

# Oxnard High Alumnus Seen as Bright, Odd

By FRED ALVAREZ  
and PAUL ELIAS  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

He was a top student in chemistry and biology. He even threw the shotput for the Oxnard High track team. And above all, his former classmates recall, Steven Garrett Colbern was smart, maybe even a genius.

But they also remember him as strange. He had an early fascination with bombs, they say. He talked about them. He built them. And he exploded them.

On Friday, arrested by FBI agents in Arizona, the 35-year-old biochemist who grew up on a quiet Oxnard street became the newest focus of the nationwide manhunt for the anti-government crusaders believed to have blown up the Oklahoma City federal building, killing 168 people.

Colbern, who last lived with his parents in Oxnard more than a decade ago, was born in Illinois and moved to Ventura County when he was about 3 years old.

He went to Oxnard Elementary School and Fremont Intermediate School before going on to Oxnard

**Please see COLBERN, A20**

## COLBERN: Recalled as Smart, Strange

**Continued from A1**

High, where he graduated in 1978.

Former teachers and classmates described Colbern as a brilliant student, but a quiet loner with few friends.

Several teachers who worked at the school while Colbern was a student said Friday they had little memory of the teen-ager. Those who did had mixed recollections of how well he did in high school.

In his freshman or sophomore year, Colbern, a member of the school's Biology Club, also threw the shotput on the track and field team, said Paul Orseth, a former Oxnard High track coach.

"I don't remember him as a great athlete," Orseth said. "I don't think it was a priority with him."

Bill Thrasher, who taught American government to Colbern, disagreed with former classmates of Colbern, saying he was just an average student.

"He came to class every day, did his assignments and did the best he could," Thrasher said.

Oxnard High School physics teacher Bill Wootton recalled discussing bombs with the then-high school student.

"He never really asked me ques-

tions," Wootton said. "It was more like he told me what he knew about bombs." Wootton could not recall the conversations in great detail.

"He was one of the more motivated students in my class," Wootton recalled. "He was fairly serious."

An Oxnard High School classmate of Colbern also described him as a "brilliant student" who talked of bomb-making with other students.

"He used to make bombs," Dale Reese said. Reese, 32, was a sophomore when Colbern was a senior. They were in the Biology Club together at Oxnard High.

"He was so smart that he was out there," Reese said. "He was also very strange."

Reese said Colbern did not associate much with other classmates.

"He was a geek, a brain," he said. "His favorite topic was chemistry."

Reese said a mutual friend, James Strickland, and Colbern were next-door neighbors and Strickland had told him of Colbern's fascination with bombs.

"Jim told me he was quite capable of making a bomb," he said. "I think he made nitroglycerin when

he was in high school."

Strickland, 32, who now lives in Camarillo, also was a sophomore when Colbern was a senior and both were members of the Biology Club.

Colbern kept snakes as pets, including a five-foot boa constrictor, Strickland said. And he remembers his former schoolmate as "weird."

Strickland told The Times that in the mid-1980s he accompanied Colbern on a weekend trip to the Arizona desert, where Colbern exploded small bombs he had made.

"That was our plan, to explode his fireworks and little bombs," Strickland said.

Strickland said Colbern had brought a larger bomb—a 100-pound device made of ammonium nitrate and diesel fuel along on the trip.

But Strickland said he and his older brother talked Colbern out of exploding it after a park ranger drove by the site where they had detonated the smaller bombs, which Strickland dubbed "vandals."

Strickland said the vandals illuminated the desert night with pur-

**Please see COLBERN, A21**

LOS ANGELES TIMES

# COLBERN

Continued from A20

ple light as they whizzed across the sky. The trio spent the weekend at a trailer owned by Colbern's family near Bullhead City and water skied during the day. But at night, the three exploded the many bombs Colbern crafted, Strickland said.

"When I first heard of that Oklahoma City building blowing up, I told friends I knew a guy who could make that kind of bomb," Strickland said.

He described Colbern as humorless, with a short temper.

"He couldn't keep his cool when we played Dungeons & Dragons," Strickland said.

Another former classmate said he remembers Colbern blowing up a locker at Oxnard High School with a small explosive.

"I remember him blowing up a locker," Brian Leish said. "That's my only real recollection of him in high school."

Leish, 35, said the last time he saw Colbern was at their 10-year high school reunion in 1988.

"At that time he was married and seemed happy," said Leish, who now lives in Laguna Nigel.

Not all of Colbern's former schoolmates remembered him in a negative light.

