

Colbern made bombs in high school, classmate recalls

By Jeff Wilson
The Associated Press

OXNARD, Calif. — Steven Colbern's teachers at Oxnard High School had trouble remembering the nondescript teen-ager with black-rimmed glasses. But friends recall a strange loner fascinated by guns, snakes and bombs.

Colbern, 35, has now become a potentially significant figure in the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, the worst terrorist act on U.S. soil. He was arrested Friday in the tiny Arizona community of Oatman.

"We were talking at work about the Oklahoma City bombing, and when somebody said they'd used ammonium nitrate I said, 'I know a guy who knows how to make one of those,'" said John Strickland, 32, of nearby Camarillo, whose brother, James, was a high-school friend of Colbern.

Colbern was arraigned Saturday in Phoenix on charges stemming from an old federal firearms case and from a scuffle with agents during his Friday arrest. He was ordered held without bail pending a detention hearing scheduled for Tuesday.

"He was always one of the ones who was a little off-base. He was always messing around with chemicals," said Brad Friedley, who was in the same high-school graduating class with Colbern in 1978.

Longtime teachers at Oxnard High School only vaguely remembered Colbern.

"He was a typical student, and as an average student he came to class every day, listened to his teachers and did his homework," said Bill Thrasher, his social-studies teacher.

Physics teacher Bill Wootton recalled discussing bombs with Colbern.

"He never really asked me questions," Wootton said. "It was more

like he told me what he knew about bombs."

A classmate, Dale Reese, said, "He used to make bombs."

"He was so smart that he was out there," said Reese, who was in the Biology Club with Colbern. "He was also very strange. He was a geek, a brain."

In the mid-1980s, John Strickland said he and his brother accompanied Colbern on a weekend trip to Arizona's Lake Mohave. The trio stopped in the desert along the way, where Colbern detonated small homemade bombs, Strickland said Saturday.

Colbern had brought on the trip a 100-pound device made of ammonium nitrate, the same type of fertilizer used in Oklahoma City, and diesel fuel, Strickland said. But Colbern was talked out of exploding it.

Strickland also said Colbern had a short temper.

"He couldn't keep his cool when we played *Dungeons & Dragons*," he said of the role-playing game.

Colbern graduated with a chemistry degree from UCLA in 1989 and worked at Cedars-Sinai Research Institute in west Los Angeles until about six months ago.

He was described as eccentric, keeping snakes as pets. Bankruptcy documents filed on May 23, 1989, in Los Angeles show that he and his then-wife bred reptiles. The filing said the Colberns ran a business called Boa Connection out of their Oxnard home from 1987 to 1989.

Colbern, the son of Robert and Eva Colbern, was born in Illinois and moved to Oxnard when he was 3 years old. The elder Colbern is a 60-year-old colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve and a dentist for the California Department of Corrections.

"We don't believe what they are

saying," Colbern said outside his home Friday when asked about his son's possible link to the April 19 Oklahoma bombing. The distraught father, whose home was searched a day earlier by federal agents, said he hadn't seen or talked to his son for eight months.

Colbern was arrested on weapons charges last year, and federal agents said they began an intensive search for him after learning that the chief bombing suspect, Timothy McVeigh, tried to contact him last fall in Kingman.

Maybelle Hertig, 70, of Bullhead City, said that Colbern lived off and on in a mobile home near her and that he was frequently seen in fatigues.

Hertig said she was annoyed that Colbern once had a large box of ammunition sent to her by parcel post because he wasn't around to accept it.

Last July, Colbern was arrested in

San Bernardino County on a weapons charge.

During a routine traffic stop, police said Colbern was found carrying a knife and an illegal weapon. When an officer attempted to arrest Colbern, he put up such a struggle that five other officers were needed to subdue him, according to court records.

In Colbern's car, officers subsequently found a chrome silencer, a Jennings .22-caliber pistol, a Sig Sauer P-226 9mm pistol, order lists for gun parts and a mechanism used to convert a semiautomatic rifle to full automatic, which would make the weapon illegal.

In a compartment covered by carpet in the rear of the car, officers found an SKS assault rifle, several boxes of ammunition and a videotape of a Browning M2 .50-caliber machine gun on the floor of a living room, according to court records.