in London on August 13, 1946, at the age of 80. *War of the Worlds* was not his only claim to fictional literary fame. Other novels he penned that were made into motion pictures include, The Time Machine (Rod Taylor, 1960), (Guy Pearce, 2002); Island of Dr. Moreau (Burt Lancaster, 1977), (Marlon Brando, 1996); The Invisible Man (Claude Rains, 1933); with sequels in 1940 (Cedric Hardwicke) and 1944 (Jon Hall); and, The Shape of Things to Come (Jack Palance, 1979 - Canadian), in which a few survivors of the destruction of the earth live in peril on the moon.

In 1953, War of the Worlds was made into a movie, starring Gene Barry. Narration was provided by Sir Cedric Hardwicke. The film received an Oscar for its special effects.

In 1990, another alien invader movie, Spaced Invaders, was made, starring Douglas Barr and other forgettable cast members. The plot involved Martians landing in a small American town after mistaking a Halloween re-broadcast of Orson Welles *War of the Worlds* for invasion orders.

Then, in 1996, a spoof of *War of the Worlds*, Mars Attacks, appeared in theaters. It starred Jack Nicholson, as the President of the United States, Glenn Close as his wife, and a cast of other well-known actors. Unlike the original *War of the Worlds* plot, where the aliens are killed by the earth's bacteria, Mars Attacks earthlings rid themselves of the Martian invaders by broadcasting a recording of country-western singer Slim Whitman yodeling-which causes the aliens brains to explode.

In 2005, Steven Spielberg made his filmed version of War of the Worlds, starring Tom Cruise.

Of all the Martian attack-related radio dramas, TV programs and movies down through the years, probably none will have the lasting emotional impact on the American public as did the Orson Welles 1938 radio broadcast.



October Listening Recommendations

A few years ago, RWUN held a "Scariest Show" contest asking readers to list the scariest OTR shows of all time. We revisit the results of that contest to provide a list of shows that you might enjoy listening to at this "spookiest" time of the year.

- 1) Sorry, Wrong Number - Suspense
- 2) The War of the Worlds - Mercury Radio Theater
- 3) The Lodger - Mystery in the Air
- 4) Three Skeleton Key - Escape
- 5) The Thing on the Foible Board - Quiet, Please
- 6) He Who Follows Me - The Hall of Fantasy
- 7) Four Fingers and a Thumb - The Witch's Tale
- 8) Leiningen vs. the Ants - Escape
- 9) Sub-Basement - Lights Out
- 10) Quiet Sunday - The Whistler
- 11) The Pit and the Pendulum - Suspense

So light a few candles, turn out the lights, and settle down for some truly great "theater of the mind" entertainment.

Old Time Radio Moments of the Century - #3

[The following article, by broadcast historian Elizabeth McLeod, is reproduced here with her permission. Ms. McLeod has listed her "top 100" 20th Century Radio Moments. We will be presenting 10 of her selections in RWUN each month for the next ten months.]

80. Bob and Ray Present The CBS Radio Network 1959-60

The best-loved satirists of their era, Bob Elliot and Ray Goulding rose out of local Boston radio in the late forties to epitomize the postwar approach to radio comedy. Inspired by the works of Stoopnagle and Budd and Raymond Knight twenty years before, Bob and Ray kidded radio with a unique, stream-of-consciousness sensibility, and their 1959-60 series for CBS presented them at the peak of their creative powers.

79. The Rise of Jessica Dragonette 1930-31



No one who listened to the "Cities Service Concerts" series in the early 1930s will ever forget her fragile soprano voice-but the woman behind that voice was a tough, no-nonsense professional who firmly stood her ground in battles with sponsors and the network over program formats and choice of material. Her appeal crossed the boundaries of popular and classical music, and though her career was compromised by conflicts, her legend remained.

78. "The Great Gildersleeve" Spins Off 1941

The term "spin-off" really didn't come into wide use until the early 1970s-but the seeds for the concept go back to Fibber McGee's puffed-up neighbor. While "Gildersleeve" wasn't strictly the first program to "spin off" from another if you think in terms of variety-hour derivatives like "The Aldrich Family" and "We The People," it was the first important series to be based on a supporting character from another program-and it was also the most enduring. Harold Peary's textured performance in the title role (until 1950), a solid supporting cast, and brilliant writing-especially by the team of John Whedon and Sam Moore-helped give "Gildersleeve" the longest first-run life of any "spin off" series, radio or TV.

77. The Rise and Fall of the Liberty Broadcasting System 1948-1952

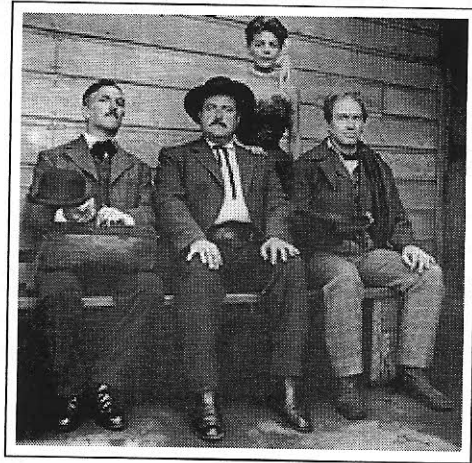
It all started with the mercurial Gordon McLendon and his need to fill time on his Dallas radio station, KLIF. Looking for cheap, appealing programming, he decided to feature recreated Major League baseball games. But he didn't figure on the results-in an era in which the westernmost Major League clubs were located in St. Louis, the entire western half of the United States was hungry for big league action. McLendon began to line up regional affiliates, and by 1951, his operation had gone national. McLendon was an innovator, no question about it-but he was also, to put it bluntly, a pirate. He had no legal right to air the games he was airing-and Major League Baseball went after him in court. Liberty was driven into bankruptcy, but McLendon was a survivor-who would go on to be one of the innovators of the "Top Forty" format.

