Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact New York Times (1857-Current file); Oct 31, 1938; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006) pg. 1

Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact

Many Flee Homes to Escape 'Gas Raid From Mars'—Phone Calls Swamp Police at Broadcast of Wells Fantasy

thousands of radio listeners throughout the nation between 8:15 and 9:30 o'clock last night when a broadcast of a dramatization of H. G. Wells's fantasy, "The War of the Worlds," led thousands to believe that an interplanetary conflict had started with invading Martians spreading wide death and destruction in New Jersey and New

A wave of mass hysteria seized

households, interrupted religious services, created traffic jams and clogged communications systems, was made by Orson Welles, who as the radio character, "The Shadow," used to give "the creeps" to countless child listeners. This time at least a score of adults required medical treatment for shock and

The broadcast, which disrupted

York.

hvsteria.

In Newark, in a single block at Heddon Terrace and Hawthorne Avenue, more than twenty families rushed out of their houses with wet handkerchiefs and towels over their faces to flee from what they believed was to be a gas raid. Some began moving household furniture.

Throughout New York families left their homes, some to flee to near-by parks. Thousands of persons called the police, newspapers

and radio stations here and in other cities of the United States and Canada seeking advice on protective measures against the raids.

The program was produced by Mr. Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air over station WABC and the Columbia Broadcasting System's coast-to-coast network, from 8 to 9 o'clock.

The radio play, as presented, was

to simulate a regular radio program with a "break-in" for the material of the play. The radio listeners, apparently, missed or did not listen to the introduction, which was: "The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air in 'The War of the Worlds' by H. G. Wells."

They also failed to associate the program with the newspaper listing of the program, announced as "Today: 8:00-9:00—Play: H. G. Wells's 'War of the Worlds'—WABC." They ignored three additional announcements made during the broadcast emphasizing its fic-

tional nature
Mr. Welles opened the program
with a description of the series of

Continued on Page Four

RADIO WAR DRAMA CREATES A PANIC

Continued From Page One

which it is a part. The simulated program began. A weather report was given, prosaically. An announcer remarked that the program would be continued from a hotel, with dance music. For a few moments a dance program was given in the usual manner. Then there was a "break-in" with a "flash" about a professor at an observatory noting a series of gas explosions on the planet Mars.

News bulletins and scene broad-

casts followed, reporting, with the technique in which the radio had reported actual events, the landing of a "meteor" near Princeton, N. J., "killing" 1,500 persons, the discovery that the "meteor" was a 'metal cylinder' containing strange creatures from Mars armed with "death rays" to open hostilities against the inhabitants of the earth. Despits the fantastic nature of the reported "occurrences," the program, coming after the recent war scare in Europe and a period

in which the radio frequently had interrupted regularly scheduled programs to report developments in the Czechoslovak situation, caused the reason for the reaction to the fright and panic throughout the program. When the explanation area of the broadcast. Telephone lines were tied up with

calls from listeners or persons who had heard of the broadcasts. Many sought first to verify the reports. But large numbers, obviously in a state of terror, asked how they could follow the broadcast's advice and flee from the city, whether they would be safer in the "gas raid" in the cellar or on the roof, how they could safeguard their children, and many of the questions which had been worrying residents of London and Paris during the tense days before the Munich agreement. So many calls came to newspapers

and so many newspapers found it advisable to check on the reports despite their fantastic content that The Associated Press sent out the following at 8:48 P. M.:

"Note to Editors: Queries to newspapers from radio listeners throughout the United States tonight, regarding a reported meteor fall which killed a number of New Jerseyites, are the result of a studio dramatization. The A. P."
Similarly police teletype systems

carried notices to all stationhouses, and police short-wave radio stations notified police radio cars that the event was imaginary.

Message From the Police The New York police sent out the

following: "To all receivers: Station WABC informs us that the broadcast just concluded over that station was a dramatization of a play. No cause

for alarm."

The New Jersey State Police teletyped the following: "Note to all receivers-WABC

broadcast as drama re this section being attacked by residents of Mars. Imaginary affair."
From one New York theatre a

manager reported that a throng of playgoers had rushed from his theatre as a result of the broadcast. He said that the wives of two men in the audience, having heard the broadcast, called the theatre and insisted that their husbands be paged. This spread the "news" to

others in the audience.

