

# Heroes' Honeymoon

*Buses, Martians and the War of the Worlds*

*by Larry Plachno*



"Heroes' Honeymoon" is a new short film based on a true story of a 1938 honeymoon bus ride to Niagara Falls. What makes it interesting is that the famous Orson Welles radio presentation of *War of the Worlds* took place at the same time creating a panic around the United States. The film centers around a 1929 Yellow Coach Model W where the story takes place. DAVID MILLHOUSER.

This story starts on Saturday, October 29, 1938 when the parents of Burt Kempner were married. On the following day, the couple boarded a bus and headed for Niagara Falls for their honeymoon. Some historians among our readers may know that this date, October 30, 1938, marked the famous "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast by Orson Welles. Many people mistakenly took the radio drama seriously and thought that we were being invaded by Martians. What resulted was an interesting story about the honeymoon couple, and other passengers on the bus, worried that our world was being invaded by aliens. Recently, Burt Kempner decided to turn this story into a short film about this interesting and unusual bus trip.

This 1938 radio broadcast was the 17th episode of *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* of CBS Radio. It had been decided to do a special program for Halloween and Orson Wells suggested a program with a format where a crisis would actually seem to be happening. Several previous programs of this type were reviewed, but the final decision was to come up with a work of science fiction. Hence, they bought the radio rights to the well-known book by H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* that was written in 1898.

Howard Koch, who had previously written for Mercury Theatre broadcasts, was given the job of modifying the Wells fiction book for radio. The setting was changed from England at the turn of the century to the United States in 1938. CBS management felt that the script was too believable and asked for changes including replacing the names of real companies and locations to fictional ones. The presentation started with news reports and then moved to on-site reporters and observers as the Martian invasion progressed.

Even before the 60-minute program ended, there were claims that a great numbers of listeners had taken the broadcast seriously and were in panic. In defense of the program it might be mentioned that at the start of the program, and later, an announcer mentioned that it was a dramatization of the book by H. G. Wells. It was also obvious to anyone who thought about it, that it was impossible for all the activity mentioned in the program to take place in one hour.

On the other side, it was suggested that some listeners may have tuned in late and missed the announcement that the program was fiction. The format of the program was blamed for increasing believability because it started with music interrupted by news bulletins and then moved into on-site reporters and observers. One actor practiced to sound like Herbert Morrison's well-known radio report of the *Hindenburg* disaster. A news item later said that the site of the fictional landing by the Martians, in rural New Jersey, had a traffic jam because of peo-

ple swarming to the site. One town in Washington lost both electric power and phone service during the broadcast, which only increased fears. I might mention that at the end, the Martians were unable to survive because of microbes in the earth's atmosphere.

By the time that the program ended, police were arriving at the CBS studio to stop the broadcast and studio telephones could not handle the number of incoming calls. Later re-broadcasts of the program were cancelled for fear of causing more problems, and numerous newspapers claimed that the program had created a national panic.

How would all of this impact the two honeymooners and others on a bus going to Niagara Falls? The honeymoon story became somewhat of a family legend. Isolated on a bus with a few other passengers, they had the impression of a crisis and chaos going on around them. What was going on? Was the world ending? Would they survive to have a honeymoon?

Recently, Burt Kempner decided to write a script on the honeymoon bus trip of his parents and turn the true-life story into a short film. The project became a joint venture and was produced by Sheri Ratick Stroud, Rich West and Burt Kempner. West did the directing and editing. Kemper developed the film script and Robin Noonan-Price became the associate producer. Production services were provided by GK Visual of nearby Harrisburg while technical assistance came from Michael Baran and the Museum of Bus Transportation staff.

The George Sage Memorial Annex of the Museum of Bus Transportation was turned into a sound stage for the filming of "Heroes' Honeymoon." Since there was reluctance to take the old Yellow Coach off museum property and getting current roads and streets to look like 1938 was impossible, most of the filming was done inside of the Annex building. Green screens were used behind the windows and for backgrounds so that 1938 background and scenery could be dubbed in later. RICH WEST.



It turned out to be relatively easy to locate period costumes and a cast was quickly put together of actors who wanted to participate in the film. Here, the cast lines up in costume in front of an MCI at the bus museum. The honeymoon couple, played by Laurie Sue Pierce and Dennis Knight, are the two in the center. RICH WEST.

Billed as a love story and comic fable, most of the activity takes place on the bus with a few cast members. The bus almost becomes a character and certainly becomes the center of attention. As the film project moved along, Wonder Pictures had no trouble finding actors and period costumes. Laurie Sue Pierce played Dottie, the bride while Dennis Knight became Irv, the groom. Other members of the cast included Dennis Marburger, a passenger

who was somewhat of a comedian, and Robert J. Morgalo who played the part of a manager. Brad Wakeman became a character identified by having a matchstick in his mouth. Other cast members included Phil Steinberg who became the bus driver and Felix Foreman, a townsman.

They needed a real bus to make the film authentic. Where do you find a real antique bus in 2019 that would have been running on the highways in 1938? As you probably already guessed, the answer was the Museum of Bus Transportation in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

On loan to the museum was a 1929 Yellow Coach model W that could serve as the centerpiece for the film. Records indicate that the bus came from the old Edwards Lakes to Seas System that operated routes from New York City and Buffalo to points in Pennsylvania and Cleveland. Not only was it more than likely that the bus in its earlier years operated in and out of Buffalo, but there was a remote chance that it could actually have been the bus used by the honeymooners in 1938.

The information we have indicates that by the 1970s, the bus was in the possession of Tom VanDegrift of Detroit, a former GM employee who saved a number of old GM documents and photos. Somewhere around the 1980s, the bus went to Fullington Bus of Clearfield, Pennsylvania. This was somewhat serendipitous since Clearfield was on a main route of the Edwards Lakes to Seas System and this bus most likely operated through there. The 1929 Yellow Coach made appearances

at public and industry events for Fullington Bus and recently was loaned to the Museum of Bus Transportation.

Since the bus was normally stored at the museum's George Sage Memorial

Annex, a short drive from the main museum building, the filming would take place there. Hence in late October of 2019, the annex became a movie soundstage for a few days for the filming. Actors, props and filming gear all moved into the Annex,

and the 1929 Yellow Coach became the star of the show.

Most of the filming was done inside the Annex itself. Because of the age of the bus, there was some reluctance to run it off museum property and it would have been impossible to duplicate a 1938 environment on today's modern streets and roads. Hence, green screens were used inside the Annex so that period background and scenery could be dubbed in later. Members of the Museum of Bus Transportation volunteered their help, support and expertise during the filming.

Those involved said that everything went very well. The late October weather cooperated nicely with the filming schedule. Comments from the cast and crew indicated that they enjoyed their time at the Annex. Director West credits the museum and its staff making the film pleasurable and convenient. "They were always there for us," he said.

Heroes' Honeymoon will be released in 2020. Since it is only a short film, it probably will not be a theatrical release. Initial plans are for Heroes' Honeymoon to appear in film festivals. If you are given the chance, you should try to watch the film. Where else can you find a film where a 1929 Yellow Coach is not only the center of attention but effectively becomes one of the cast? □

Although this scene was shot outside in daylight, it will be adjusted to look like night since the film takes place at night. Note the use of the green screen behind the windows again so that a suitable background can be dubbed in later. RICH WEST.



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