

The Philadelphia Siege: Ways of Life in Conflict

By LINDSEY GRUSON
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PHILADELPHIA, May 24 — For months, Louise James tried unsuccessfully to poke holes in her brother's philosophy.

"There's not one question, not one, that he couldn't answer," Mrs. James said. "It was the first time in my life that somebody said things to me that I could absolutely not refute."

Enthralled by the revolutionary philosophy espoused by her brother, Vincent Leaphart, she joined his radical group, Move. Four years ago, she allowed about a dozen children of group members to move into her West Philadelphia row house, where she lived nearly 25 years. Soon women who were members moved in, and two years ago, men came.

These were some of the early steps in an ascending spiral of neighborhood tension and conflict that peaked May 13 when the police bombed the home she left a year ago after quitting the group.

A fire that followed the bombing destroyed the neighborhood, including 53 homes, and killed 11 Move members who had barricaded themselves in the heavily fortified house on Osage Avenue.

Different Ways of Life

The conflict seems to have its roots in the different ways of life of Move members and the neighborhood residents.

The descriptions each side gives of itself and the other differ sharply, and each side blames the other for the confrontation, which followed efforts to evict the group from the densely packed block of row houses.

Most Move members grew up in poor inner-city areas, according to former members who were interviewed, as well as Susan Lumia, a sociologist who has studied and written about the group. Some members were college graduates, but they had little in common with their middle-class neighbors.

Many residents of the block had lived there all their lives. They eagerly joined block improvement projects, which were as much a way of life as working hard, often in two jobs, to pay their mortgages. Their family was their neighborhood.

Move gave members their own sense of family, said Mrs. James and LaVerne Sims, a former member who remains sympathetic to the group.

'A Feeling of Closeness'

"I felt good," Mrs. Sims said. "I truly learned the meaning of family. I met these people who were strange to me, and before long I was calling them brother and sister. There was a feeling of closeness that's hard to believe."

According to Mrs. James, whose 26-year-old son, Frank, was killed in the fire, Move gave members the "Principle": her brother's back-to-nature, anti-authoritarian philosophies. There were answers for every question and guidelines from Mr. Leaphart for every situation, recorded in a school notebook by a follower. It was, Mrs. James said, an escape from personal decision-making for people bypassed by the American dream and its ma-

terial rewards, and, for many, a way off the streets, a way out of crime, prostitution and drug addiction.

Move is not a national organization. Some members lived in Rochester, N.Y., but the contingent there dissolved after nine of them were arrested in 1981 when 80 law-enforcement officers raided two houses and a gas station. The nine were wanted in Philadelphia on charges ranging from parole violation to manufacturing pipe bombs. Several of them died in the fire here.

Elimination of Government

In general, the group is a back-to-nature movement that would give America back to the Indians and do away with all governments. Members do not recognize the authority of the state — its schools, laws or courts. Move opposes all scientific research and technology and the killing of any animals, including rats and roaches.

"Everything comes from nature and returns to nature," Mrs. James said. "We shouldn't tamper with nature."

Former members said the group believes that life is sacred and cyclical, beginning and ending in the earth. Members call dying "cycling," a normal part of the life cycle, and believe in reincarnation.

Yet there are contradictions. A belief in nonviolence is accompanied by a belief in a right to armed self-defense, for example, Miss Lumia, the sociologist, said. And the glowing descriptions of Move by Mrs. James, Mrs. Sims and other former members contrast sharply with those given by city and police officials, former residents of the devastated neighborhood and community activists involved in unsuccessful negotiations with the group.

Members Called 'Terrorists'

They said Move sought confrontation and rejected repeated attempts at negotiation. Some call group members "terrorists." Little by little, many residents said, Move ruined a warm and friendly oasis in a sprawling city of high crime.

