

**ONE OF the most notorious crimes of Jazz Age Los Angeles began quietly enough with a lost boy.**

**But the Walter Collins case would end up becoming the O.J. Simpson drama of its day, a horrifying crime that inspired a media frenzy and captivated the Southland. What started as the real-life tale of a missing child would eventually take on a much larger significance in the then-burgeoning city. Though the details may have faded into the miasma of time, its commentary on corruption and abuse of authority, on female empowerment and on the ultimate price of justice, continues to echo throughout the canyons of L.A.'s collective memory.**

**In the middle of it all was Christine Collins, Walter's mother, a victim turned unlikely heroine.**

**On March 10, 1928, Collins gave 9-year-old Walter a dime to see a movie. Collins, who lived in a middle-class Mount Washington neighborhood, was an anomaly for an era when women were still considered to suffer from the vapors. A handsome woman with prominent features, she was a single mom whose ex-husband sat in jail for helping to run a speak-easy. She was also a professional woman who worked at the telephone company and apparently prided herself on maintaining a nonemotional, businesslike manner when dealing with men in authority.**

**Walter disappeared that day, a fact that was chronicled in the Los Angeles Times several days later. Within weeks, the police (with the press watching) were conducting a massive manhunt and dragging Lincoln Park lake for Walter's body. Tips poured in, with people claiming to have seen the boy in a Glendale gas station, sitting in a back seat of a car, wrapped in newspaper -- and even as far away as San Francisco. The boy's father, Walter J.S. Collins, floated the theory that some of his former inmates kidnapped his son, perhaps out of revenge.**

**In August, the LAPD delivered a boy to Christine Collins, her putative son who'd been found in Illinois. It was an apparent coup for the Los Angeles Police Department, which had routinely suffered bad press and whose chief, James Davis, was famous (now infamous) for having created only two years before a 50-man "gun squad" to go after the city's criminal element with the express command to bring in the purported crooks "dead, not alive."**

**Upon seeing the proffered child, Collins, according to a press account from that time, immediately stated, "I do not think that is my son." But, pressured by the LAPD, she took the boy home. Three weeks later, she returned the child to the LAPD, armed with dental records of her actual son, and statements from people who knew Walter. Collins unwittingly initiated what would become a veritable media storm, which ended with a court fight that lasted a decade, and a new state law, but never definitively resolved -- at least for Collins -- what happened to Walter.**

**Now her story is being told in the new Clint Eastwood film, "Changeling," which opens Friday. (It follows the true story, so if you're worried about plot spoilers, think twice before reading further.) The title comes from European folklore; a "changeling" was the offspring of a fairy or troll secretly swapped for a human child. The film stars Angelina Jolie as Collins and John Malkovich as the Rev. Gustav Briegleb, a pastor with a radio pulpit who took up Collins' cause.**

**The Collins story was literally unearthed out of city and court archives by journalist turned screenwriter J. Michael Straczynski, who had been tipped off by a former source to transcripts from a City Council hearing about the Collins case. Straczynski, who wrote for The Times and Herald Examiner, was an unlikely choice to be Collins' unofficial historian, given that his main credits were for the sci-fi TV show "Babylon 5." But he quickly became fascinated by her story and spent a year trawling through newspapers and records, piecing together an elaborate tapestry.**

**"I was so caught up by the raw, naked courage she showed, that she fought so hard for her son, and nobody remembered this. It was outrageous," says Straczynski. So many of Collins' travails, he says, stem from the fact that she was a woman who didn't conform to what men -- in this case the LAPD -- expected her to be like.**

**Collins was treated brutally by the police. When she tried to give back the child, the captain in charge of the case, J.J. Jones, ridiculed her. According to court testimony, he told her, "What are you trying to do, make fools out of us all? Or are you trying to shirk your duty as a mother and have the state provide for your son? You are the most cruel-hearted woman I've ever known."**

**Collins testified that Jones told her, "You're insane and ought to be in a madhouse. You're under arrest and I'm going to send you to the psychopathic ward." Jones threw Collins in the psych ward of the Los Angeles County General Hospital -- i.e., the insane asylum -- where she remained for about a week.**

**"At the time, it was very easy for the police to throw anyone they didn't like into the asylum for causing problems," says Straczynski. "They did it more with women than men. The reality is if Christine had been a single dad, this would have never happened."**

**Meanwhile, under police questioning, the child who had been returned to Collins admitted that he was actually Arthur Hutchins, a 12-year-old runaway from Illinois who had pretended to be Walter because he wanted to go to Los Angeles and see cowboy star Tom Mix.**

**Around this time, the police also inadvertently discovered a serial killer, Gordon Stewart Northcott, operating from a rundown chicken farm in Wineville, a small community near Riverside. Northcott preyed on young boys, sexually abusing and ultimately killing an unknown number of them; estimates run as high as 20. Northcott's nephew, Sanford Clark, who'd been coerced into being his accomplice, finally alerted the police to the atrocities. Clark said one of the victims was Walter Collins.**

