PS1 for 11/10/88#THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

It was one of those days -- like Pearl Harbor Day and the assassination of John F. Kennedy -- that almost everyone then alive remembers. I'm talking about that day 50 years ago when Orson Welles scared Americans with his lifelike radio dramatization of H.G. Wells's (BF)War of the Worlds(end BF).

It happened in the heyday of radio. Families would finish supper and then gather round their radio in the evenings to listen as a group. Few events were allowed to interfere with the primetime comedy and dramatic productions. Sunday evenings brought us Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

In those days, real actors read their scripts live to the radio microphone. Anyone could easily tell the difference in sound quality between programs that were live and those that were pre-recorded.

On that pre-Halloween evening of October 30, 1938, I was a teenager babysitting three young cousins. I had bedded them down in plenty of time to be ready for my favorite program of the week, and was comfortably seated alone in the living room.

So, when Orson Welles cut in with his emergency announcement that Martians had landed in New Jersey, I knew it was theater. I had heard the initial fanfare and voice that customarily heralded the start of the program.

Within ten minutes, my parents were on the phone, all excited about the ""war'' news and wanting to know if I was "all right.'' I told them to ""cool it -- it was just a show.'' They were not fully reassured.

Some 1.2 million Americans were completely fooled by the program, and many more who did not hear it were caught up in the hysteria. Dan Rather last week showed us a monument in New Jersey, the focal point of the scare, commemorating the place where the men from Mars were

alleged to have landed.

That most famous radio show of all time has produced lots of people who want to psychoanalyze Americans and come up with exotic reasons for why they succumbed to mass hysteria. Some researchers are solemnly telling us now that the widespread reaction probably resulted from the submerged anxieties of a country suspended between the Great Depression and an incipient World War.

Come on now. We don't need any esoteric psychoanalysis. The explanation is simply that Orson Welles was a superb actor and he put on a thoroughly convincing show. The program catapulted a 23-year-old actor with a unique radio voice to fame and fortune in the movies.

The other factor is that, in 1938, so-called Conventional Wisdom held that life could exist on Mars. Now we know that is impossible, but it was widely believed in the pre-space age.

In 1947, Radio Quito in Ecuador aired its own production of Wells's ""War of the Worlds.'' The reaction was even more dramatic than in the United States; people were terrified and went into panic. When they found out that it was just fiction, an angry mob burned down the radio station, and two people perished in the flames.

A few American radio stations since 1938 have replayed a tape of the original Orson Welles performance. The airing was ruined, however, by a local announcer injecting his voice frequently (it seemed like every three minutes) reminding listeners not to be worried because the ""news'' didn't really happen and was just make-believe. It was like a ""don't be deceived'' warning label.

National Public Radio commemorated the 50th anniversary by airing a completely new radio production of Wells's (BF)War of the Worlds(end BF). NPR could have saved its energies; we would have rather heard the old soundtrack of Orson Welles's program. The only convincing talent on the 1988 program was Douglas Edwards, recently retired from

a half-century on CBS newscasts and one of the great radio voices of all time.