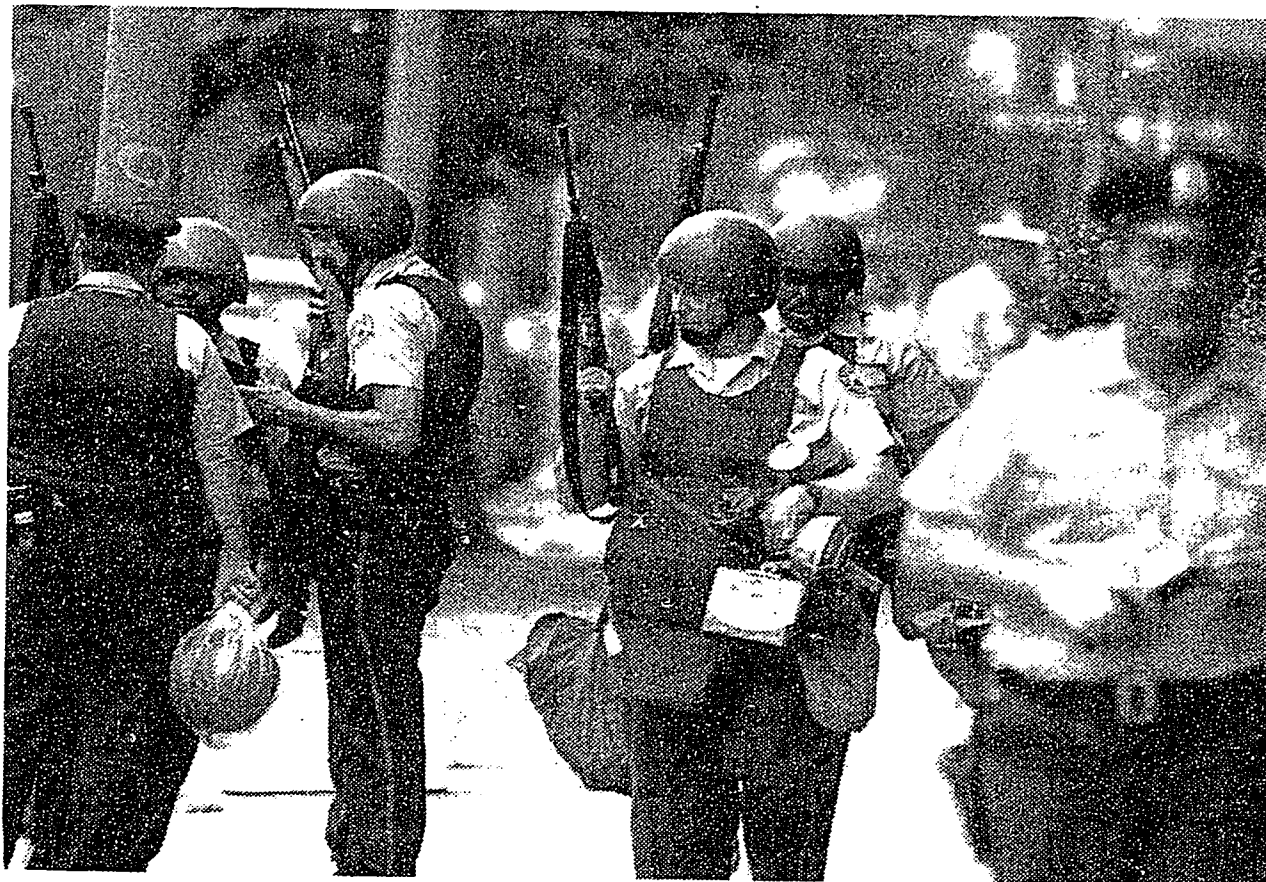
They said members harassed and assaulted residents; dumped garbage in what had been a neat, flowering yard; attracted flies; fed rats like pets, and turned the two-story house into a fortress, complete with a series of steel-plated bunkers.

Mrs. Sims, who lived there nearly three years before leaving the group a year ago from "exhaustion," said the neighbors "were snooty, stuck up, looking down their noses at us since we moved into Louise's house."

Rejection of Neighborhood

Feeling rejected by the residents, Move in turn rejected the neighborhood, the two women said.

The residents pleaded with Mayor W. Wilson Goode to evict Move, saying it was a cancer that was slowly poisoning the entire neighborhood. Fearing a confrontation, Mayor Goode said the city moved cautiously. The eviction attempt was a "last resort," he said,



Philadelphia police officers in position near a house they mistakenly believed was occupied by Move.

The New York Times/Keith Meyers

forced on the city by a group that he said had lost touch with reason and was bent on violence and destruction.

Miss Lumia said members felt the group was being persecuted by Philadelphians and needed to stockpile weapons for defense against what it considered were imminent police assaults.

Membership Estimates Vary

In the 1970's, the police arrested Move members on more than 600 minor charges, such as disorderly conduct.

Move accused the police of killing dogs owned by group members, beating pregnant women and causing stillbirths.

The police here have estimated that the group has about 50 members, while Miss Lumia put the number at 100 to 150. Move houses have been reported at one time or another in New York City and Chicago, but law-enforcement officials in those cities said this week that they knew of no houses. Move still has two houses in Philadelphia, and a house in nearby Chester was raided by the police not long after the siege here.

Miss Lumia said many members led conventional lives. Most are black, she said, and all take the surname Africa. Mr. Leaphart became John Africa.

Guidelines and Anecdotes

The sociologist said the group financed itself through various projects. Many members also receive money from welfare programs, she said, though members say they reject government. Mrs. James said members often worked 12-hour shifts in the group's projects, such as a carwash.

Miss Lumia said the name Move did not stand for anything in particular but was a shorthand way of implying that the group would ultimately prevail, as



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Louise James

in "Move is on the move."

For Mrs. James, "Move stands for truth." She said, "John Africa saw very clearly the messed-up system."

The group's way of life, Miss Lumia said, is based on "The Book," a set of anecdotes and guidelines dictated by Mr. Leaphart, a former handyman and third-grade dropout, to one of his earliest followers, Donald Glassey. Mr. Glassey, a former community college teacher who is widely regarded as the group's co-founder, filled an 80-page school notebook in longhand.

Based on personal experiences, the philosophy stated there is vague and often contradictory, Miss Lumia said. The book, apparently written in 1972, rambles and is often barely coherent, she said. Some of its didactic anecdotes were never finished; others were interrupted by long, tangential stories.

At first Move followed the book's teachings against technology and forewarned electricity and gas. Its houses now use them, however, and a gas generator and a public address system were installed at the Osage house.

In carrying out the belief that everything taken from the earth must be returned, members spread their garbage on the ground. The stench from this and their abstinence from many forms of personal hygiene carried through the neighborhoods around their homes.

50-Day Siege in 1978

That has caused nearly constant friction with neighbors and the police. In the Powelton Village section of Philadelphia, the tension led in 1978 to a 50-day siege of a fortified Move house.

Before the crisis ended, Officer James J. Ramp was shot in the neck and killed. In the brief gunbattle, four other police officers, four firefighters and one member of Move were wounded. In a 19-week trial, one of the most raucous and costly in the city's history, nine Move members were convicted of murdering Officer Ramp for their role in the shootout. In 1981, each was sentenced to a prison term of 30 to 100 years.

"We're not going to give up until our people are released," Gerald Ford Africa, a spokesman for the group, said a few days after the May 13 siege. "Pressure will be applied. The issue of the prosecution of innocent people has not been laid to rest."