

Man Questioned in Bombing Freed in Separate Case

■ **Crime:** Steven Colbern of Oxnard served time on other weapon charges after arrest amid search for second Oklahoma blast suspect.

By RICHARD WARCHOL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

On the eve of opening arguments in the Oklahoma City bombing trial, an Oxnard native who was once the object of a nationwide manhunt for the alleged "John Doe No. 2" was released from federal prison.

Biochemist Steven Garrett Colbern was released Wednesday from the Federal Correctional Institution at Lompoc, 329 days early from a 27-month sentence on federal weapons and resisting arrest charges, U.S. Bureau of Prisons officials said. The charges were unrelated to the Oklahoma blast.

"I need to get my life back in order and that's going to be my priority," the 37-year-old Colbern said Thursday in a

brief interview at his parents' Oxnard home.

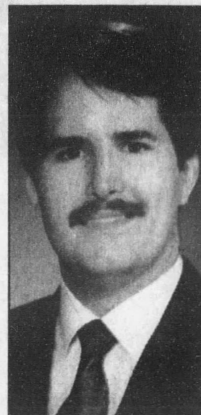
"I thought it was unfair that my parents were harassed and that the media assumed I was guilty of being involved in that bombing with no proof," said Colbern, dressed in T-shirt and shorts and sounding cordial and friendly as he answered questions on his parents' Carty Drive doorstep. "People are too obsessed with crime and punishment and they're too quick to jump to conclusions."

Although Colbern was questioned during an exhaustive federal probe into the April 1995 bombing, he never was publicly linked to Timothy McVeigh, the prime suspect in the blast.

Authorities arrested Colbern, a fugitive on firearms charges, amid an extensive search for a man they believed to have been an accomplice in the bombing. The suspect, dubbed simply John Doe No. 2, was believed to have accompanied McVeigh when he allegedly rented a Ryder truck used in the bombing.

On Feb. 9, 1996, Colbern was sentenced to two 27-month

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Steven Garrett Colbern, at left

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terms in the low-security federal prison in Lompoc after pleading guilty to federal weapons and resisting arrest charges.

The sentences were ordered to be served concurrently.

The weapons charge stemmed from a July 1994 arrest in Upland on suspicion of carrying illegal firearms. During a traffic stop, police confiscated a 9-millimeter handgun, a .22-caliber pistol, an SKS assault rifle, several boxes of ammunition and a chrome silencer, which is illegal under federal law.

Colbern failed to show up for a hearing on the charge and a federal fugitive warrant was issued for his arrest.

Federal authorities caught up with him seven months later, on May 12, 1995, when he was spotted sitting on a bench in the tiny Arizona town of Oatman.

Authorities said Colbern tried to leave and attempted to pull a fully loaded, .38-caliber revolver. He was wrestled to the ground by three federal marshals. In the process, Colbern kicked one of the deputies in the jaw, a U.S. Marshals Service spokesman said after the arrest.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, federal officials said at the time that their interest in Colbern was based on information that McVeigh had tried to contact him the previous fall in Kingman, Ariz., which authorities believe may have been a planning site for the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. "I didn't even know the guy," Colbern said. "I never met him."

Colbern was dropped as a suspect in the case after being questioned by authorities.

But during the questioning, he said, "It certainly seemed like someone up there, perhaps the ATF [the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms] was trying to pin that John Doe No. 2 thing on me.

"I just wanted to prove to them that I had nothing to do with the bombing," he said. "I just told the truth."

He recalled authorities telling him that his brown pickup truck and its license plate were caught on an enhanced videotape obtained by investigators.

Investigators from the FBI came to his home a day or two later and saw that the cobweb-ridden vehi-



In 1995, federal marshals arrested Steven Colbern on a warrant. He completed his prison term Wednesday.

cle hadn't been driven in months, he said.

FBI officials could not be reached for comment Thursday evening.

Colbern said he never was questioned again about the case, but he's not convinced his role is over. "They could come back at any time," he said.

In the weeks after the worst terrorist attack ever on U.S. soil, the manhunt for Colbern created a media frenzy at his parents' Oxnard home, which sits in a quiet, tree-lined neighborhood. Through interviews with past acquaintances, detail after detail of Colbern's past was dredged up.

There were the two real estate deals that went sour, his failed marriage, his reported love for guns, explosives and snakes. Others told of his penchant for military fatigues, his childhood reputation as a geeky science buff, and his deep hatred of government, women and nonwhites.

The Colberns' next-door neighbor, Carl Ward, said he will never forget it.

"It was half crazy is all," he said as he stood on his neatly manicured front lawn Thursday. "There wasn't anything in my mind that he would be in on a bombing deal like that. I thought it was just a bunch of hysteria."

Colbern's mother, Elaine, said suspicions that her son was involved in the case were unfair.

"We're just happy to have him home," she said. "I don't like to go back and think about it."

Colbern said what he missed most in prison were tools, but his mother said he has been catching up on lost time.

He spent Wednesday fixing the television in the living room, the air conditioning in his mother's car, and the family pool.

Colbern, who was released from prison early for good behavior and time served before his sentencing, still must spend three years of supervised release under the guidance of federal probation officials, according to his sentencing terms.

Colbern said he will meet with his federal probation officer today for the first time. He said he is unsure what conditions might be imposed, including restrictions on travel or how frequently he will have to meet with his probation officer.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Probation Office in Los Angeles said information on Colbern's probation terms is confidential. A copy of the conditions, contained in Colbern's criminal file, was not immediately available.

Colbern guessed it was just coincidence that he was released the day before opening arguments be-

gan in the Oklahoma City bombing trial.

"I don't want to speculate about Mr. McVeigh's guilt or innocence," he said, "but I think he, too, has perhaps been raked over the coals more than need be by the media."

Asked whether he still harbors a strong distrust of government, Colbern initially said he has more important things to do with his life than focus on politics, namely finding a job.

But later, he said questioning government is part of the nation's fabric.

"I think that criticizing the government has been the traditional American pastime," he said. "People characterize cynicism about government as bad. If our government is ever going to improve, bad things about it have to be pointed out and corrected."

Colbern, a UCLA-educated biochemist who once worked in a molecular biology research lab at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, said he plans to put all his energy toward finding a job in the chemical or oil industry and getting his life back on track.

He said he is under no illusions. He thinks it is unfair, but knows his criminal record could hurt his job prospects.

"It very well could," he said. "People tend to be fearful that you spent time in prison."