

Biochemist Held in Federal Building Blast Investigation

■ **Oklahoma City:** Steven Colbern, 35, who grew up in Ventura County, is being held on unrelated weapons charges. McVeigh may have tried to contact him last fall.

By RONALD J. OSTROW and TOM GORMAN, TIMES STAFF WRITERS

WASHINGTON—A Southern California biochemist who was the object of a national manhunt in connection with the Oklahoma City bombing case was arrested by U.S. marshals Friday afternoon in the heart of Arizona's Black Mountains after he was spotted sitting on a bench in the tiny town of Oatman.

Steven Garrett Colbern, 35, a UCLA-educated chemist who grew up in Ventura County and attended Oxnard High School, was wanted on both state and federal weapons charges. Witnesses said Colbern resisted arrest when the marshals approached him and he was wrestled to the ground and handcuffed.

In some ways, Colbern's photo on a U.S. Marshals wanted poster resembles the sketch of the elusive

■ ARREST DETAILS

A manhunt comes to Ventura County, ends in Arizona. A18

"John Doe No. 2," who is believed to have accompanied bombing suspect Timothy J. McVeigh when he allegedly rented the Ryder truck used in the worst terrorist act on U.S. soil. But federal officials, made wary by the ups and downs of the hunt, played down any connection with John Doe 2 as they disclosed they have been searching for Colbern for at least a week.

In fact, the Upland Police Department, which arrested Colbern July 20 on weapons charges, on Friday issued but then withdrew at the request of U.S. marshals a press release stating that Colbern also was known as John Doe No. 2.

However, federal officials—speaking not for attribution—made clear that their interest in Colbern now is based on information that McVeigh, the prime suspect in the case, tried to contact him last fall in Kingman, Ariz., which authorities believe may have been a planning

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PROBE: Oxnard High Grad Is Arrested

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 site for the Oklahoma City bombing.

A spokesman for the U.S. Marshals' office in Phoenix said Colbern was armed with a .38-caliber revolver when he was wrestled to the ground by three federal marshals in Oatman. After a brief struggle, Colbern was taken into custody about 3 p.m., said Thomas B. Nixon, chief deputy for the district of Arizona office.

"He got up and attempted to leave and attempted to pull a .38 caliber, five-shot revolver, fully loaded," Nixon said. "[The deputies] jumped him and wrestled him to the ground." In the process, Colbern kicked one of the deputies in the jaw, Nixon said.

Nixon said that Colbern was transported to Bullhead City, Ariz., where he was being held for failing to appear on an underlying charge of possession of unregistered weapons. He will be transported to Phoenix, where he is scheduled to be arraigned today).

Police in Upland, a suburban community east of Los Angeles, stopped Colbern just after midnight last July 20 for not having a properly illuminated license plate. According to court records, officers found in Colbern's car a "weapon of the kind commonly known as metal knuckles," an assault rifle with a detachable magazine and a silencer. They also found him to be in illegal possession of loaded firearms, including a 9-millimeter handgun and a .22-caliber handgun.

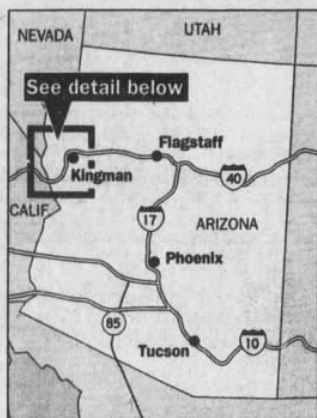
Colbern resisted arrest and was charged with injuring a police officer, according to Richard Maxwell, chief deputy district attorney in the West Valley office of the San Bernardino County district attorney. Upland police notified the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which obtained search warrants for a house in Oxnard owned by Colbern's father and also for a residence in Ventura.

When Colbern, who was free on \$10,000 bail on the local charges, returned in late July to the Upland Police Department to retrieve a video camera and film that had been in his vehicle, ATF agents arrested him on federal weapons charges. But Colbern failed to show up for the federal proceedings, resulting in the issuance of a federal fugitive warrant for him Oct. 21.

The wanted notice said Colbern, with an alias of Bill Carson, is considered armed and dangerous and has been "trained in survival

Bombing Arrest

Steven Garrett Colbern, a UCLA-educated chemist, was arrested in the tiny town of Oatman, Ariz., and is being held in Bullhead City.



