

# Egghead Kaczynski Was Loner in High School

Andrew Martin and Robert Becker and Tribune Staff Writers. Tribune staff writer Steve Mills contributed to this story

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They were the smartest boys at the high school, a rumbled group of teenagers who sat together in the cafeteria, experimented with explosives in the chemistry lab and stayed after class to puzzle over calculus problems and probability theory in the Math Club.

Some classmates at Evergreen Park Community High School in the late 1950s remember them as “the briefcase boys,” referring to what even then was considered a socially suspect manner of carrying textbooks.

Theodore Kaczynski, the Montana recluse suspected of being the Unabomber, was among this loose-knit clique of overachievers, and many considered him the smartest.

But even in a group that many considered “eggheads,” “Teddy” Kaczynski was considered a misfit, an insecure teenager who preferred the company of textbooks to classmates.

“There was a group of us who were kind of at the top of the class,” remembered classmate Russell Mosny, now a computer programmer in Schaumburg. “We were the eggheads. We were into science and books and the others were out playing football.”

Although the group’s interest in academics set them apart, they were by no means anti-social.

Indeed, members of “briefcase boys” ran for student council, played in the band, built a canoe and dated girls from nearby Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School, an all-girls Catholic school.

But Kaczynski, the skinny kid with an uncombed head of hair punctuated by a cowlick who carried an alligator-skin briefcase, rarely socialized outside of an academic setting, they said.

“I can’t remember any social thing we did together,” Mosny said. “We never went to a movie or anything like that.

“Ted as an individual, though he interacted with us fairly comfortably, was still not socially involved with any one of us,” Mosny added. “He seemed to have a really nonexistent social life.”

The dynamics of the group—Kaczynski always the odd man out—seem to have foreshadowed the future. While other members of the “briefcase boys” settled into careers as computer programmers, pharmacists and college professors, Kaczynski veered onto his now infamous path, leaving a promising life in academia for a life of seclusion and, allegedly, terrorism in a 10-by-12-foot Montana cabin.

Did Ted’s alienation begin at Evergreen Park?

When the Unabomber’s manifesto rails against young people spending their lives studying, “I think he was talking about himself,” said Mosny, who has read the 35,000-word treatise.

Nearly 40 years later, some classmates now wonder whether Kaczynski’s behavior in high school offered early clues to what triggered an 18-year bombing campaign that killed three people and injured 23 others.

Sandy Lepore, 54, said Kaczynski signed her 1956 yearbook with a mysterious symbol: a circle with an X in the middle of it, followed by his name “Ted Kaczynski” and the words “his mark.”

“I wonder if he put this mark on anything else?” said Lepore, of Frankfort.

Jo Ann De Young, 55, told the San Jose Mercury News that Kaczynski once handed her a “hand bomb” that popped when she twisted it apart and may have left a cat’s hide in her locker that they had just dissected in science class.

“He would get this funny little smile on his face, pinch his lips and stick his tongue out a little,” said De Young, who lives in California. “That was our clue Ted was up to it again.”

While Kaczynski’s behavior was undeniably peculiar, members of the “briefcase boys” said it was more characteristic of a shy and awkward teenage boy than a future bombmaker.

Known as one who favored “childish” jokes and pranks, Kaczynski “was emotionally immature for his age, let alone his peer group,” Mosny recalled.

Some speculated that Kaczynski’s social inadequacies may have been exacerbated by his age: He was two years younger than his classmates because he skipped a grade in grammar school and his junior year in high school.

“He felt a little pressure because he was younger than the rest of his classmates,” said Donald Sobbe, who played in the band with Kaczynski and recalled that Kaczynski took junior and senior level classes as a sophomore.

Patrick Morris, a former classmate, said his former friend was “juvenile in the best and worst sense of the word.”

“He wasn’t a recluse in high school,” said Morris, a former computer programmer who now works as a massage therapist in St. Louis. “(H)e was just young.”

Kaczynski’s social outlets were confined to school-related activities, from math and biology clubs to playing trombone in the school band. He was known as a technically proficient musician who couldn’t put much emotion into his playing.

The “briefcase boys” were also fascinated by explosions and rockets, experimenting in fields and covering the explosives with a garbage can to protect themselves.

“Other guys were into girls, football. We were fascinated by this,” said John Chesta, a former classmate and member of Kaczynski’s clique who now is a pharmacist on the South Side. “We called them bombs, but they were really cardboard pipes with the ends closed up.

“We were budding scientists,” he added. “It was part of extended chemistry class.”

But “mainstream” high school society did not always welcome those students who prized academics over athletics.

Morris described the high school as a “violent place” where athletes dominated the social scene and scholars were looked upon with suspicion or disdain.

“We were pretty tight, by default, I think,” Morris said.

If popularity could sometimes prove elusive for the “briefcase boys,” it was all but unobtainable for Kaczynski, who personified the slide rule-carrying “brain.”

“He had a pocket protector, the whole thing,” said Raymond Janz, a former classmate who admitted teasing Kaczynski.

“We stuffed him in a locker one time just for grins,” said Janz, now in the advertising business in Shawnee Mission, Kan. “He was scared mostly. We let him out.”

While others might have turned to friends for solace and support from such heavy-handed teasing, Kaczynski apparently did not.

“When we got together with Ted, we didn’t talk about intellectual stuff,” Morris said. “We talked about just regular stuff—lunch or whatever was happening after school.”

Like Morris and the others in this group of talented students, most who saw Kaczynski struggle in his frayed relationships with people believed that his keen intellect would ultimately lead him to a successful adjustment in adulthood.

“I think anyone you talked to who had worked with him would have expected nothing short of extraordinary success,” said Lois Skillen, a former counselor at the high school. “Having been involved in education and the psychological evaluation of people, I can tell you that this is a big mystery to me.

“With some students I have predicted their demise,” she said. “But with him, never.”

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