The Martian Invasion

by Elaine Langlois

On October 30, 1938, an exhausted Howard Koch returned to his New York apartment. Koch was a young playwright who would later become a famous film writer. Right now, he was starting out in his first professional job, writing radio plays for Orson Welles’ Mercury Theater.

This week had been especially demanding. Koch had been given a short novel by H. G. Wells about a Martian invasion of Earth. He was told to turn it into a series of news bulletins. He had rewritten almost the entire novel. Before he went to bed, Koch flipped on his radio to listen to the one-hour broadcast.

He had plenty of company. In those days before TV, listening to radio was one of the most popular family activities. Of America’s 32 million families, 86 percent owned a radio. The country’s 900 stations and 4 networks turned out a steady stream of news, drama, comedy, classical and dance music, and variety programs.

Right now, news was in the forefront. In September, a terrible hurricane had hit the East Coast, killing 700 people. Adolf Hitler continued to gain power in Germany. War in Europe seemed to be coming. Radio brought on-the-spot coverage of these breaking events. News flashes often broke into regular programs.

That night, the Mercury Theater ran against the popular Chase and Sanborn Hour. Radio polls predicted that Chase and Sanborn would have 34.7 percent of the audience, compared to the Mercury Theater’s 3.6 percent. About a million people were probably settling down to listen to The War of the Worlds along with Howard Koch that night.
After a brief introduction by Welles, the play began with a weather report and a program of dance music. An announcer broke in with a special bulletin about some explosions on Mars. Returning briefly to the dance music, the play cut away again. A telegram from the National History Museum and a report from McGill University quickly established that “a huge, flaming object” had fallen on a farm in Grovers Mill, New Jersey.

Professor Richard Pierson of Princeton University (Orson Welles) and reporter Carl Phillips went to the farm. A horrified Phillips described the scene as several Martians emerged from the half-buried object and used a “heat ray” to burn up people and set fire to the surroundings.

Phillips suddenly stopped broadcasting, and a series of announcements followed: The governor had placed New Jersey under martial law. The National Red Cross had mobilized its workers. The radio station put itself at the service of the state militia.

Soon 7,000 soldiers descended on Grovers Mill and were swiftly defeated, “crushed and trampled to death under the metal feet of the monster [a walking war machine], or burned to cinders by its heat ray.” The Martians moved across the countryside, tearing up communication and power lines and railroad tracks as thousands fled before them.

More Martians landed. They defeated Army bombers and advanced on New York City. An announcer described black poisonous smoke rolling in and masses of people falling in their tracks. He ceased abruptly, and listeners heard the voice of a lonely operator:

2X2L, calling CQ . . . New York.
Isn’t there anyone on the air?
It was 40 minutes in, and the show took a station break. Afterwards, the Martians quickly came to an end, destroyed by bacteria against which they had no natural defense.

Howard Koch went to bed.
Across the nation, 1.2 million people panicked.
Some hadn’t heard the announcement before the broadcast explaining that it was a play. Others had been listening to the Chase and Sanborn Hour and had switched to the Mercury Theater broadcast during a station break.

People ran into the streets. They gathered in churches, huddled in basements, or raced off in cars, clapping wet towels over their faces to protect them from the Martian gas. Police headquarters, radio stations, and newspapers were flooded with calls. Phone lines were jammed as thousands of people called to warn families and friends or say goodbye.

Two Princeton geologists scoured the area, looking for the Martian craft. National Guardsmen called in, asking where to report. Doctors and nurses volunteered their services. The governor of Pennsylvania offered to send troops to New Jersey to fight the Martians.

In Concrete, Washington, the power failed just at the point in the play when the Martians were cutting off power and communications. Panicked residents fled into the night. In Pittsburgh, a man arrived home just in time to stop his wife from taking poison. Some people thought they smelled the deadly gas. Others saw “Martian machines” on the Jersey Palisades.

Near Grovers Mill, the panic was understandably intense. Armed farmers roamed the countryside, looking for the Martians. Dozens of people reported fires set by heat rays. People shot at a water tower, mistaking it for a Martian machine. One hundred state troopers had to be called in to restore order.

At the Mercury Theater, Orson Welles was about to find out just how effective the broadcast had been. As he signed off, cheerily telling listeners it had all been a Halloween prank, the phones began ringing with calls from outraged listeners. Police officers and reporters stormed in.

There was talk of arrests, lawsuits, and censorship, but no laws had been broken. After a while the controversy died away. Howard Koch got a seven-year contract at Warner Brothers. The theater got a sponsor, Campbell’s Soup, and continued to produce good shows for the next two years. But it never again made anything as real and scary as The War of the Worlds.