

CITY LIFE

MOVE: An Oral History

For years, the hostility between the city and the radical West Philly group MOVE had escalated. But nobody was prepared for the horrific way the fight would end one May afternoon in 1985. Now, decades later, the people who were there that day tell the still-unbelievable story.

by **VICTOR FIORILLO** • 3/26/2010, 6:00 a.m.

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John Africa and the end of the 1978 Powelton Shoot-out: AP Photo

Angel Ortiz, *former City Councilman*: This was an intolerant time. If you were different, you were pursued. The MOVE members fit into that pattern. They were loud. But I don't believe they were plotting subversive action against the state.

Ramona Africa: The government couldn't explain their position, didn't want to hear us. That's when the beatings and unjust jailings started. MOVE men and women — pregnant women — were beat.

James Berghaier: And then there was the guns-on-the-porch incident.

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Ramona Africa: We are not a violent people. We are uncompromisingly opposed to violence. But we do believe in self-defense. You're violent if you don't defend, because then you're endorsing violence.



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Andino Ward: In the mid-'70s, I went to the Powelton house. I tried to initiate conversation, and somebody shot at me. I took off running. I wouldn't see my son for another 10 years.

Tigre Hill: Today you have this revisionist history of this peaceful group in West Philly. They were not peaceful.

Ramona Africa: In May of '77, we took a stand after MOVE people were beat bloody. You come at us? We're coming back at you. We took to a platform built in front of our house, and we displayed weapons.

James Berghaier: We got called in. The commissioner said, "I don't want any crazy shootings. Find good positions. If shooting starts, do you have a problem taking them out?" I said no.

Charles "Tommy" Mellor, retired Philly police officer: I never heard of MOVE until '77. When I saw them brandishing their weapons, I was taken aback. Them standing out there with automatic weapons, and no one was doing anything about it.

James Berghaier: From 1977 to 1978, 24 hours a day, we sat outside and listened to the rhetoric. If they came out, we were to apprehend.

Ramona Africa: Our main demand was that the members in jail for riot and weapons be released. Mayor Rizzo said he didn't negotiate with terrorists, so we stood our ground.

Frank Rizzo Jr., son of then-mayor Frank Rizzo: My father made the decision to evict them with a court order.

Ramona Africa: They turned off our water, didn't pick up our trash. Then on August 1st, the city said they wanted every MOVE person out, we had to give up our home, and we said no. It wasn't about the house. They wanted to get rid of — to murder — MOVE.

William Richmond, former Philadelphia fire commissioner: In '78, I was deputy chief in charge of research and planning, and we were involved in the planning process for that episode. I went on-site and looked at the geography, saw what problems we might encounter.

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