

Members of 'mafia' say killers did not belong; Pair had been friends of clique participant; COLORADO SCHOOL SHOOTING

THE BALTIMORE SUN

APRIL 25, 1999

LITTLETON, Colo. -- Tad Boles' mother bought him a black duster for Christmas in 1996 because they were on sale at Miller Stockman, a Western wear outlet, for \$99.

A week or so later, Tad's closest friend, Chris Morris, had the same kind of coat.

"They were two little hipster sophomores going down the hallway -- people started calling them the 'Trench Coat Mafia,' " recalled Boles, who spoke on condition that her first name not be printed. "I personally thought they looked kind of goofy, but they're kids."

Soon, it seemed that all of Tad's buddies were wearing the coats. By last year, their girlfriends bought a business-card-size ad in the Columbine High School yearbook, "Rebelations," and devoted it to the Trench Coat Mafia, running a photograph of the group.

In retrospect, the name sounds a little menacing, now that it is linked to the two young men behind one of the deadliest school massacres in U.S. history, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

But it started out as just a tease, a name thrust upon the ragtag group of outcasts by the more popular kids at Columbine, who seized on the appearance of the dark, ominous-looking dusters as new fodder for their unending harassment of those on the fringes.

In the yearbook, Harris and Klebold are not even in the picture (and those who do appear in it are not wearing trench coats).

In the first hours after the shooting and bombing that left a teacher and 14 students -- including Harris and Klebold -- dead at Columbine in this middle-class suburb of 35,000 southwest of Denver, the group was described as devoted to Gothic music and culture, computer video games with ominous names like "Doom" and all things German, including Hitler, whose birthday coincided with Tuesday's destruction.

Since then, members of the group, their parents and other Columbine students have said it was just a tiny clique of boys who had long been losers, finally finding a place.

They were into computers. They all played "Doom," like Harris. A World Wide Web site attributed to him mentioned the "Trench Coat Mafia" and featured drawings of gun-toting monsters and directions for making pipe bombs.

The group used to hang out at Amazing Fantasy Comics in Littleton, but the manager of the store, Shawn Carey, said members stopped coming about a year ago because they grew more interested in paint-ball and girls.

Friends said they were heavily into role-playing games like "Dungeons and Dragons," and often played the card game "Magic." They liked to drink shots of After Shock, a brand of cinnamon or peppermint schnapps.

Some in the group, which had from seven to 20 members, wore the black lipstick and black fingernail polish associated with the Goths. But Klebold and Harris did not, friends said; some say they were not even part of the core of the trench coat group, just friends of a core member.

Boles, a mother of five, insisted that the trench-coat owners were just like any other teen-agers, interested in bamboo sword fights, "Star Wars" and

computer games, but also "the teeny-boppers bopping at the prom" and that great American teen-age tradition, working on their cars.

Columbine students said the trench-coat group often spoke in German and wore clothes decorated with swastikas. Klebold was said to have had a German flag sewn onto his coat.

Ian Nelson, 18, a Columbine senior who describes himself as "an outcast by choice," said he had played "Doom" with Klebold and Harris over the Internet and, yes, "they always seemed a little different to me."

"They dressed a little different," Nelson said, noting that that kind of thing can be stupidly important in high school. "They wore the trench coats all the time, 90 degrees, 20 degrees, whatever."