The switchboard of The New YORK TIMES was overwhelmed by the calls. A total of 875 were received. One man who called from Dayton, Ohio, asked, "What time Dayton, Ohio, asked, "What time will it be the end of the world?" A caller from the suburbs said he had had a houseful of guests and all had rushed out to the yard for safety.

Warren Dean, a member of the American Legion living in Manhattan, who telephoned to verify the "reports," expressed indignation which was typical of that of many callers.
"I've heard a lot of radio pro

grams, but I've never heard anything as rotten as that," Mr. Dean said. "It was too realistic for comfort. They broke into a dance program with a news flash. Everybody in my house was agitated by the news. It went on just like press radio news.''

At 9 o'clock a woman walked into the West Forty-seventh Street police station dragging two children, all carrying extra clothing. She said she was ready to leave the city. Police persuaded her to stay.

A garbled version of the reports reached the Dixie Bus Terminal, causing officials there to prepare to change their schedule on confirmation of "news" of an accident at Princeton on their New Jersey route. Miss Dorothy Brown at the terminal sought verification, however, when the caller refused to talk with the dispatcher, explaining to her that "the world is coming to an end and I have a lot to do.'

Harlem Shaken By the "News" was shaken by the Harlem

"news." Thirty men and women rushed into the West 123d Street police station and twelve into the West 135th Street station saying they had their household goods packed and were all ready to leave Harlem if the police would tell them where to go to be "evacu-ated." One man insisted he had heard "the President's voice" over the radio advising all citizens to leave the cities.

The parlor churches in the Negro district, congregations of the smaller sects meeting on the ground floors of brownstone houses, took the "news" in stride as less faithful parishioners rushed in with it, seeking spiritual consolation. Evening services became "end of the world" prayer meetings in some. One man ran into the Wadsworth

Avenue Police Station in Washington Heights, white with terror, shouting that enemy planes were crossing the Hudson River and asking what he should do. A man came in to the West 152d Street Station, seeking traffic directions. The broadcast became a rumor that spread through the district and many persons stood on street corners hoping for a sight of the "battle" in the skies.

In Queens the principal question at Police Headquarters was whether the wave of poison gas will reach as far as Queens." Many said they trict, fifteen men and women were larged to the parket of the Newark industrial district, fifteen men and women were treated for shock and nysteria. In asked of the switchboard operators leave Queens when told to do so. Samuel Tishman of 100 Riverside

Drive was one of the multitude that fled into the street after hearing part of the program. He declared that hundreds of persons evacuated their homes fearing that the "city was being bombed."
"I came home at 9:15 P. M. just

in time to receive a telephone call from my nephew who was frantic with fear. He told me the city was about to be bombed from the air and advised me to get out of the 6:30 last evening provided a build-building at once. I turned on the radio and heard the broadcast which when the radio broadcast started. radio and heard the broadcast which when the radio broadcast started. such consternation, Mr. Welles corroborated what my nephew had Without going out entirely, the said: "I don't think we will choose said, grabbed my hat and coat and lights dimmed and brightened alteranything like this again." He

a few personal belongings and ran to the elevator. When I got to the street there were hundreds of people milling around in panic. Most of us ran toward Broadway and it was not until we stopped taxi drivers who had heard the entire broadcast on their radios that we knew what it was all about. It was the most asinine stunt I ever heard of."

"I heard that broadcast and almost had a heart attack," said Louis Winkler of 1,322 Clay Ave-nue, the Bronx. "I didn't tune it in until the program was half over, but when I heard the names and titles of Federal, State and municipal officials and when the 'Secretary of the Interior' was intro-duced, I was convinced that it was the McCoy. I ran out into the street with scores of others, and found people running in all directions. The whole thing came over as a news broadcast and in my mind it was a pretty crummy thing

to do."
The Telegraph Bureau switchboard at police headquarters in Manhattan, operated by thirteen men, was so swamped with calls from apprehensive citizens inquiring about the broadcast that police business was seriously interfered

Headquarters, unable to reach the radio station by telephone, sent a radio patrol car there to ascertain was given, a police message was sent to all precincts in the five boroughs advising the commands of the cause.

