

The riot that predated Stonewall, 50 years later

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Gene Compton's Cafeteria, which sat on the corner of Turk and Taylor streets some decades back, was an all-night diner with big windows. It was the sort of place where the waitresses wore crisp uniforms and a cup of coffee didn't cost more than a dime. It was also bright, and that was fine with the queens and the hustlers and the hair fairies and the queers who would crowd around the tables at night.

"It was a good place to be seen," says Tamara Ching, one of a handful of people who remembers the place, "to let people know that you were alive, that you survived the night."

If you were to go back to this corner today, you wouldn't find much, just a big blue building with the corner doors boarded up. But if you happened to look down, you might notice a plaque sunk into the sidewalk, marking this corner as the site of something called the "Compton's Cafeteria Riot."

In June 1969, patrons at New York's Stonewall Inn spent two nights rioting after police raided the Greenwich Village bar one time too many. The Stonewall Riots are generally acknowledged as the beginning of the modern gay liberation movement. But history is too complicated for neat edges, and in the years leading up to Stonewall, other stories played out in places like Los Angeles, Philadelphia — and San Francisco's Tenderloin area.

Acceptance in Tenderloin

Three years earlier, on a “hot August night” in 1966 (the exact date has been lost to time) hustlers and transgender women (before “transgender” was a word in general use) fought police harassment, shattering the cafeteria's windows, lighting a newsstand on fire and destroying a patrol car. Nearly everybody knows about Stonewall — President Obama declared the site a national monument Friday — but that night at Compton's, 50 years ago in August, is also part of the long history of struggle.



Susan Stryker is the historian who helped uncover the story of the Compton's Cafeteria Riot photographed in her home on Thursday, June 9, 2016 in her home in San Francisco, California.

Michael Noble Jr./The Chronicle

History only becomes history in the retelling, and for many years, the story behind Compton's Cafeteria was largely forgotten. If it weren't for historian Susan Stryker, it might have been lost completely.

On a spring afternoon, under a clear sky, Stryker sips a beer on the porch of her Bernal Heights home. She's casual and frank as she talks about the rediscovery of Compton's, which begins in the stacks of San Francisco's GLBT Historical Society. (Stryker spent a good chunk of the '90s and beyond there, first as a volunteer and later as the first paid director.) In 1992, she'd finished up her doctorate at UC Berkeley, but couldn't find a job. She was newly out as a trans woman and, she says, "employment discrimination is a really real thing." So Stryker decided to read through the archive. All of it. "I have turned every page," she says. "I can't say I've read every word."

Her first hint that something called the "Compton's Cafeteria Riot" happened came in the form of a small notation in somebody's abandoned effort to create a gay chronology. "At Compton's Cafeteria, in August of 1966, gays and lesbians fought back against the police," it read. The note was enough to get Stryker's attention.

The couple of dozen blocks that make up the Tenderloin neighborhood have always been known for vice, but in the 1950s, as the gambling economy crumbled, it became a home for the sort of folks who couldn't find one anywhere else. People came from all over — from places as near as San Pablo and as far as Appalachia. "Kerouac said there was a place for me, so I came to find out," says Aleshia Brevard, who moved from Tennessee to a small place on Geary Street.

"The Tenderloin accepted everybody," Ching says. She'd grown up in San Francisco, an androgynous kid with a moon-shape face and high cheekbones. After her family moved to San Pablo, she'd take the bus in and crash with friends. The freedom was worth the commute. "The Tenderloin was the central place of queerness. All the gay people, all the poor people, all the elderly, all the disabled lived in the Tenderloin."



Felicia Elizondo shows her photo album where she was in Coronado in the navy during the sixties at home on Friday, June 17, 2016 in San Francisco, Calif.

Liz Hafalia/The Chronicle

Growing up, Felicia Elizondo got called all the names — sissy, queer, *joto*. She came to the Tenderloin for the first time in 1963, a high schooler chasing a date up from San Jose. “I saw all these people and I was like, ‘Oh, my God. There’s a lot of people like me here in San Francisco.’” She started cutting class, taking the Greyhound bus to the depot at Seventh and Market streets. It wasn’t long before she and some friends had met a man name Cyril. He took them up to his room, and they watched as he teased his hair and put on an angora sweater and skintight pants. “He called himself a hair fairy.” Pretty soon she was doing the same.

Both Elizondo and Ching ended up working the streets as women. Ching can still list them, rapid fire: Eddy, Turk, Ellis, O’Farrell, Mason, Taylor — never outside those, never on Market Street, where the boys worked. “They wouldn’t hire us anywhere,” Elizondo says. “We were just trying to survive. We were a whole bunch of people trying to figure out what the f— we were and who we were.”

