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## Biochemist Is Held on U.S. Weapons Charges

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TIMES STAFF WRITERS

PHOENIX—A gun enthusiast who spent more than seven months as a fugitive on felony weapons charges was ordered held without bail Saturday as federal agents continued an intensive investigation of his possible ties to the chief suspect in last month's deadly Oklahoma City bombing.

Steven Garrett Colbern, 35, a UCLA-educated biochemist who grew up in Oxnard, appeared dazed during his arraignment before a federal magistrate on charges unrelated to the Oklahoma City blast, which claimed 168 lives. Colbern was arrested after a struggle with federal officials Friday as part of a hunt for those involved in the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

Federal prosecutors and defense attorneys in Phoenix declined to say Saturday whether Colbern is considered a suspect or a witness,

or whether he is assisting authorities in their search for information about accused bomber Timothy J. McVeigh. Colbern remained in custody here pending a court hearing Tuesday to consider whether he should be granted bail, a move prosecutors are resisting.

But in Washington, sources familiar with the investigation downplayed Colbern's possible link to the bombing. So far, investigators have disclosed only one alleged connection between the two men: that McVeigh tried to contact Colbern last fall in Kingman, Ariz., where officials believe the bombing was planned.

The sources said they remain interested in Colbern's background and recent whereabouts, but pointed out that his physical appearance does not completely match that of the so-called John Doe No. 2, who was believed to have helped carry out the attack. Most notably, they said, Colbern has no arm tattoo,

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# PROBE

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"All we wanted to do was go camping," said William Harris of Ventura, one of 13 other boys in Oxnard Troop 205. "He was into nuclear fission."

Colbern grew up on Carty Drive in Oxnard, a quiet suburban street of well-trimmed lawns and stucco houses. His father, Robert, was an Army reservist and military history buff. Their next-door neighbor, Thomas Ward, was a gun collector who was once investigated on suspicion of plotting to assassinate former President George Bush. Ward was never charged in that matter, but later served a two-year federal jail sentence for possessing several machine guns.

Colbern, like McVeigh, has also spent time in recent months in or around Kingman, Ariz., where investigators believe the attack was planned.

So far, however, investigators have disclosed only one alleged connection between the two men. Federal sources, speaking Friday on the condition that they not be identified, said they are interested in Colbern because they have learned that McVeigh tried to contact him last fall in Kingman.

During much of the past year, sources said, Colbern lived in a mobile home in Bullhead City, about 30 miles west of Kingman, and in an abandoned shack in the tiny nearby town of Oatman, where he was arrested Friday while carrying a .22-caliber revolver.

In Washington, sources familiar with the investigation downplayed the possibility of linking Colbern to the bombing. In some ways, Colbern's photo on a U.S. Marshals' wanted poster resembles the so-called "John Doe No. 2," who was believed to have helped carry out the attack. But sources noted Saturday that Colbern has no arm tattoo, one of the identifying characteristics of John Doe No. 2.

Colbern's father said Saturday he has not heard from his son, but does not believe Steven was involved in the Oklahoma bombing.

"It would be out of character for him to be involved . . . unless he's doing things I don't know about," Robert Colbern said.

He said his son had not been in any other serious trouble with the law before his arrest last July in Upland on suspicion of carrying illegal weapons. Police had confiscated from Colbern's car a 9-millimeter handgun, a .22-caliber handgun, an assault-style rifle and



Associated Press

Steven Colbern, left, poses in the Mojave Desert in a 1993 photo. At right, his lawyer, public defender

a silencer, which is illegal under federal law. He failed to appear at a hearing on those charges and was then considered a fugitive.

Others who have known Colbern paint a picture of a man who seemed alienated from society. Though intelligent, perhaps even brilliant, Colbern suffered a series of personal failures in recent years, including lawsuits against him over soured real estate deals, bankruptcy and divorce. He was fascinated with firearms, explosives and reptiles, especially snakes.

Friends at Oxnard High School, where Colbern graduated in 1978, recall him as a quiet loner.

As a teen-age Boy Scout, William Harris hiked and camped with Colbern in the Santa Monica Mountains and described him as a "genius-type" who was fascinated with chemistry and bombs.

Harris said Colbern was an intellectual who kept to himself, but was friendly on a one-on-one basis. A Boy Scout for five years in Ventura County, Colbern made Eagle Scout in 1976. Colbern's name appears on a plaque at the foot of a flagpole he helped build for a Knights of Columbus lodge in Oxnard.

"I knew him for a couple of years," Harris said. "He wasn't a bad guy. . . . He just seemed like he was a little too smart for what he could handle mentally. He

seemed like he could snap."

Carl Ward Sr., who lives next-door to the Colberns on Oxnard's Carty Drive, doubted that Colbern was connected to the bombing. "We don't think Steve has anything to do with it," he said. "I think they'll kick this thing out."

Ward, a former Oxnard mayor, said he had little contact with Colbern. But he said his son Thomas shared an interest in military history with Colbern's father.

The friendship did not extend to the younger Colbern, said Ward's other son, Carl Ward Jr. "Steve called my brother a couple of times over the years, but I wouldn't call that a relationship," Carl Jr. said. "They wouldn't hang out together."

Federal authorities declined Saturday to say whether they plan to investigate Colbern's relationship with Thomas Ward.