"They're Bombing New Jersey!" Patrolman John Morrison was on duty at the switchboard in the Bronx Police Headquarters when, as he afterward expressed it, all the lines became busy at once. Among the first who answered was

a man who informed him:
"They're bombing New Jersey!"
"How do you know?" Patrolman

Morrison inquired.
"I heard it on the radio," the voice at the other end of the wire replied. "Then I went to the roof and I could see the smoke from the bombs, drifting over toward New York. What shall I do?" The patrolman calmed the caller

as well as he could, then answered other inquiries from persons who wanted to know whether the reports of a bombardment were true, and if so where they should take refuge. At Brooklyn police headquarters,

eight men assigned to the monitor switchboard estimated that they had answered more than 300 inquiries from persons who had been alarmed by the broadcast. A number of these, the police said, came from motorists who had heard the program over their car radios and were alarmed both for themselves and for persons at their homes. Also, the Brooklyn police reported, preponderance of the calls seemed to come from women.

The National Broadcasting Company reported that men stationed at the WJZ transmitting station at Bound Brook, N. J., had received dozens of calls from residents of that area. The transmitting station communicated with New York and passed the information that there was no cause for alarm to the persons who inquired later.

Meanwhile the New York telephone operators of the company found their switchboards swamped with incoming demands for information, although the NBC system had no part in the program.

Record Westchester Calls

The State, county, parkway and local police in Westchester County ed also with calls from terrified residents. Of the local police departments, Mount Vernon, White Plains, Mount Kisco, Yonkers and Tarrytown received most of the inquiries. At first the authorities thought they were being made the victims of a practical joke, but when the calls persisted and increased in volume they began to make inquiries. The New York Telephone Company reported that it had never handled so many calls in one hour in years in West-

One man called the Mount Vernon Police Headquarters to find out "where the forty policemen were killed"; another said his brother was ill in bed listening to the broadcast and when he heard the reports he got into an automo-bile and "disappeared." "I'm nearly crazy!" the caller exclaimed. Because some of the inmates took

the catastrophic reports seriously as they came over the radio, some of the hospitals and the county penitentiary ordered that the radios be turned off.

Thousands of calls came in to Newark Police Headquarters. These were not only from the terrorstricken. Hundreds of physicians and nurses, believing the reports to be true, called to volunteer their services to aid the "injured." City officials also called in to make "emergency" arrangements for the population. Radio cars were stopped by the panicky throughout that

city. Jersey City police headquarters received similar calls. One woman asked Detective Timothy Grooty, on duty there, "Shall I close my windows?" A man asked, "Have the police any extra gas masks?" Many of the callers, on being assured the reports were fiction, guaried again and again uncertain queried again and again, uncertain in whom to believe.

Scores of persons in lower Newark Avenue, Jersey City, left their homes and stood fearfully in the street, looking with apprehension toward the sky. A radio car was dispatched there to reassure them. The incident at Hedden Terrace and Hawthorne Avenue, in Newark, one of the most dramatic in the area, caused a tie-up in traffic for blocks around. The more than twenty families there apparently believed the "gas attack" had started, and so reported to the police. An ambulance, three radio cars and a police emergency squad of eight men were sent to the scene

They found the families with wet cloths on faces contorted with hysteria. The police calmed them, halted those who were attempting to move their furniture on their cars and after a time were able to clear the traffic snarl.

with full inhalator apparatus.

At St. Michael's Hospital, High some cases it was necessary to give sedatives, and nurses and physicians sat down and talked with the more seriously affected.

While this was going on, three persons with children under treatment in the institution telephoned that they were taking them out and leaving the city, but their fears were calmed when hospital authorities explained what had happened.