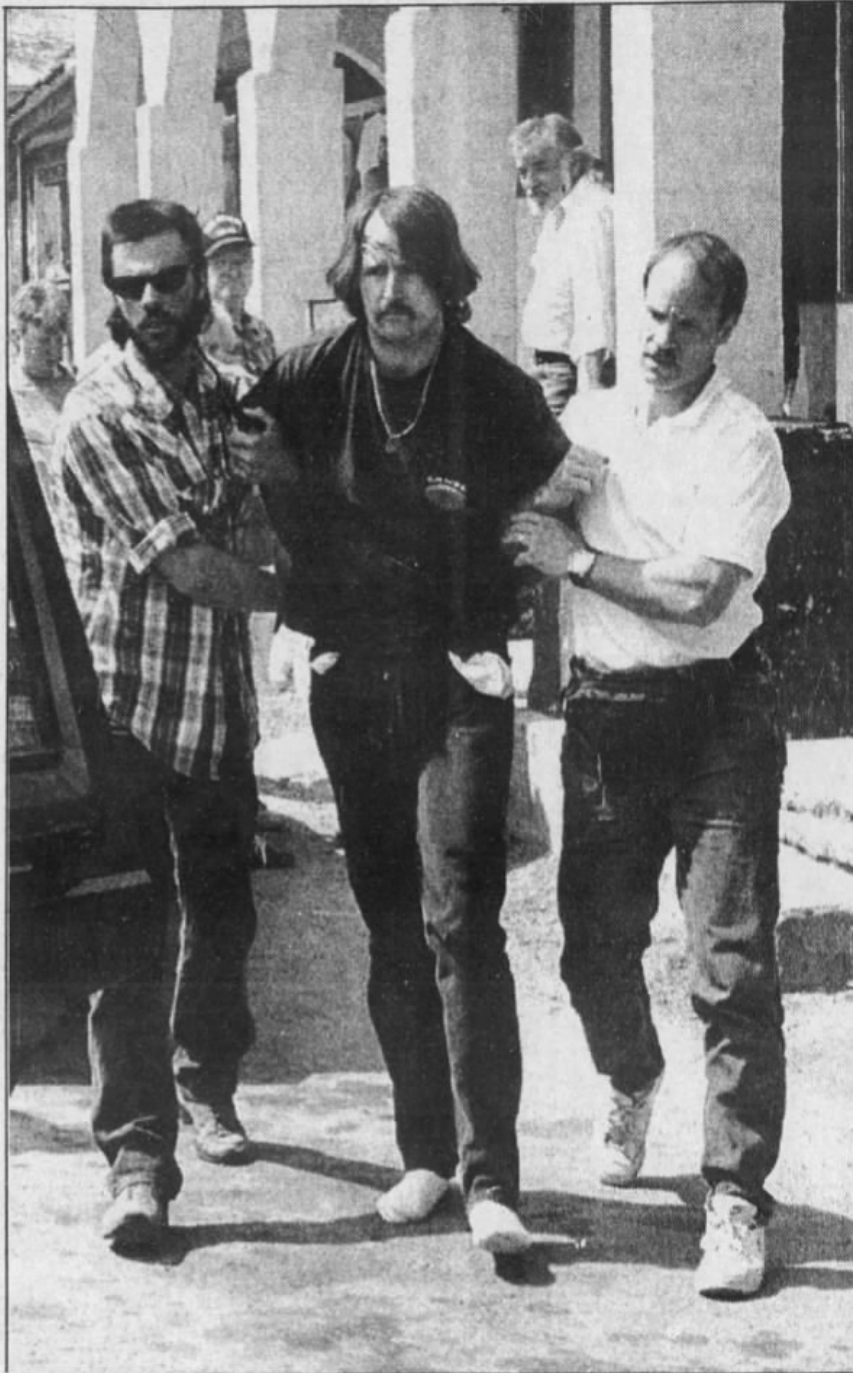
One former classmate, who did not want to be identified, said she was shocked to hear of his arrest.

"He was a very intelligent boy, an extremely intelligent boy, very knowledgeable," she said. "He was always very nice to me—I never had a problem with him."

She last saw him five or six years ago in Oxnard, but she did not speak to him. And she had little contact with Colbern since their senior year in high school. But her memories were positive.

"From what I remember of him he was a very nice guy," she said. "I'm quite shocked to hear he could be involved with the bombing."

**Alvarez is a Times staff writer and Elias is a correspondent. Staff writer Miguel Bustillo and correspondents Catherine Salliant, Barbara Murphy and David R. Baker also contributed to this story.**



Associated Press

Federal marshals arrest Steven Colbern in Oatman, Ariz., on Friday.

**TIMESLINK**  
 THE ONLINE SOURCE FOR SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

FOR A FREE TRIAL MONTH OF TIMESLINK,  
 CALL 1-800-792-LINK, EXT. 274.

REFINISH  
**STAINMASTERS**  
 plus  
 SUPERIOR STAIN & SOIL RESISTANCE