Los Angeles Times

skills."

It described him as 6-feet, 1-inch tall, weighing 195 pounds with green eyes and brown hair. While he has a scar on his right wrist, according to the wanted notice, he has no tattoos. The description of John Doe 2 included a tattoo.

His father, Robert J. Colbern, a 60-year-old California State Corrections Department dentist, said Friday that his son "has always been a gentle person who has not hurt anyone as far as we know."

Robert Colbern said he was surprised when his son failed to appear in court last year. "All of the sudden, he was just gone one day.

"I don't agree with what happened over at Oklahoma City," the senior Colbern said, "but until somebody shows me, I don't believe my son was involved."

Colbern received an undergraduate degree in chemistry from UCLA in March, 1989, a decade after he first attended the university. After graduating from Oxnard High in 1978, he attended classes at UCLA from 1979 through the spring of 1985, withdrawing during

four different quarters and taking classes part-time during another. He did not get his degree for another four years, and the university had no information to explain that gap.

In the fall of 1991, he returned for a quarter as a graduate student in biological chemistry. While at UCLA, Colbern requested that his address not be given out by the university—information that would otherwise be public. The yearbook carried no photo of him.

Colbern worked in a medical research lab at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles from June of 1993 until last November, when he resigned voluntarily. For all his time there, he was a research associate in one of the center's basic science labs.

According to his father and Santa Monica Superior Court records, Colbern filed for divorce in March, 1991, after a five-year marriage to Ava Hacopian Colbern. They were married Dec. 27, 1985, in a civil ceremony at the Los Angeles courthouse. She listed herself as a "self-employed microbiologist," and she also graduated from UCLA.

The divorce agreement gave Colbern possession of the contents of two storage lockers in Bullhead City, Ariz., where his attorney, Leslie James Sherman, said his gun collection was stored.

"The only quirk about this person . . . was his gun collection," Sherman said. "He was concerned it would be lost," because his wife didn't make the payments on the storage lockers. Ava Hacopian's last known address was in Palo Alto.

The couple filed for bankruptcy on May 23, 1989, in Los Angeles, according to court records, listing liabilities of \$662,000 and assets of \$5,000.

Three years earlier, they purchased a house in Long Beach and signed a deed of trust for \$93,100 with the Veterans Administration—although no record of his serving in the military could be found.

It appears the Colberns failed to make payments on the house, resulting in the VA buying it back in October, 1987, for \$103,530 at a public auction. Government agents sought to evict the Colberns, but failed in four attempts to serve the legal notice, apparently because they could not find anyone to serve.

Finally, on May 18, 1988, a Long Beach Municipal Court judge or-

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PROBE: Man Arrested in Arizona Town

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dered that the VA recover \$3,368 from the Colberns because they had failed to promptly turn over the property.

In Kingman, Ariz., the manager of a mail-drop service used over the past two years by McVeigh said Friday that authorities have questioned her regarding Colbern. Lynda Willoughby, manager of The Mail Room, said that FBI and U.S.

Marshals Service agents had shown her pictures of Colbern during the past week, asking if she recognized him.

Willoughby's ability to recognize Colbern holds significance because she had already told the FBI that a man resembling the sketch of John Doe 2 picked up McVeigh's mail once in either February or March of this year. Willoughby said she is unsure whether Colbern was the man who picked up McVeigh's mail.

"It's very difficult to say that could have been him—or no, that's not him," Willoughby said. "It's very difficult to know."

What is certain, she said, is that Colbern did not share McVeigh's

mail box. Willoughby said that she has also told the FBI that no one with Colbern's name or two aliases provided to her by the authorities has rented space at the Mail Room since at least December, 1992, when the current owners acquired the business.

Ostrow reported from Washington and Gorman from Upland. Times staff writers Fred Alvarez and Miguel Bustillo in Ventura County, Paul Feldman, Bob Pool, Bettina Boxall, Nancy Hill Holtzman, Ralph Frammolino, J. Michael Kennedy, James Rainey, Carla Hall, Jeff Brazil and Tina Daunt in Los Angeles, William C. Rempel in New York and David Willman in Washington and correspondent Catherine Saillant in Ventura County contributed to this story.