

War of the worlds—Ecuadorian style

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The radio program began with a startling scenario. News reports indicated that creatures from outer space had landed near a small town. Later broadcasts indicated that Martians were advancing on larger cities, destroying everything in their path and taking a heavy human toll.

In response to the program, and in spite of pleas from radio announcers that the story was merely fictional, people panicked. Police and military reinforcements were called out to quell the pandemonium. Many took to their cars to flee from the advancing space monsters.

Most Americans are familiar with the Orson Wells' presentation of the *War of the Worlds* that panicked the nation on October 30, 1938. What they don't know is that a similar presentation, with more drastic consequences, was broadcast in Ecuador in 1949.

Radio Quito was one of the leading stations of the normally tranquil Ecuadorian capital, Quito. Owned by the same family that published *El Comercio*, the station's studios were located in the newspaper building. The popular broadcaster produced a variety of programs including news, live music and radio drama.

Leonardo Paez, Radio Quito's program director and Eduardo Alcaraz, the station's dramatic director had heard about Orson Well's success eleven years earlier and wanted to do something that would draw attention to their station. The two prepared a script, assembled a team of actors and went on the air on Saturday evening, February 12, with their presentation.

Two popular singers began what appeared to be a program of live music, but were soon interrupted with the news that an observatory in the United States had noted strange, unidentified objects flying toward the earth. During a second song, the announcer again interrupted to report that objects had now been sighted over the Galapagos Islands, off the coast of Ecuador. The third song had barely begun when reports were broadcast that a saucer had landed in the Quito suburb of Cotocollao.

The drama swung into full force at this point. Reports were phoned in that more objects had landed near the town of Latacunga, 20 miles south of Quito. The town had been destroyed and monsters were advancing on the capital. Listeners could hear orders going out to the armed forces to attack the supposed invaders. Fictitious stations chimed in from Ambato, Cuenca, Guayaquil and other location around the country with reports about clouds of poisonous gases and the destruction of a nearby military base.

An actor portraying Quito's mayor appeared on the air appealing to the citizens, "People of Quito, let us defend our city. Our women and children must go out into the surrounding heights to leave the men free for action and combat." An announcer

positioned atop the tallest building in the city said that he could discern a monster engulfed in plumes of fire and smoke advancing on Quito.

By this time the population was terrified. Sensing the panic, station personnel broadcast appeals to the public to remain calm, advising them that it was only a fictional drama. But passions were out of control and people had taken to the streets, some clad only in night clothing.

An enraged mob of several hundred poured gasoline on the radio station and newspaper plant setting it ablaze. Unable to find any monsters around the city and realizing that they had been unwilling fooled by the drama, the police stood by and did nothing. Fed by printing chemicals, the facility soon burned to the ground, killing between 15 and 20 people and injuring many more.

Damage amounted to around 2.5 million dollars, a substantial amount in those days. While the newspaper was able to resume publishing within a few days thanks to the help of other papers, Radio Quito was off the air for two years.

“The creators of the program were forced to flee the country,” said current Radio Quito manager Javier Almeida. While no known recordings of copies of the scripts are in the hands of the radio station today, Almeida said, “I have heard that a member of the family of one lives in Mexico and may have a copy of the script.”

Radio Quito still broadcasts occasional dramatic programs including radionovelas (soap operas) and other features such as dramatized versions of the Christmas and Easter stories. Acknowledging that radio drama can be powerful tool, Almeida said that if the script could be found, he “just might produce it again.”

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