76. Hollywood Speaks on the Dodge Victory Hour 3/29/28

As the "talkie revolution" terrorizes the film capital, a phalanx of Hollywood's biggest names faces the microphone: Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, D. W. Griffith, John Barrymore, Dolores Del Rio, Norma Talmadge, and Gloria Swanson. Fairbanks was MC, Chaplin told Jewish and Cockney dialect jokes,

Barrymore offered a scene from Hamlet, Del Rio performed a song, and the others delivered short talks-as millions of Americans heard the voices of these film favorites for the first time. And judging from the reviews, many of those listeners weren't at all impressed. Nonetheless, the show marks the start of a long liaison between Big Time Radio and Hollywood.

75. Gunsmoke and the rise of the Adult Western 1952



The heroes don't wear white hats or shoot silver bullets. The villains don't snarl and twirl their mustaches. And the endings are rarely happy. Norman MacDonnell and John Meston gave radio a searingly-realistic drama: a western for people who hate westerns, and perhaps the most relentlessly *adult* program of the entire OTR era-and its success contributes to a final "golden age" flurry of quality radio drama.

74. A Fireside Mystery Chat 10/17/36

A paid political broadcast over CBS by the Republican National Committee takes the art of "negative campaigning" to new heights, as Senator Arthur Vandenburg conducts a mock debate-pitting himself against out-of-context recordings of President Roosevelt. The program itself is controversial and is made even more so by the fact that CBS cuts it off the air-not on political grounds as charged by the GOP, but on the grounds that the use of recordings violates the network prohibition on transcriptions! Nevertheless, the program pioneers the use-and abuse-of political "sound bites."

73. The Rise and Fall of "Pot O' Gold" Fall-Winter 1939/40

A venal twist on the old carnival wheel-of-fortune gimmick, this big-money quiz is the first network program to offer large sums of money to listeners waiting by their phones at home. The series becomes a national craze before NBC decides it's too close to a lottery for comfort. The basic concept would resurface on ABC after the war as the infamous "Stop the Music."

72. Unemployment Relief Program 10/18/31

Stars join forces for a spectacular dual network program urging the "haves" to help the "have-nots" as the Depression nears rock bottom. President Hoover delivers a speech stressing his belief that relief is the responsibility of the states and local charities and not the federal government-and Will Rogers doesn't sound like he's smiling as he delivers an uncharacteristically bitter critique of the American Way Of Doing Business.

71. Hugo Black Defends Himself 10/1/37

For the first time, an embattled national political figure uses radio to directly answer charges against him. A decade before, this Supreme Court nominee had belonged to the Ku Klux Klan-and over an all-network hookup, he came before the American people to explain himself and to repudiate the organization. Black went on to a career as one of the court's most distinguished liberals-and his speech set a take-it-to-the-people precedent that would be followed by figures like Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton

From the Desk of the Editor by Carol Tiffany



Greetings from somewhere Southeast of Hurricane Central. As last month's editorial was written, Florida was being hit by the early (and much tamer) version of Hurricane Katrina, which, as you know, went on to become one of the worst storms in over 100 years. This week, we had around 5 inches of rain in a little over 4 hours courtesy of an outer band of Hurricane Rita. Your editor will be very glad to see hurricane season end in November.

That said, I hope you enjoy this Halloween issue of RWUN. Dr. Charles Beckett presents an article on "War of the Worlds" which is arguably the most famous and infamous OTR show ever. It most definitely had the most widespread effect of any entertainment program ever presented. In addition, we have revisited the results of our "scariest show" contest to present a list of shows for great Halloween listening.

We continue with Elizabeth McLeod's countdown of the 100 most Memorable Radio Moments of the 20th Century in this issue. I hope you are enjoying this feature as much as I am.

Coming up in the November and December issues of RWUN will be more lists of shows recommended for Holiday listening. If you have any favorites that you enjoy at Thanksgiving and Christmas, please take a moment to let me know which shows you enjoy during the holidays and I will include them in the list.

As always, your newsletter is in need of articles, features, and puzzles for future issues. You may send any ideas or contributions by E-Mail or snail mail to me at the addresses listed on page 2.

Good listening to all



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

The last two disastrous hurricanes bring to mind that New Orleans is known as the birthplace of jazz. We wonder if it will take very long to revive the area, or will folks tend to move on to other places - such as Denver. Colorado has had a lot of displaced people from that area, and perhaps these folks will be attracted to areas such as this where they will be less subject to nature's whims - like hurricanes.

While we're enjoying the Fall colors in our trees we have the chance to listen to "The Chamber Music Society" and "The Mel Blanc Show" for a better, calmer outlook of the world we live in. The CD's we are offering this month are certainly from another time and place, but will help to get us thinking more of the present days' events.

Today it is more important than ever to keep music in our homes and to be looking forward to the time we can enjoy the oldies and still look forward to tomorrow.