A flickering of electric lights in Bergen County from about 6:15 to 6:30 last evening provided a build-up for the terror that was to ensue

Geologists at Princeton hesitated about presenting it, he disclosed, because "it was our thought that perhaps people might bored or annoyed at hearing a tale so improbable." Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

PRINCETON, N. J., Oct. 80 -- SCARE IS NATION-WIDE

Scholastic calm deserted Princeton University briefly tonight foroadcast Spreads Fear in New lowing widespread misunder-England, the South and West standing of the WABC radio program announcing the arrival of ast night's radio "war scare" Martians to subdue the earth. shocked thousands of men, wo-

Dr. Arthur F. Buddingtomen and children in the big cities chairman of the Department offices, police stations and radio Geology, and Dr. Harry Hessations were besieged with calls Professor of Geology, receivesom anxious relatives of New Jerthe first alarming reports in say residents, and in some places form indicating that a metes axious groups discussed the imhad fallen near Dutch Neckers menace of a disastrous some five miles away. They Most of the listeners who sought armed themselves with the necessore information were widely consary equipment and set out fused over the reports they had find a specimen. All they foundard, and many were indignant was a group of sightseers, searched they learned that fiction was ing like themselves for their San Francisco the general improvement. meteor.

pression of listeners seemed to be At least a dozen students renat an overwhelming force had inceived telephone calls from the aded the United States from the parents, alarmed by the broader, was in the process of destroy-cast. The Daily Princetonialities westward. "My God," roared campus newspaper, receivene inquirer into a telephone, numerous calls from studentswhere can I volunteer my services? We've got to stop this awful and alumni.

Newspaper offices and radio stanately and radio reception was alsons in Chicago were swamped affected. The Public Service Cath telephone calls about the and Electric Company was mystimeteor" that had fallen in New fied by the behavior of the lightersey. Some said they had reladeclaring there was nothing wrotiges in the "stricken area" and at their power plants or in thanked if the casualty list was available.

destroyed; it's the end of the world. You might as well go home to die. I just heard it on the radio." Services were dismissed immediately. Five students at Brevard College, N. C., fainted and panic gripped the campus for a half hour with many students fighting for telephones to distributing system. A spokesmable. distributing system. A spokesmable. for the service department said in parts of St. Louis men and

call was made to Newark and themen clustered in the streets in same situation was reported. Psidential areas to discuss what believed, he said, that the conditions should do in the face of the was caneral throughout the Stateudden war. One suburban residential was general throughout the Stategudden war. One suburban resiThe New Jersey Bell Telephotent drove fifteen miles to a newsCompany reported that every capper office to verify the radio
tral office in the State was floodedeport."
with calls for more than an hourn New Orleans a general impres-

and the company did not have timen prevailed that New Jersey had to summon emergency operators been devastated by the "invaders," relieve the congestion. Hardest hitt fewer inquiries were received was the Trenton toll office, whitten in other cities. handled calls from all over then Baltimore a woman engaged

Dassage on an airliner for New One of the radio reports, there, where her daughter is in statement about the mobilizations chool.

7,000 national guardener in Name 7,000 national guardsmen in NeWhe Associated Press gathered the Jersey, caused the armories of the lowing reports of reaction to the Sussex and Essex troops to be accest: swamped with calls from officerat Fayetteville, N. C., people with

and men seeking information aboutatives in the section of New Jersey where the mythical visitation had its locale went to a newspaper the mobilization place. Prayers for Deliverance

Prayers for Deliverance office in tears, seeking information. In Caldwell, N. J., an excited message from Providence, R. I., parishioner ran into the First Bard: "Weeping and hysterical tist Church during evening servicesmen swamped the switchboard and shouted that a meteor had The Providence Journal for defallen, showering death and tall of the massacre and destruction, and that North Jerston at New York, and officials of was threatened. The Rev. Thomas electric company received Thomas, the pastor quieted there of calls urging them to turn congregation and all prayed for the lights so that the city would liverance from the "catastrophe be safe from the enemy." liverance from the "catastrophebe safe from the enemy. East Orange police headquarters as hysteria mounted so high received more than 200 calls from some cases that people told the persons who wanted to know whitice and newspapers they "saw" to do to escape the "gas." Uthe invasion.

ware of the broadcast, the switch he Boston Globe told of one wo-board operator tried to telephone

Newark, but was unable to get the call through because the switchboard at Newark headquarters was tied up. The mystery was not cleared up until a teletype explana-

More than 100 calls were received at Maplewood police headquarters and during the excitement two families of motorists, residents of New York City, arrived at the station to inquire how they were to get back to their homes now that the Pulaski Skyway had been blown

tion had been received from Tren-

The women and children were crying and it took some time for the police to convince them that the catastrophe was fictitious. Many persons who called Maplewood said their neighbors were packing their possessions and preparing to leave for the country. In Orange, N. J., an unidentified

man rushed into the lobby of the Lido Theatre, a neighborhood motion picture house, with the inten-tion of "warning" the audience that a meteor had fallen on Raymond Boulevard, Newark, and was spreading poisonous gases. Skeptical, Al Hochberg, manager of the theatre, prevented the man from entering the auditorium of the theatre and then called the police. He was informed that the radio broadcast was responsible for the man's alarm.

