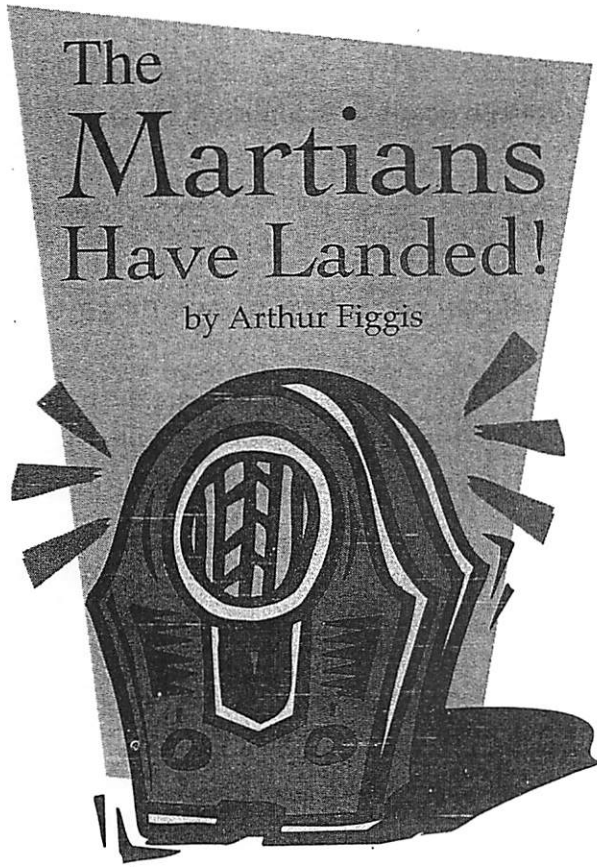


Directions

This passage is about the classic *War of the Worlds* radio program. Read the passage.



Before there was television, radio was the most popular form of home entertainment in America. In those days (1920–1950), radio was much like television without the pictures. Radio stations broadcasted dramatized stories. It was up to the listeners to imagine what was happening, based on the voices and sounds that came through the speakers. In addition to this type of entertainment, radio also provided news and music. Radio was as important in its prime time as TV is to many families today.

On Sunday, October 30, 1938, millions of listeners were tuned in to one of the most popular shows on the

air, NBC's *The Charlie McCarthy Show*. A much smaller number of people were listening to the low-rated *Mercury Theatre on the Air* on CBS. The Mercury Players, led by their 23-year-old star and director, Orson Welles, were presenting a version of the science-fiction story *The War of the Worlds*, about a Martian invasion of Earth.

This broadcast was unusual because it didn't sound like a normal radio play. It began with a few minutes of music. Then an announcer broke in to tell the audience that scientists in Princeton, New Jersey, were reporting strange, gaseous explosions on the planet Mars. The music then returned only to be interrupted again by an announcer who reported that a strange object had landed on a farm in Grovers Mill, New Jersey. More listeners tuned in as the radio program revealed that this object was in fact a Martian spaceship, and it was using "heat rays" and gas raids to destroy everything in its path! The program sounded like an actual news broadcast, which went on to state that people in Trenton, New Jersey had declared that they were going to fight against this Martian invasion. Soon, the radio reported that Martian spaceships were destroying New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and other large American cities.

At the start of *The War of the Worlds*, the announcer told the radio audience that what they were about to hear was not real but just a radio play.

Many listeners apparently missed that announcement. Orson Welles's deep, serious voice along with the talent of the Mercury Players caused listeners to fall into a terrifying fantasy. America became certain that Martians were invading Earth and, as word spread, a full-scale panic soon began.

Roads in New Jersey were jammed with carloads of people fleeing from the imagined invasion. In Newark, families crowded major streets with wet towels wrapped around their faces to protect them from the poisonous gas that was reportedly coming from the Martian spaceships. Not far from these Newark streets, hospitals became filled with people suffering from shock and hysteria. The New Jersey Bell Telephone Company was flooded with emergency calls, and in Caldwell, New Jersey, churches began having "end of the world" services. People cried and prayed, absolutely sure that Earth was being overrun by creatures from another planet.

Meanwhile, back in the CBS studio, Orson Welles and the Mercury Players had no idea what kind of havoc their play was causing. The broadcast ended with an announcement that it had all been in fun.

After it was over, people who had been injured or suffered property damage during the panic threatened CBS, Welles, and the Mercury Players with lawsuits. All of the lawsuits were soon dropped, however. *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, which had been in danger of being cancelled for low

ratings before *The War of the Worlds*, became a big hit. Orson Welles soon left radio and later became famous in the movie industry as an actor and a director.

Why did the panic happen? Were people simply more easily fooled in 1938 than they are today? Certainly, they had less experience with listening to broadcasts than people do today. There was a strong faith that if something was broadcast on the radio, it had to be true.

The panic also might have had something to do with the fact that America, especially New Jersey and the eastern seaboard, was a nervous place in the fall of 1938. European nations had narrowly escaped going to war in September, and Americans had anxiously followed the news on the radio. Also in September, the northeastern United States had been hit without warning by a rare hurricane. Weather forecasters had missed it completely, and more than 700 people had died.

And if all that wasn't spooky enough, along came Orson Welles, the Mercury Players, and thousands of make-believe Martians. Welles had picked the right time of year to put a scare into the country: *The War of the Worlds* was broadcast on the night before Halloween.



Orson Welles