**Christine Collins sued the city, Davis and Jones for false imprisonment, and 1,000 furious citizens attended a hearing about the Collins case before the City Council's health and welfare committee. Giant speakers had to be hung from the outside of City Hall to accommodate the overflow crowds. Undoubtedly, the public's fascination was stoked by the radio preacher Briegleb, who loved to rail not only against LAPD corruption but also other salacious topics of the day, such as film star Fatty Arbuckle's rape trial and sex in the movies.**

**"Everybody around her had an agenda. The police had an agenda. Briegleb had an agenda," says Straczynski. "The only clear voice in the entire thing was her voice saying, 'Where is my son?' "**

**CLINT EASTWOOD found the real Northcott ranch still in existence in Mira Loma in Riverside County. In 1930, the citizens of Wineville changed the name of their farming community to Mira Loma, to get rid of the notoriety caused by the Northcott murders.**

**"It was creepy," says the veteran director-actor, who'd been taken there by a historian from the Riverside Historical Society. "It looks exactly the same, though the house has been slightly modified. We went around back and there were these chicken coops."**

**The coops are where Northcott kept and murdered his victims. "I don't know if they were the same ones, but they were old, very rustic chicken coops," Eastwood says. No one appeared to be home, but Eastwood decided not to knock on the door. He didn't know how the occupants would feel about having Clint Eastwood show up on their doorstep and announce they lived in the former home of a notorious child killer. "I didn't want to intrude on these people's life," he says.**

**For Eastwood, who was given Straczynski's spec script by producers Brian Grazer and Ron Howard, the Collins tale reminded him of the kind of great women's stories he saw on the screen growing up in Northern California in the 1940s. "You had a lot of women protagonists in stories that were dramatic," says Eastwood, speaking of individualists like Bette Davis and Ingrid Bergman. "I always liked those kind of stories, and we got away from them over the years. This was a chance to do one of those kind of stories."**

**And it happened also to be true. Straczynski had strategically placed headlines from the newspapers of the day throughout his script. "The truth is stranger than fiction in a lot of ways," says Eastwood. "There was a certain vulnerability for women in general at that time. [Collins] didn't really have a chance. When you look at the pictures of her sitting there with that bogus child, smiling, you think, 'How did they get her to do that?'"**

**"Changeling" is actually Eastwood's second film -- after "Mystic River" -- that deals with a child's disappearance, and the torment it leaves behind. "Crimes against children are the most hideous of all. I think they would be on the top of my list of justification for capital punishment," says the 78-year-old Eastwood, who has three children. "It's hard to think about. When you're doing the movie, you're just using your imagination to figure out what the trauma was like. [Angelina Jolie] was very affected by it, because she is a mother. You don't even have to be a mother to be affected. I never cease to be amazed how blasé people can be about the victims of crime."**

**When Eastwood came to the film, he learned that there were five actresses vying for the role of Collins. Once he realized that Jolie was one of them, he said, "Let's not go any further. I like her very much. She'd do a nice job."**

**Eastwood, who shot the film primarily around Southern California, did make the choice to only imply the depravity of Northcott's crimes, which included child sexual abuse. "I tried to show the brutalizing in a way that wasn't as brutal as it really was," says the director.**

**During Northcott's trial, Sanford Clark testified about the "sexual abuse" inflicted on the**

children, says Straczynski. "It was pretty horrific," says the writer, who believes that Northcott had an incestuous relationship with his mother, Louisa, who later claimed to have killed Walter Collins, but Straczynski believes that she was just trying to save her son.

Once it was shown that the boy returned to her was not her son, Collins improbably waged war on the establishment. The Police Commission held a hearing but refused to discipline Jones. Later, however, the City Council's health and welfare committee recommended the removal of both Jones and Chief Davis. After two trials, a judge eventually ordered Jones to pay Collins \$10,800, but he never paid. He and Davis were eventually reinstated to the LAPD, with Davis becoming chief again in 1933.

More important, in the wake of Collins' incarceration, the California Legislature passed a bill that prohibited the police from throwing a person into a psychiatric facility without a warrant.

Eastwood believes that Collins was killed on the Northcott ranch, but the boy's body was never found. Unlike some of Northcott's other victims, none of Walter Collins' possessions or trace elements were found there. Throughout her life, Christine Collins maintained hope that her son was alive, and continued to search for him.

Northcott, notes Eastwood, tormented Collins to the very end. Citing a memoir by Quentin Duffy, a San Quentin warden, Eastwood notes that Northcott invited Collins and another mother to see him in jail right before his execution in 1930. "He messed with their brains. [Northcott] led them to believe he would give them closure and he didn't. He jerked them around." In fact, the killer again insisted he was innocent.

Says Eastwood, "It was his last sadistic act."