Thomas Ward, 48, who recently moved back into his parents' home, was arrested for possessing illegal weapons on October 20, 1991. He served two years in federal prison.

At the time of his arrest, he was being investigated by the Secret Service acting on a tip that he was allegedly planning to shoot President Bush during a visit to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library near Simi Valley.

The investigation, however, failed to turn up any evidence of an

assassination plot, his older brother said.

"That turned out to be hogwash," Carl Ward Jr. said.

Even while attending UCLA in the 1980s, Colbern liked to wear combat fatigues and seemed to bear a deep hatred of government, women and non-whites, said a former roommate who asked not to be named.

"He was Mr. Anti-Government, and he would go into long tirades about the Jews, Mexicans and blacks too," said the former roommate. "Every ethnic group was inferior to whites."

Colbern talked of a worldwide "Jewish conspiracy" to consolidate wealth and political power, and he liked to boast of making weekend forays into the desert to fire automatic weapons, including machine guns, the roommate said.

"He was hugely anti-Semitic, and we would have long arguments with him," he said of Colbern, adding: "He would make the same points over and over. He was somebody who was obviously intelligent, but he had this hatred and you really couldn't figure out where it came from."

Colbern worked until last November in a medical research lab at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where he had been employed since mid-1993. He left that job volun-

tarily at the time he disappeared as a fugitive in the Upland incident.

In recent years, Colbern has lived off-and-on in a mobile home in Bullhead City, where he was frequently seen in fatigues and was receiving ammunition by mail, said neighbor Maybelle Hertig, 70.

FBI agents last week showed Hertig a picture of Colbern, and she said she identified him as her occasional neighbor. The agents then searched a brown pickup outside Colbern's trailer—a truck that, Hertig said, had not been moved for at least five months, when she last saw Colbern.

Though she now describes Colbern as similar in appearance to John Doe No. 2, Hertig said the resemblance did not occur to her immediately after the artists' rendering was released.

Colbern first began spending time at the trailer with his then-wife, Ava Hacopian Colbern, in 1986, Hertig said.

The couple apparently divided their time between Bullhead City and the Los Angeles area. Records show that the Colberns signed a deed of trust for \$93,100 with the Veterans Administration to buy a Long Beach house, although no record could be found of Colbern serving in the military.

Not long afterward, the Colberns showed signs of financial trouble. Court records indicate the Colberns defaulted on their loan and the VA took over the property. The Colberns were the target of at least two other judgments against them involving real estate transactions before they filed for bankruptcy in May of 1989, listing \$662,565 in debts.

The Colberns were divorced in early 1991. Since then, Steven Colbern has spent time at the Bullhead City trailer park with another man who also wore camouflage outfits, said Hertig.

As part of his divorce settlement, Colbern was given possession of two storage lockers in Bullhead City, where he kept his gun collection, Colbern's divorce attorney said.

In March, the contents of one of those 10-by-12-foot lockers sold at public auction because Colbern was behind on the \$67-a-month payments. Ralph Schwab of Ft. Mohave, Ariz., bought the items based on a glimpse of some aquariums inside.

In an interview, Schwab remembered being surprised to find boxes crammed with chemistry books, bomb manuals, volumes about military history, German-made gas masks—and pictures of Colbern posing nude with snakes and guns.

"There were all these books on explosives," said Schwab. "I mean, this guy was very learned; his background in college was big-time."

"I'm not one to judge the man, as far as being guilty, but he definitely had the knowledge, in my mind, that he could make the bombs. I even had chemistry equipment he had, different kinds of flasks and tubing and bottles that a regular chemist would have. He had order catalogues for chemical supplies."

After being spotted Friday on a bench, Colbern struggled and had to be wrestled to the ground by the three federal marshals who approached him, according to a spokesman for the U.S. Marshals Service. Colbern kicked one marshal in the jaw but did not fire the loaded, five-shot revolver he was carrying, the spokesman said.

At the arraignment Saturday, Colbern's arms appeared bruised, but he exhibited clean, collar-length hair and a trimmed mustache. In a voice barely audible, Colbern meekly answered "yes" when asked if he understood the charges against him. Those charges include the federal weapons complaint for possessing a silencer, as well as additional federal charges for fleeing.

Colbern told the court he did not wish to comment on the accusations.

Federal Magistrate Barry G. Silberman set the Tuesday hearing on prosecutors' request that Colbern be held without bail. Also to be decided is whether he will remain in Arizona to face charges of resisting arrest and being a fugitive in possession of a firearm before being returned to Los Angeles to face charges resulting from the Upland arrest.

Even while Colbern was being arraigned in Phoenix on Saturday, authorities in Mohave County were holding a former roommate of Colbern's in connection with a mysterious explosion that damaged a house outside Kingman on Feb. 21, Associated Press reported. Dennis Kemp Malzac, 37, was being held in lieu of \$50,000 bond on a felony charge of arson of an occupied structure, the AP reported. However, officials in Mohave County refused to comment Saturday on the arrest or its possible relevance to the Oklahoma City bombing case.

Times staff writers Jeff Brazil, David Ferrell, Ralph A. Frammolino, Eric Lichtblau and James Rainey in Los Angeles, Tracy Wilson in Ventura and Ronald J. Ostrow in Washington contributed to this story.