

Photo by The Leigh Photographic Group

Grover's Mill in West Windsor Township, the site of the 'Martian landings.'

West Windsor Celebrates 'The War of the Worlds'

By Don Delany

On October 30, 1938 — Halloween Eve — the tiny community of Grover's Mill in West Windsor Township became world famous as a result of a now-legendary radio broadcast. Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre aired a program titled "The War of the Worlds," based on the H.G. Wells book of the same name.

The drama depicted the landing of Martians in Grover's Mill, and it was done with such realism that millions of people across the country became convinced that we had indeed been attacked from outer space. Many became panic-stricken; some left their homes to flee, others to repel the invaders.

This month, world attention again will be focused on Grover's Mill as West

Windsor celebrates the 50th anniversary of the broadcast with four days of festivities, from Oct. 27 through Oct. 30, including art and planetarium shows, a formal dinner-dance, a parade and burial of a time capsule, panel discussions, a bicycle race and 10-kilometer run.

DOUGLAS FORRESTER, chairman of "The War of the Worlds" 50th Anniversary Commemorative Committee and former West Windsor mayor, said the celebration has been in the discussion and planning stages for several years.

"There is tremendous interest in this story," he commented. "We have newspapers, radio stations calling us

from all over the country. The 'Today' show, 'Evening Magazine' on TV are going to do something on us. We're finding that the amount of attention being given this thing is really extraordinary."

Forrester recalled that a 49th anniversary celebration was held last year with much success. Howard Koch, who wrote the original radio script, came down from New York for the event as an honored guest. "He's 86 now," Forrester noted, "and still going strong. He has had quite a career; he wrote 'Casablanca' for the movies, won an Oscar for that."

Forrester said Koch picked Grover's Mill as the locale for "The War of the Worlds" by accident, on the very day of the broadcast. "He had been visiting

relatives in this area, and was on his way home. He was getting concerned about the show as the time was getting close. So he closed his eyes, pointed a pencil at a map of New Jersey and it landed on Grover's Mill. He liked the sound of it."

GROVER'S MILL, located near the northern border of West Windsor, hasn't changed much in 50 years, Forrester said. Like other communities in the township such as Edinboro, Penns Neck and Dutch Neck, it has no formal boundaries, is still pretty much a rural area. A half dozen residents are still around who remember the Martian scare, but they are a little reluctant to share their stories of that night, Forrester said.

"They have been badgered so much by the press through the years," he explained. "Every year, reporters annoy them with questions like, 'Why were you such a fool to believe Martians were landing?' Actually the alarm over the broadcast was not displayed primarily in Grover's Mill but rather all over the country, and mostly in urban areas. The people here didn't react any differently than in any other part of the country. The story has grown up that this was some kind of joke played by city slickers on rural folk. There are some in our town who have felt for years that they were put upon by people who suggested that the folks in Grover's Mill were unusually gullible. And that just was not the case."

Now, however, the old-timers are overcoming their misgivings and are contributing their recollections of "WOW" to a collection that is being gathered as part of the celebration and which Forrester said probably will be published later in the year.

The celebration actually got under way July 23 with a concert by the New Jersey Pops Orchestra and a fireworks display.

It will reach a climax beginning Oct. 27 when a "War of the Worlds" art show will open and a planetarium show will be held. The dinner dance is set for Oct. 28 at the Hyatt Regency Princeton together with another planetarium show.

THE FOCAL POINT of the festivities will be held. The dinner-dance is set for Oct. 29, in which representatives of all of the municipalities in Mercer County have been invited to take part.

"It's our intention to use the parade as a pleasant way of getting the towns of Mercer County together," said Forrester. "We are also inviting people from Plainsboro and Cranbury because those



Orson Welles narrates the 'invasion from Mars' at Grover's Mill on CBS Radio on Halloween Eve 1938.

Courtesy, AP/Wide World Photos

towns about our area. We feel there is really a very serious lack of social cohesion within the county, no way of getting the towns together, and we think this will do the trick because we plan to make this an annual event."

The parade will end at Grover's Mill Pond, where a time capsule containing memorabilia of the occasion will be buried and a bronze monument to the Martian "landings" will be dedicated. A "Martian Panic" bicycle race will be held that day along with a panel discussion on the subject, "Could it Happen Again?" The celebration will close Oct. 30 with the 10-kilometer run and another panel discussion on "Should We Go to Mars?"

Late additions to the commemoration, Forrester said, will be two film festivals. One on Oct. 22 will be devoted to the films of Orson Welles, the other on Nov. 5 to works of H.G. Wells.

FORRESTER SAID the commemoration has three purposes — to fund scholarships for students pursuing careers consistent with the spirit of the broadcast, to raise funds to assist with the restoration of Grover's Mill Pond, and to

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"educate and amuse the public in a series of commemorative events between Oct. 27 and Oct. 30."

Funds are coming from a number of sources, he added. Souvenirs of the event — T-shirts, mugs, posters, bumper stickers, buttons, frisbies — are selling very well in area stores. Individuals and firms are contributing \$1,000 each to become members of The Grover's Mill Circle. They will receive special recognition during the celebration and will be invited to place remembrances in the time capsule, which will be opened on the 100th anniversary in 2038. Also available is a recording of a song by Trenton area musician Tom Marolda, which Forrester describes as "terrific."

