

Los Angeles Times

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To the judges,

Long before there was Britney Spears, Gary Coleman or Lindsay Lohan, there was Lora Lee Michel, a child star in the 1940s. At 7, she was billed as a “sensation” and called the next Shirley Temple. But the promise of Michel’s fame turned to notoriety. She became the subject of a sensational custody trial and just before her 10th birthday, a judge ordered her to leave Hollywood and return to Texas, where at 22 she was arrested. Then she vanished.

The genesis of the story began in the summer of 2021, when a representative from the family reached out to the Los Angeles Times. The family had hit a wall in their efforts to find Lora Lee and since The Times had covered the custody and abuse trials extensively in 1950, they asked if a reporter would be interested in the story. Perman was deeply intrigued. She reached out to the family and then flew to Texas and began digging. She spent a year painstakingly reporting out this 80-year-old mystery, through interviews, court filings, letters, archives and genealogy reports. Michel’s life story was a classic tale of childhood stardom and the ongoing perils of child actors set against the backdrop of the Golden Age of Hollywood – before protections were established for minors. But it was also the story of a family, its search for answers and buried secrets.

This powerful narrative, published May 19 [online](#) and in print May 22 (Sunday A1), was one of the most-read Los Angeles Times stories in 2022. The story received thousands of social media mentions on Twitter and Facebook as well as correspondence from readers.

Here’s a sample of reader response:

“This was one of the best and most heart-wrenching articles that I have ever read,” [tweeted Erica D.](#)

“Unreal work, one of the best pieces I’ve read in a long time. Heartbreaking, but such great work solving this puzzle for the family,” [tweeted Justin Hammond.](#)

“Your article about Lora Lee was jaw dropping and riveting. It was a roller coaster of an article that I couldn’t put down,” wrote reader Chris Woodall in an email.

The story was adapted into a [two-part podcast for The Times](#) and was featured in a news segment on [Spectrum News 1](#), the “Forgotten Hollywood” podcast as well as several local Texas newspapers. [Apple News](#) recorded a dramatic audio version of the story. [Longreads](#) named it a top 5 editors’ pick, calling it “a riveting story of a child star who went off the rails. Told by Stacy Perman with great sensitivity and care, the full story of Lora Lee Michel is finally pieced together.” There has been interest in adapting the article into a film.

Texas Monthly also included the piece in the “Stories We Wish We’d Published This Year.”

“I started out skimming and ended up devouring all 10,454 words of Stacy Perman’s investigation into Lora Lee’s life – her troubled early childhood in Schulenberg, her rise to stardom in Hollywood, and the court order that sent her back to Texas at age 9, kicking off a life of instability, crime, and loneliness,” the Texas Monthly citation read.

We are proud to submit this work for your consideration.

Sincerely,

