

Chicken coop murders: the real story behind 'changeling'

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The Wineville Chicken Coop Murders are one of the most notorious crimes in California state history. It is a story of deceit and horror and above all- corruption of one of the most unjust tyrannies in the United States- the Los Angeles Police Department. The drama and secrets involved are still being uncovered today. The movie, Changeling, is in my opinion a verifiable source, though it only skims the depth of the real drama. The twisted workings of Gordon Stewart Northcott's mind and family politics are the result of two books.

Nothing is Strange With You details more about Northcott's dark past. The other book, The Road Out Of Hell, is about Sanford Clark's recovery. Sanford Clark was a victim of his uncle, Northcott's, devious acts. When he was thirteen, Clark was kidnapped by his Uncle and brought down to a ranch in Wineville, now Mira Loma, where he was severely abused. A little after Clark moved in, Northcott went scouting for young boys and then would bring them back the ranch. The boys always felt comfortable getting in the car with Northcott seeing young Clark sitting in the passenger seat.

Northcott usually made up a story such as, " Your parents were in a terrible car accident and they asked me to bring you to the hospital to see you, hop in, I'll drive you." The adolescent, naive boys respectfully obeyed, never to be seen from again. One such boy was Walter Collins. On March 10, 1928, nine-year-old Walter went missing while his mother was working as a telephone operator. She left him with a few coins to go see a movie and promised to be back soon. When she arrived home, Walter was gone.

She went out looking for him for hours and when he failed to show she called the police, where they stated that the child must be missing for 24 hours before they commenced a search. Outraged, Collins went public in a desperate hunt for her son. Captain JJ Jones of the LAPD returned her a boy of similar appearance. The boy, Arthur Hutchins, claimed to be Walter in order to see his Hollywood hero, Tom Mix, and to get away from his stepmother. Collins, armed with testimonies from dentists and teachers concluded that this boy was not her son. Embarrassed by their mistake, Jones had Collins thrown into a psycho ward.

Meanwhile, the real Walter was on the ranch in Wineville. Clark had been sought out by the Police by a tip that stated he was an illegal immigrant from Canada. Upon questioning him, Clark broke down and relayed the hideous events that had taken place in the chicken coops. When shown pictures of missing boys, Clark pointed out Walter as one of the victims. As word reached the LAPD, Collins was immediately released, much to the humiliation of the police. While Jones tried to regain his footing with the peoples' trust, the chicken coops were being scoured.

Enough gory evidence was found in order to indict the Northcotts. And so the Murder Trial began. Much to the people's surprise, Collins had little to do with the trial. As it was, Collins and her battle with the LAPD seemed stationed on a different level with the murders; although in the end they would all tie together in a gruesome package. Northcott was a terror in the trial.

He amused himself by playing mind games with the victim's parents, and always danced around the police, neither denying nor confirming anything. If he were to admit to some deed, he retracted his statement later. His mother followed the same set of unruly guidelines. Northcott did sign a slip of paper confessing to the murder of an unidentified Mexican youth. By the end of the stretch, Northcott was convicted of slaying the Winslow brothers, ten and twelve respectively, and a Mexican boy. The elder Northcott was found guilty to murdering little Walter Collins.

Proof that the Winslow boys were found on the ranch was obvious. One of the boys' ukuleles was discovered, smashed on the property, a letter to their parents saying that they were fine wedged in a library book. Bits of human remains were also present at the crime scene. However, nothing of Walter was ever certainly found. Not a bone, not a belonging.

Clark's word and the Elder Northcott's "confession" (she is believed to admitting in slaying Walter only to save her son), was the only thing that led detectives to believe the boy was murdered at the ranch. Louis Northcott was sentenced to life at San Quentin. She was released early and lived out the rest of her existence in obscurity. Northcott was sentenced to death. On the day he was supposed to hang, he called in Collins to tell her what really happened to her son. When she arrived, he laughed in her face and denied ever touching her boy.

She left unsatisfied and broken while Northcott was hanged. As he teetered up the steps, he whimpered and cried. His hanging was one of the last in California before it was outlawed. Clark was sent to a detention facility where

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he learned to deal with his past. When he grew up, he decided not to have children in order to “ not pass down the family sickness.

“ He lived a quiet, humble life, adopting two children and marrying a woman named June. On Clark’s death bed, his son told him he loved him, and Clark replied, still scarred and sickened from his experience almost seventy years ago, ““ Why would you?”” Captain JJ Jones of the LAPD was shunned by the world. He was ordered to compensate Collins for injustice, but never paid up. Collins, who was treated with such despicability, was never awarded anything. She never found her son.

She remarried, but never again had a child. Collins lived a quiet, uneventful life. She all but vanished from the public eye and can only be unearthed through old public records. Her date of death varies, but we do know she still died with hope for her little boy. I find this story interesting.

When I first started to read it, I felt like a fly getting wound tighter and tighter into a web of lies, hope, survival, and cruelty. The indecent acts of the LAPD both disgust and enlighten me to the fact that humans are selfish. Jones cared more about his public image than he did of an innocent child gone lost. Human nature can both be devious and, at times, optimistic. Sanford Clark gives me my faith in humanity. Dragged through a mind-bogglingly sadistic two years, he had the courage and devotion in making his life the best it could be.

Instead of following in his Uncle's vicious footsteps, he contributed to his community and taught his children the joy of doing right by people. Collins is someone I look up to. She is the definition of never giving up.