

# WAR OF THE WORLDS

## GROVER'S MILL 1938

By HELEN SCHWARTZ  
Home News correspondent

By 8 p.m. on the night of October 30, 1938 — 45 years ago today — most Americans had finished dinner and settled in as usual to spend Sunday night by the radio. While most were listening to the Charlie McCarthy Show, a fraction of the audience — 3.6 per cent according to the Crossley ratings — tuned in to Orson Welles' competing program, "The Mercury Theater of the Air," on another network.

That small audience, however, was more than enough to cause a commotion that approached mass hysteria. In fact, what happened that night has served ever since as the classic example of how little it takes to make large numbers of allegedly civilized people behave like fear-ridden animals.

The program — an adaptation of H.G. Well's "War of the Worlds" — was basically about a meteorite that landed in the West Windsor Township hamlet of Grovers Mill, and turned out to be the opening volley of a Martian invasion. It was presented in the format of a musical broadcast that was interrupted by a series of increasingly alarming news bulletins — dire reports of impending disaster. The performance convinced thousands that the world was about to end.

Listeners, lulled by the music of 'Ramon Raquello at the Meridian Room of the Park Plaza Hotel in New York,' succumbed to Welles' spell as "newscasts" announced the arrival of the National Guard at Grover's Mill, and purported scientists from nearby Princeton University broke in to the program to describe the meteor and comment on the growing crisis.

Because of the news format, people who tuned in after the opening credits were unaware that it was a dramatization. As a result, as the "news" was announced, many listeners assumed that they were hearing reports of actual events, and behaved accordingly. Their reaction is now history, carefully documented in textbooks and social studies.

### 'Martial law' declared

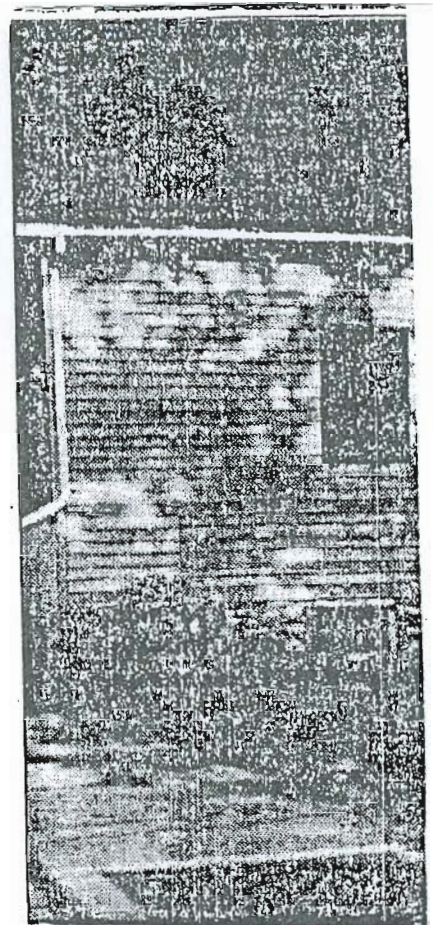
Much of the action described in the

Life Magazine carried a photo of "Grandpa" Bill Dock, who worked at the mill, with his rifle. A caption claimed that he was ready to fight off the Martians. But he really was just trying to protect his garden from the frantic hordes of New Jersey citizens who were the true invaders that night.

here in Central Jersey. The script, as it developed, spread disaster in an ever-widening geographic circle that included the area around New Brunswick. A "bulletin" announced that the "central portion of New Jersey is blacked out . . . due to the effect of heat ray." A 'Brigadier General Montgomery Smith, commander of the State Militia' declared that "the counties of Mercer and Middlesex as far west as Princeton and east to Jamesburg (were) under martial law." The announcer reported that a telephone operator east of Middlesex has spotted the dreaded invaders within ten miles of Plainfield.

Few listeners, to judge by everything else that happened, heard the entire broadcast — not the soliloquy of the survivor (Welles himself), not the eventual destruction of the invading Martians by bacteriological reaction, not the cosy little chat by Welles about Halloween. For within minutes of the very first "bulletin" the network's switchboard was swamped by calls from alarmed listeners . . . many well beyond the point of hysteria.

