

OR

"WILL WE TALK TO MARS IN AUGUST?"

by Thomas H. White

The greatest thrill for contemporary DXers comes when through their ear-phones drift sounds from a station on the opposite end of the globe. DXers were not so limited in the summer of 1924. August found many carefully making last minute adjustments, readying their sets for intercepting signals from the planet Mars. Some, thanks to stations like WHAS, would temporarily claim success.

The Mars of 1924 was far different from the vast desert, host to at best obscure bacteriological activity, which recent probes have reported. Most scientists believed some sort of life made its home on the orb; whether it was an animal form equal or superior to humans was the main order of speculation. Astronomer Percival Lowell was the United States' foremost proponent of the theory of advanced Martian life. Where other observers saw only vague lines on a smudgy sphere obscured by atmospheric turbulence, Lowell in a series of writings claimed to have mapped an intricate system of canals which irrigated the dying planet with water drawn from the polar icecaps. Any race capable of such a vast public works project would clearly possess a culture much older and wiser than its terrestrial counterpart. Communication with these beings promised great scientific revelations. However, if there was intelligent life on Mars, we had no known means of contacting it.

This is not to say no thought had been given to the problem. Flashing a series of bright lights towards the planet had been suggested by the early radio experimenter Telsa but never attempted. A New York Times editorial spoke approvingly of the suggestion that a proof of the Pythagorean proposition be carved on a vast scale on a Siberian plain. Not only would it be large enough for easy viewing, but the canal-digging Martians would be favorably impressed with our own engineering skills. (Unfortunately, this method would of course be terribly slow, and there was the danger of it degenerating into an exchange of mathematical proofs.) A Professor Goddard was experimenting with rocketry which he claimed would one day link the planets, but his work was still literally barely getting off the ground.

But science marches on, and it seemed radio might just be what was needed. Millions had witnessed in their own living rooms the marvel of capturing voices from half a continent away. The previous November some had received transatlantic signals exchanged during the International Radio Week tests. Would not a Martian civilization, builders of a canal system far beyond the capabilities of man, be thoroughly versed in the mysteries of radio? On earlier close passes, perhaps for many thousands of years, had the Martians fruitlessly beamed signals to hail their backward neighbor? Earthlings now had the technology to receive signals across vast expanses of space. On August 23 Mars and Earth would be in "opposition", separated by 55.7 million kilometers, their closest point of approach since 1804. Perhaps this time the Martians would find us attentive.

In spite of extensive skepticism, plans were organized on various fronts. Apparently no attempt was made to transmit messages from this side of the divide. Powers were just too limited, and it was known the frequencies then in use would be absorbed and scattered by the Heavyside Layer (ionsphere) encircling our planet. (Still, no doubt many announcers found it humanly impossible not to coyly thank their "Martian listeners" for tuning in.) Martian outlets, it was hoped, were capable of much more powerful transmissions.

If there were any Martian signals to hear, it was our task to try our best to receive them. Every home that had a radio was a potential detector. Professor David Todd, former Amherst College astronomy department head, worked to organize a worldwide observance of broadcasting shutdowns to limit interference to the interplanetary signals. Major General Charles Saltzman responded with a limited endorsement, by ordering all American stations to monitor and report any unusual signals during the approach. Admiral Edward W. Eberlen, Chief of Naval Operations, quickly followed suit for his branch of the armed forces. Professor Todd had actually requested that all stations maintain a five minute silence each hour for a two day period. Only WRC in Washington, D. C. seems to have participated in this part of the plan, although representatives of other nations were reported "interested".

Interpretation of the signals also merited attention. It was possible a Martian broadcast would be a speech delivered in a distinctive although

unintelligible alien tongue. Or Earth could be serenaded with the strains of a lilting Martian tune. But most likely the transmission would be in code, similar to the Morse variety but based on a mathematical key. William F. Friedman, Chief of the Code Section in the Office of the Chief Signal Officer of the Army, announced his availability for interpreting any otherworldly codes. Friedman had already made his mark in the Teapot Dome scandal by deciphering a series of messages between two of the defendants.

Monitoring activities were to be centered around Saturday night's opposition, on the assumption the Martians would know we would know a special event was taking place. However, strange signals started being heard prior to the closest approach of the planet.

Radio operators in Vancouver reported on Thursday they had been hearing a series of "four groups of dashes in groups of four", of origin and even form of transmission unidentified. A close watch was promised. Other reports filtered in of signals strange and unexplainable. In London a special twenty-four tube set picked up "harsh notes" of an unknown nature. (Some said it would have been odd only if a set of this complexity had not produced strange noises.) WOR engineers in Newark reported nearly the same sounds at nearly the same wavelength. A Bostonian noted a strange ringing, ending with an abrupt "zzzip".

Squarely into the midst of this activity stumbled WHAS of Louisville, Kentucky. By coincidence local maneuvers were scheduled during an evening of the opposition, as members of assorted militias would repel a mythical army occupying the city. (Mars was, after all, the god of warfare.)

WHAS saw this as a splendid opposition to score a "first", for no radio correspondent had had occasion to ply his craft in a war zone, mythical or otherwise. The good citizens of Louisville were to be provided with up-to-the-minute reports of their coming liberation. However, a few far-flung radio fans would be listening with ears attuned to the heavens. Misled by newspaper listings which reported WHAS carrying orchestra music, they would decide the odd noises emitted by their sets were coming from our friends in outer space.

WHAS's innovative program featured a remote broadcast, carried by telephone lines direct from the front. A Colonel Hamer provided commentary, but more important to our story was his setting. The microphone was located between two 3-inch field artillery pieces, firing in an alternating sequence four times a minute. Scattered small arms fire filled in the gaps between the main blasts. Because the Colonel's report ended a few minutes early, the program's close consisted exclusively of the sounds of the firing, unbroken by any announcements.

Imagine the reaction of a distant listener, searching for evidence of Mars, coming across this experimental offering. Each fifteen seconds a "bong!" sounded (this is how the artillery reports were reproduced, for their blasts froze the microphone). In between, in a strange code clearly not Morse, came seemingly random pulses. Could it be Mars? Could it be anything but Mars??

Eventually the facts were sorted out. The operators of the London set decided they had logged nothing more exotic than "a combination of atmospheric and heterodyning". (RCA engineers calculated that for the signals noted in London to have originated from Mars a one-million-megawatt transmitter consuming the equivalent of 2.7 metric tons of coal hourly was required. The engineers suggested the Martians had better outlets for their talents and natural resources.) The Vancouver signals were identified as a new type of beacon developed to aid navigation in Washington state's inland waterways. WHAS even assumed a kind of pride about its role. Credo Harris, the station manager, overstates in his memoirs the extent of his station's influence, claiming it responsible for a number of reports which were clearly the result of other sources.

Obviously the red planet was not interested in talking to us. This could have been viewed as a setback, or merely as a first step, for as the New York Times noted, "...men would never cease trying to establish communication with Mars". Other methods would be tried. However, 82-year-old Camille Flammarion, French astronomer and staunch adherent of the life-on-Mars theory, was wide of the mark as he declared that although man would never establish links with Mars through the use of "flying machines", he would eventually attain success -- using mental telepathy.

Perhaps it is just as well Mars turned out to be radio-free. We're having enough trouble regulating stations on a global scale. Having to cooperate with other planets would be an additional burden to our already overtaxed allocation schemes.