Emanuel Priola, bartender of a tavern at 442 Valley Road, West Orange, closed the place, sending away six customers, in the middle of the broadcast to "rescue" his wife and two children.

"At first I thought it was a lot of Buck Rogers stuff, but when a friend telephoned me that general orders had been issued to evacuate every one from the metropolitan area I put the customers out, closed the place and started to drive home," he said.

William H. Decker of 20 Aubrey Road, Montclair, N. J., denounced the broadcast as "a disgrace" and "an outrage," which he said had frightened hundreds of residents in his community, including children. He said he knew of one woman who ran into the street with her two children and asked for the help of neighbors in saving them.
"We were sitting in the living

room casually listening to the radio," he said, "when we heard reports of a meteor falling near New Brunswick and reports that gas was spreading. Then there was an announcement of the Secretary of Interior from Washington who spoke of the happening as a major disaster. It was the worst thing I ever heard over the air."

Columbia Explains Broadcast

The Columbia Broadcasting System issued a statement saying that the adaptation of Mr. Wells's novel which was broadcast "followed the original closely, but to make the imaginary details more interesting to American listeners the adapter, Orson Welles, substituted an American locale for the English scenes of the story."

Pointing out that the fictional character of the broadcast had been announced four times and had been previously publicized, it continued: "Nevertheless, the program apparently was produced with such vividness that some listeners who

may have heard only fragments thought the broadcast was fact, not Hundreds of telephone fiction. calls reaching CBS stations, city authorities, newspaper offices and police headquarters in various cities testified to the mistaken belief. 'Naturally, it was neither Co-lumbia's nor the Mercury Theatre's

intention to mislead any one, and when it became evident that a part of the audience had been disturbed by the performance five announcements were read over the network later in the evening to reassure those listeners." Expressing profound regret that his dramatic efforts should cause

man who claimed she could "see the fire," and said she and many others in her neighborhood were "getting out of here."

Minneapolis and St. Paul police switchboards were deluged with calls from frightened people. The Times-Dispatch in Richmond, Va., reported some of their telephone calls came from people who

said they were "praying."
The Kansas City bureau of The Associated Press received inquiries on the "meteors" from Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Beaumont, Texas, and St. Joseph, Mo., in addition to having its local switchboards flooded with calls. One telephone informant said he had loaded all his children into his car, had filled it with gasoline, and was going somewhere. "Where is it safe?" he wanted to know.

Atlanta reported that listeners throughout the Southeast "had it that a planet struck in New Jersey, with monsters and almost every-thing and anywhere from 40 to 7,000 people reported killed." Editors said responsible persons, known to them, were among the anxious information seekers.

In Birmingham, Ala., people gathered in groups and prayed, and Memphis had its full quota of weeping women calling in to learn the facts. In Indianapolis a woman ran into

a church screaming: "New York destroyed; it's the end of the world.

ask their parents to come and get A man in Pittsburgh said he returned home in the midst of the broadcast and found his wife in the bathroom, a bottle of poison in her hand, and screaming: "I'd rather die this way than like that."

He calmed her, listened to the broadcast and then rushed to a telephone to get an explanation. Officials of station CFRB, Toronto, said they never had had so many inquiries regarding a single broadcast, the Canadian Press re-

ported.

WASHINGTON MAY ACT

Review of Broadcast by the Federal Commission Possible

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES. WASHINGTON, Oct. 30.—Informed of the furore created tonight by the broadcasting of the Wells drama, "War of the Worlds," officials of the Federal Communications Commission indicated that the commission might review the broad-The usual practice of the commis-

sion is not to investigate broadcasts unless formal demands for an inquiry are made, but the commission has the power, officials pointed out, to initiate proceedings where the public interest seems to warrant official action.