

Drifter Held in Arizona is Said to Have Had No Role In Bombing

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WASHINGTON -- Federal authorities have concluded that the armed drifter arrested last week on weapons charges in Arizona did not take part in the Oklahoma City bombing, but are hoping that he can guide them through the murky world of Timothy McVeigh, one of two men charged in the plot, law enforcement officials said Tuesday.

Federal prosecutors and defense lawyers for Steven Colbern, who was arrested Friday on a fugitive warrant unrelated to the bombing, have held preliminary discussions about the case against him, law enforcement officials said.

Although no agreement has been reached, those conversations could ultimately result in an offer of leniency to Colbern on the weapons offenses if he agreed to be a witness for the government, the officials said.

The possibility that the government might seek a negotiated settlement with Colbern seemed more likely Tuesday when federal prosecutors at a hearing in Phoenix did not seek to immediately transfer Colbern to California to face the gun charges in the jurisdiction in which they were filed.

Instead, a federal magistrate ordered Colbern held in custody and scheduled another hearing for May 26, enough time for both sides to determine whether they can settle the case with a plea bargain. Investigators said they remain interested in questioning Colbern, in search of insights into McVeigh's movements, associates and finances in the months before the bombing.

It was during that period, investigators say, that McVeigh slipped into a clandestine existence as he prepared for the attack.

So far, Colbern has acknowledged that he knew McVeigh but has denied any knowledge of the bombing.

Outwardly, the two men had little in common. Colbern grew up in Southern California and earned a degree in chemistry at UCLA. McVeigh was raised in upstate New York and enlisted in the Army.

But by the time they became acquainted in the towns around Kingman, Ariz., they shared a fascination with guns, extreme anger toward the government and an itinerant life.

Still, with few other promising leads in hand, investigators seemed convinced that the sparsely populated Kingman region, to which McVeigh returned after his

wanderings to other states, could hold a key to some remaining mysteries of the case, like how the plot originated and whether it extended beyond McVeigh and Terry Nichols, an Army friend of McVeigh's who has also been charged with the bombing.

Investigators have aggressively sought out acquaintances of McVeigh as part of their effort to compile a detailed chronology of his life, an effort complicated because McVeigh lived a nomadic life -- often using an alias -- and had few roots in a community, a job, a house or a family.

Investigators have checked the telephone records on freeway pay telephones McVeigh might have used in his travels on the chance that a call to a confederate might turn up on the telephone debit card McVeigh sometimes used.

Armed with photo spreads of McVeigh and a rogues' gallery of possible associates, agents have visited inexpensive motels, fast-food restaurants and convenience stores on interstates in a dozen states.

But the trail has regularly led back to Kingman, Ariz., where the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the two agencies leading the inquiry, have maintained a highly visible presence since the blast, questioning scores of residents who may have known McVeigh.

In the fall of 1994, witnesses have said, Colbern and McVeigh each attended the "Route 66 Swap Meet," a flea market where guns were sold and bought in open-air stalls.

McVeigh owned several weapons and was arrested after the bombing carrying a concealed Glock semiautomatic pistol.

Colbern was also a firearms devotee. He was carrying a .22-caliber pistol when he was arrested and agents later found seven weapons in his trailer.

But so far, none of the witnesses said they had seen the two men together