People all over the United States were praying, crying or fleeing frantically from anticipated death at the hands of the extra-terrestrial invaders. In a single block in Newark more than 20 families ran from their

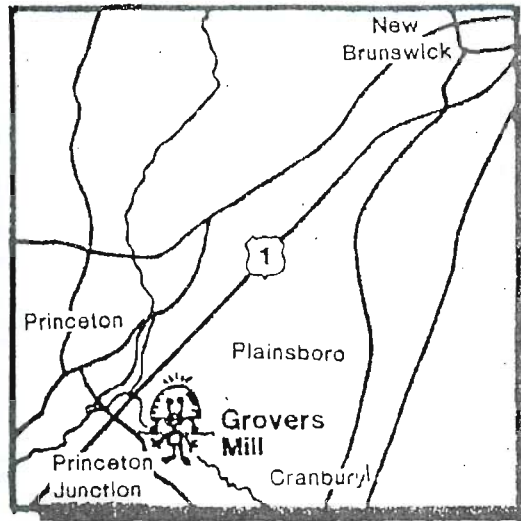


damp cloths; dozens of Princeton students received calls from anxious parents; a frightened listener who called the Maplewood police was told "We know as much as you do. Keep your radio tuned in and follow the announcer's advice."





Home News Photo by Joe McLaughlin



**GROVER'S MILL** — The village was put on the map on Oct. 30, 1938, when Orson Welles, inset photo, used it as the scene of a Martian invasion in a Halloween Eve radio theater broadcast. Dick Richey, shown outside the mill in photo at left, was a youngster who recalls the commotion caused by curiosity seekers who jammed Cranbury and Clarksville roads for a look at the visitors.

mately a million listeners were frightened or disturbed. The panic spread as far as Boston, where the Globe received a call from a woman who claimed she "could see the fires".

While many fled New Jersey, others of cars converged on the scene of the "disaster" in hundreds of cars. Newspaper reporters and a real group of curious scientists from Princeton University headed for the sparsely settled crossroads. State troopers who had stopped panicky speeders learned the bad news, and joined those headed for the mill to fight off the invaders.

### Traffic jams Grover's Mill

Most of the Grover's Mill residents, however, were not among the panic-stricken. "We missed the excitement!" says Jean Main of Clarksville Road, who was listening the Charlie McCarthy show at the time. Although she saw a solid line of cars outside her window she didn't learn of the "attack" until the following day.

Robert Sanders, who still lives on Cranbury Road not far from the mill, recalls that the broadcast didn't worry him at all but he did receive several calls from anxious friends in Trenton. And his wife Alice remembers that all night long, cars kept turning into their driveway after they passed the mill and couldn't find any Martians.

Although there were no invaders

some, according to Dick Richey, who could see the lights of cars stretching between his parents' home on North Mill Road and Grover's Mill, a quarter-mile away. "There were people screaming, crying and hollering," recalls Richey, who still lives nearby. He explained that the "the traffic pile-up was so bad that most people never got to learn that nothing was happening. I remember seeing cars all over the place . . . on people's lawns . . . everywhere. You couldn't even see the end of the cars."

"The selection of Grover's Mill was no accident," according to Dorothy Sjostrom, a long-time resident of North Mill Road. She explained that "Orson Welles was a guest in this house in the late '30s", answering a frequently-asked question about the choice of the obscure, tiny settlement as a site for the beginning of the end.

### John Houseman sums up

It was, all in all, quite a night. And, although hysteria vanished as rapidly as it began, the story remained in the headlines for the next several days.

Life Magazine's Nov. 14, 1938, issue carried a photo of "Grandpa" Bill Dock, who worked at the mill, with his rifle. A caption explained that he was ready to fight off the Martians. But according to Florence Richey, a Grover's Mill resident at the time, poor Grandpa Dock wasn't

just trying to protect his garden from the frantic hordes of New Jersey citizens who were the true invaders that night.

Chastened by the inadvertent chaos his theatrical efforts had caused, Welles was quoted as saying "I don't think we'll try anything like that again." But his associate, John Houseman, commented cheerfully that "... the show came off. There is no doubt about that."

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**Dozens of Princeton students received calls from anxious parents; Maplewood police advised callers: "Keep your radio tuned in and follow the announcer's advice."**

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