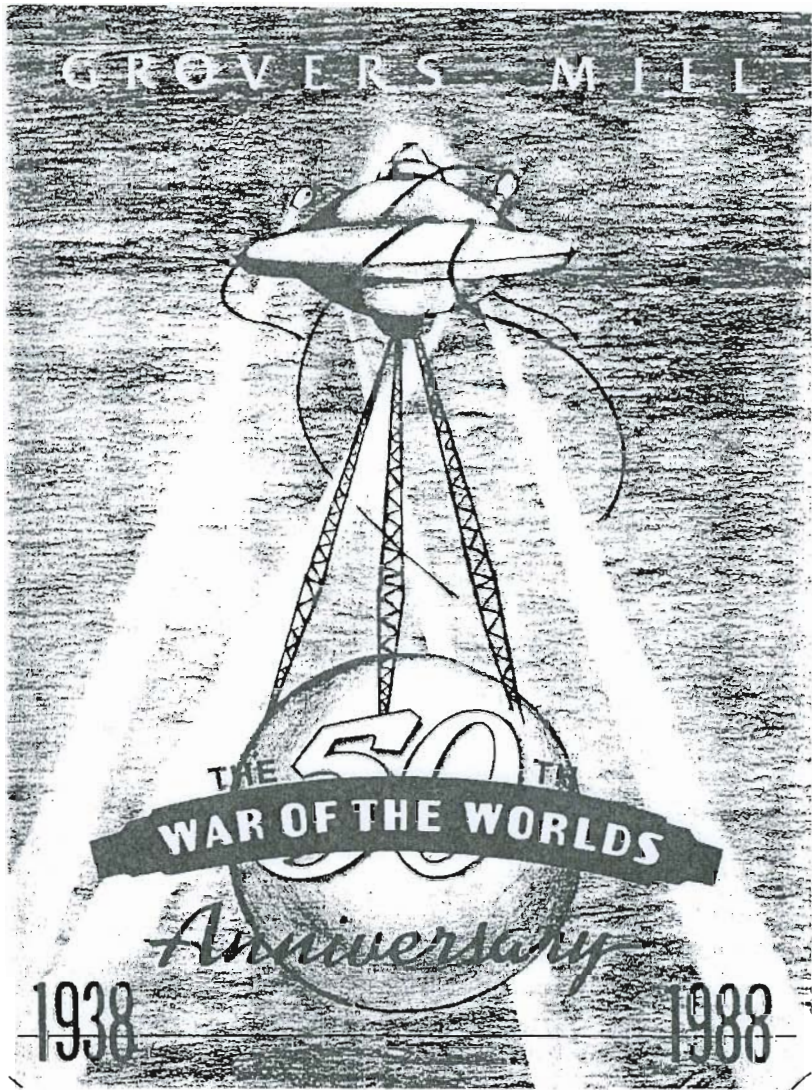
Forrester noted the "The War of the Worlds" broadcast had its tremendous impact because of an unusual circumstance. The show was aired opposite the very popular Edgar Bergen/Charley McCarthy program. Several minutes into that show a female vocalist was introduced and millions of listeners switched stations, tuning in the Wells drama after it was well under way.

"People missed the opening, all they heard was this seemingly legitimate news of a landing at Grover's Mill," Forrester said. "We had a state trooper who was on duty that night and he described the difficulties in getting accurate information. Half of the troopers were volunteering for duty to fight the Martians. There was a very serious civil defense problem, which really woke the authorities up to the gravity of the situation."

TO SHOW THE WORLDWIDE effect of the broadcast, Forrester recalled a meeting between H.G. Wells and Orson Wells in 1940, at which Wells pointed out that Adolph Hitler, in a Munich speech, used the show to demonstrate how weak and cowardly Americans were. "That in itself gives some idea of the magnitude of this event," he said.

He noted that Joel Cooper, chairman of the psychology department at Princeton University, begins his undergraduate course in clinical psychology each year with a discussion of the Grover's Mill incident. "It was a unique thing," he concluded. □

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Mercer Business in Time Capsule

One complete issue of the October 1988 edition of Mercer Business Magazine will be placed in a time capsule among other items commemorating the 50th anniversary of "The War of The Worlds" at Grover's Mill in West Windsor Township.

The time capsule items hopefully will be retrieved at the 100th anniversary of the event, according to Douglas Forrester, chairman of the 50th Anniversary Commemorative Committee.

Gene J. Sayko, Mercer Business editor, said the cover of one issue of the magazine will be replated with the date October 1988 — 2038 and with the words "Time Capsule Edition" directly under

the date. The magazine is printed and managed by White Eagle Printing Co., Inc., Trenton.

"It will obviously become a collector's item and it is the wish of the Mercer Business Magazine Committee that the West Windsor Branch of the county library system take possession of the special issue when it is dug up," Sayko said.

J. Ross Bevis, a magazine committee member and long-active in West Windsor Township affairs will represent the magazine, which is the official publication of the Mercer County Chamber of Commerce, at the time capsule ceremonies at Grover's Mill Pond on Oct. 29. □