Collective resistance

For whatever reason — perhaps the promise of a story involving people who were something like herself — that mention of a riot at Compton's stuck in Stryker's mind. A few years later, as she looked through a program (dated June 25, 1972) from San Francisco's first Gay Pride Parade, she came across something more substantial. At the center of the program was an article that read, in part, "We're here to celebrate the uprising at Stonewall, but don't forget that gay militancy and gay pride started in San Francisco three years earlier." The piece went on to describe a "hot August night" when "drag queens rose up angry at oppression by the police ..."

"I go to the newspapers, I check the weather reports," Stryker says. "There are no hot August nights in 1966." Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that this was something. So she kept digging. In 1998, as part of the requirements for a postdoctoral fellowship, she pitched a documentary about San Francisco trans history and recruited her friend Victor Silverman to work on the project with her. After some time, they decided to focus solely on the riot.

"There were traces of memory in the community about Compton's, about Compton's being kind of a queer hangout," Stryker says. They were able to piece a narrative together, but outsider history can be hard to verify. These stories, stories on the fringes, don't always add up the way we want them to. There aren't always photographs or articles or interviews to rely on. The Chronicle didn't print a word about the riot. Herb Caen mentioned that the cafeteria had been "picketed by Gay Lib for rousting the tray-gay boys," but that came years later, in August 1972 — part of an item about Compton's closing after 20 years.

Eventually, though, Stryker and Silverman caught a break in Amanda St. Jaymes, a woman who ran a Tenderloin hotel. She'd been at the diner during the riot, and her story, with no prompting, lined up exactly with what they'd found.

"As soon as we got that interview," Stryker says, "we were like, that's it, we have it."

Compton's Cafeteria might not have looked like much, but for the people living on the edges, it was special. "Everybody hung out at Compton's," Elizondo says. "It was the center of information. You could come in, when all the girls were sitting down in Compton's, and strut your stuff, or show off your husband. It was just utopia. We could be who we were."

When you worked those streets, you had to accept some truths. You had to accept that getting arrested meant being humiliated, it meant not working for a weekend. You had to accept that there might be awful men waiting for you, that if you disappeared, the police might not come looking.

"We had to survive, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute," Ching says.



Tamara Ching pictured June 22, 2016 in the Tenderloin where she has had a long history of transgender activism in San Francisco, Calif. Ching used to hang out in Compton's Cafeteria, where the Compton's Cafeteria Riot took place. Leah Millis/The Chronicle

“It was just scary,” Elizondo says. “A lot of girls didn’t make it.”

Compton’s was usually a place away from all that, somewhere safe at the end of a long the night.

In 2005, Stryker and Silverman released their documentary. They called it “Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria.” The two people they interviewed who saw the queens and hustlers rise up that night — St. Jaymes and an officer named Elliot Blackstone — have since died. “I think, at this point, it’s not a living memory anymore,” Stryker says. “It’s a historical memory.” But there is the film, and in it St. Jaymes describes the scene at Compton’s that night after an officer messed with a queen drinking coffee.

In the days and months and years leading up to the riot, a lot had been changing. “Homophile” groups like the Tavern Guild and the Society for Individual Rights had been organizing. Vanguard, a group of radical gay youths, had just formed. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing. Glide Memorial Church had begun welcoming the Tenderloin’s disenfranchised.

To put it simply, people were feeling bolder — that queen with the coffee cup in her hand included. She threw it in the officer's face.

"There was tables turned over," St. Jaymes says. "All the sugar shakers went through the windows and the glass doors. I think I put a sugar shaker through one of those windows." Police called for backup, but the patrons spilled out on the street and kept fighting. By the end of the night, according to reports, a newsstand had been set on fire and a police car was destroyed. It was, Stryker says in the documentary, "the first known instance of collective militant queer resistance to police in United State history."

Stryker dug into the time after the riot and found that city services catering to trans women and other queer people increased. That they had access to things as simple as ID cards and as central as hormone therapy. That the police began to act more compassionately. Whether any of this was the result of what happened at Compton's is hard, maybe impossible, to say. You can prove sequence, Stryker says, but not causality.

But maybe that's not the point. Maybe the point, as prominent transgender activist Cecilia Chung put it, is this: "We should not try to pinpoint, so hard, one single event in history as what defines the movement. There are actually many, many events that demonstrate the resilience of our community."

One of the things that pushed Stryker to record this story, to spend years investigating whispers, was a hope that she might, as she put it, "make history in a way that historians don't usually get to make history. I wanted Compton's to enter historical memory." By most any measure, she's succeeded.

On June 9, in a speech to mark Gay Pride Month, President Obama talked about the sorts of people who "ruffle feathers in the name of justice and equality." He then, in the same breath as Selma, Seneca Falls and Stonewall Inn, mentioned "Compton's Cafe."

One day later, Elizondo sent out an email to dozens of people. It was a bit jagged, line breaks and spaces where they might not have belonged. "First time I've ever heard of my President Obama mention Compton's Cafe." She had started crying when she heard about the speech, she said. The Compton's Cafeteria Riot had become history.

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