

MAN HELD WITHOUT BOND

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By Serge F. Kovaleski; William Claiborne

May 14, 1995

A federal magistrate today ordered California biochemist Steven Garrett Colbern held without bond in an old firearms case and on new federal charges while authorities explore his relationship with Timothy James McVeigh, a primary suspect in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Colbern, 35, a fugitive who was arrested Friday after pulling a fully loaded revolver and scuffling with U.S. marshals in a tiny Arizona mining town, has told authorities he knew McVeigh as "Tim Tuttle," a name the bombing suspect apparently used in a military surplus business he ran with Terry Lynn Nichols, another suspect in the Oklahoma City case. But Colbern, a heavily armed survivalist, has denied any connection to the massive federal building bombing, and authorities apparently have little evidence to link him to McVeigh or the April 19 explosion that killed 168 people.

At today's hearing, U.S. Attorney Janet Napolitano requested that Colbern be detained in federal custody, and Magistrate Barry G. Silverman scheduled a hearing for Tuesday. This effectively buys authorities more time to seek information from Colbern that might be relevant to their attempt to reconstruct the movements of McVeigh and his Army buddy, Nichols, in the months before the bombing.

Colbern abruptly quit his job as a medical researcher in downtown Los Angeles last fall and went into hiding among the gun-toting population of Oatman, Ariz., an old gold mining town near Kingman, where McVeigh lived before the bombing.

Oatman residents describe Colbern as an angry man, embittered over a failed marriage and zealous in his dislike for the federal government, a common sentiment in the isolated town of fewer than 200 people where he frequented a hotel bar.

His landlord and roommate, Preston Haney, described sitting in his trailer living room with Colbern watching early news accounts of the Oklahoma City bombing. Colbern's initial reaction was that "he kind of liked the idea of someone blowing up the feds."

But Haney, a 52-year-old ex-Marine and self-described survivalist, added, "I don't blame him. There are a lot of people around here who feel that way." Haney said Colbern was upset and near tears when he heard that children had been killed in the blast and seemed depressed at the rising death toll.

When asked if Colbern ever discussed a knowledge of making bombs, Haney said, "We talked about things. Yeah, he knew how to make them. After Oklahoma City, he said, Yeah, ammonium nitrate and fuel oil. I know how to do that.' But any farmer knows that. That doesn't mean anything."

Colbern drifted into the Arizona town last year and worked as a miner and dishwasher known only as Steve. In a search of his residence conducted shortly after his arrest Friday, federal authorities recovered four rifles, three handguns and 16,000 rounds of ammunition, including 4,000 bullets commonly used in assault rifles.

Officials also seized miscellaneous documents that they declined to describe and some evidence indicating that the residence might have been used as a laboratory to produce methamphetamine, a drug commonly known as "crank."

At his arraignment in U.S. District Court here, Colbern appeared expressionless as he stood in the packed courtroom, murmuring answers to questions from Silverman. Asked if he had money to hire a lawyer, Colbern replied: "No I don't, your honor."

Colbern, flanked by two federal public defenders, was wearing beige prison garb, his arms badly bruised and scratched, apparently from the scuffle with U.S. marshals.

According to the criminal complaint, Colbern was carrying a loaded blue steel Smith & Wesson .22-caliber revolver in his right pocket when federal authorities arrested him about 6 p.m. (EST) Friday. A two-page affidavit by deputy U.S. marshal William Knaust described Colbern's efforts to evade arrest.

Knaust "told Mr. Colbern that they wanted to talk to him because he looked like someone they were looking for," according to the affidavit. "Mr. Colbern mumbled something incoherent, turned and started walking away. . . . Mr. Colbern began looking left and right and appeared to be seeking an avenue of escape. Mr. Colbern then attempted to walk away," the affidavit said.

After Knaust blocked his path, Colbern "began physically resisting by attempting to push his way past Deputy Knaust," the document said. "At the time, Mr. Colbern was reaching into his right pocket with his right hand."

Another deputy marshal grabbed Colbern's right arm as Knaust grabbed his left arm. "Mr. Colbern continued to resist and shout for help," the affidavit said. Another deputy helped the two other marshals subdue Colbern. "During the struggle . . . he {Colbern} rolled in such a manner that Deputy Knaust struck his head on the sidewalk," according to the affidavit.

Neither Oklahoma City nor McVeigh were mentioned during the court proceeding, but law enforcement sources said investigators are exploring possible connections between McVeigh and Colbern.

According to several law enforcement sources, Colbern has ties to the Arizona Patriots militia, an armed citizen group that splintered several years ago and recently began to reemerge in scattered groups. His roommate Haney, however, disputed that notion, saying Colbern was a "loner" during his four to five months in Oatman.

There are reports that McVeigh tried to contact Colbern last fall while McVeigh was in the Kingman area. McVeigh also was known to associate with members of the Arizona militia and a similar group in Michigan.

In addition, the sources say, Colbern apparently used a commercial mail drop in Kingman -- the Mail Room at 1711 Stockman Road -- where McVeigh rented boxes under his own name and that of "Tim Tuttle," an alias he allegedly used to buy and sell guns. McVeigh and Nichols sold surplus military equipment in recent years at gun shows.

Authorities recovered a letter, contents unknown, McVeigh wrote to someone described as "S.C."

Authorities also have been tracking a tip that a witness had noticed a brown truck when McVeigh was arrested about 80 minutes after the Oklahoma City bombing on traffic and weapons charges. They were intrigued to learn that Colbern owned an old brown pickup truck, only to discover that the cobweb-covered truck has not been recently moved. A brown Chevrolet pickup is parked at a mobile home that Colbern's father, Robert, owns in Bullhead City, Ariz., an address the younger Colbern occasionally visited.

Law enforcement sources have been cautious in assessing these links, still stung by the arrest and subsequent release of two drifters whose movements had paralleled McVeigh's. "I don't know that we can tie him to anything," said one senior law enforcement official.

Robert Colbern today insisted his son is not involved in the Oklahoma City bombing. Standing outside a simple stucco house adorned with Christmas lights in Oxnard, Calif., the father said Colbern was "just a gun collector. . . ."

"It would be out of character. . . . I don't believe he was involved in the Oklahoma deal," he said in an interview. "He was carrying a silencer in his car and he ducked out because he got scared. . . ." Colbern said that the last time he saw his son was on Oct. 17, 1994, when his daughter got married and after that "he just disappeared."

John Strickland, whose brother, James, was a high school classmate of Colbern's, said the three of them made a few trips to Lake Mojave, Ariz., to go water-skiing in the 1980s but on one trip also "made some explosives." He said, Colbern "had 100 pounds of ammonium nitrate and diesel" fuel. Strickland said that after he and his brother protested, Colbern did not assemble or detonate the materials.

He described Colbern as "nerdy and quiet and smart but never threatening."

Haney said Colbern had told him he was "running from something," but never volunteered details. He said he never knew Colbern's last name, and that it never occurred to him to ask.

"That's the way this town is. Nobody knows last names here. A lot of people are hiding from something. I'm hiding from creditors," Haney said. Kovaleski reported from Phoenix and Claiborne from Oatman, Ariz. Staff writers Pierre Thomas in Washington and Nell Henderson in Los Angeles and special correspondent Kathryn Wexler in Los Angeles contributed to this report. CAPTION: Steven Garrett Colbern, held as authorities check ties to bombing suspect, is holding blasting caps in November 1993 photo. CAPTION: Federal marshals subdue Steven Garrett Colbern Friday outside hotel in Oatman, Ariz., on gun charges.