

August 2020



Inside Gene Compton's cafeteria,
San Francisco, ca. 1966.

From Archival Silence to Screaming Queens: Reconstructing the Compton's Cafeteria Riot

By Isaac Fellman & Susan Stryker

On an August evening in 1966, three years before the Stonewall riots in New York City, the patrons of the Compton's Cafeteria on Taylor and Turk Streets in San Francisco's Tenderloin district fought back against police harassment. Little documentary evidence survives of this key moment in transgender history. The photograph above from the GLBT Historical Society's archives is an extremely rare still of the interior of the Compton's location in question, and the exact date the riot occurred has never been determined.

Our archives contain much of the documentation that does survive, which enabled historian and former GLBT Historical Society executive director Susan Stryker to research the event in the early 2000s. Together with Victor Silverman, Stryker produced the Emmy Award-winning 2005 documentary *Screaming Queens*, which succeeded in bringing the riot

to greater public awareness. Our [special program](#) on August 5 features a screening of *Screaming Queens* and a conversation with Stryker.

Reference archivist Isaac Fellman, who has been working extensively with our transgender-related collections, interviewed Stryker about how she uncovered the legacy of Compton's.

The story of Compton's exposes gaps in archives; it exists in memory, but official sources, records and contemporary news reporting are scarce. Did this scarcity influence your process and philosophy as a historian?

The scarcity of traditional primary-document sources really did require me to embrace creative and nontraditional research methodologies. One of the most important strategies was simply walking in the neighborhood, studying San Francisco's urban history, using the GLBT Historical Society's [sites database](#) to map historic trans-serving bars and SROs, and reading a lot of spatial and architectural theory. I was particularly informed by the work of Bernard Tschumi, who writes a lot about the relationship between space and event — how the built environment structures what happens.

It was coming to understand the Tenderloin as a place, seeing how trans people were situated there, the conditions of their lives, that gave a depth and richness of context to the meager clues about the riot itself that were available in primary print sources. We were eventually able to corroborate those through oral-history work, and in locating some archival media sources that had not previously been considered as primary-source materials.

How did you find the interviewees for *Screaming Queens*?

I'd met former San Francisco Police Department officer Elliot Blackstone through Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, and had done an oral history with him years before *Screaming Queens*. That interview is what became "MTF Transgender Activism in the Tenderloin," an article published in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* back in 1998. Similarly, Reverend Ed Hansen was somebody I was able to connect with through Paul Gabriel's amazing oral-history work with members of the mid-1960s homophile community. Suzy Cook, Tamara Ching and Aleshia Brevard were just women I'd met socially through the trans community. Felicia Elizondo attended an early work-in-progress presentation, and contacted Victor Silverman and me. She then put us in touch with Amanda St. Jaymes.

Have the tactics police use against trans and gender-nonconforming people changed since the 1960s?

The biggest change in police tactics directed against trans people then and now is that then the police didn't feel the need to hide, dissemble, cover up or spin the mistreatment of trans people, because they assumed that nobody cared and they could act with impunity. Now there's a bit more of a "cover-your-ass" attitude, and a lot of lip service to respect for diversity and equality. But nothing has fundamentally changed. They do not provide "public safety" for trans and gender-

nonconforming folks. I'm very much in favor of police and prison abolitionism.

Isaac Fellman is the reference archivist at the GLBT Historical Society.

Susan Stryker is associate professor of gender and women's studies at the University of Arizona.

From the Staff

Leaving a Legacy: A Chat With Randy Alfred



By Andrew Shaffer

At the end of August, we're organizing a [two-part series](#) on planning for the future, providing practical tools and resources you can use to prepare your archival and financial estate. In anticipation, I talked to Randy Alfred, a member of our [Legacy Circle](#) and an archival donor, about his motivations for entrusting the GLBT

Historical Society with his personal papers and providing a legacy gift as part of his estate planning.

How did you first get involved with the GLBT Historical Society?

I'm not even sure if I can remember. I've curated. I've been a contributor and a member. I'm not sure of the exact date, but in the 1990s I was interviewed by Roland Schembari for the oral-history program, and that might have been when I started. I think back in 1991 was when I first gave a [whole bunch of my papers](#) to the GLBT Historical Society. That would have been around when I was doing my will and wanted to reduce my stuff and do something meaningful with it.

What do you hope people learn from your archival collections?

This is the way things were. As a journalist, I wasn't recording *for* history. But the materials I created remain interesting documents and historians can judge them as documents of their time, that don't have the benefit of hindsight. But they're there. Archives are one of the main places that history gets made from. I'm not intending to write memoirs, so what I've written and what I've recorded is what's out there.

How did you decide what to donate to the archives?

In my current will, the society gets first dibs on papers and effects, because I'm donating anything that's of historical interest in addition to what I've already given. So [GLBT Historical Society archivist] Kelsi Evans made what's called a site visit — I called it a “pre-mortem” visit — where she took notes of things, and we went over what might be of interest here, room by room. So it's really a collaborative process with the archives. You know, we all have all this stuff. It's people's whole lives, and they can organize it to make it easier for whoever is going to clean

out their place later. And it makes it easier for the society.

Do you see a connection between archival donations and financial donations?

Absolutely, maintaining archives takes money! In order for there to be queer history, we have to continue to be visible as a community for which and about whom the history will be written. But we also have to have material, and we have to have the materials properly processed, preserved and accessible.

NOTE: If you're interested in learning more about how to prepare your estate for the future, join us on [August 28](#) and [September 4](#) for our lunchtime series on [Leaving a Legacy](#).

Randy Alfred is a retired journalist who worked on the Gay Freedom Day Committee in the 1970s, and was a cofounder of the Butterfly Brigade street patrol, the S.F. Bay Times and the Association of LGBTQ Journalists.

Andrew Shaffer is the director of development and communications at the GLBT Historical Society.

At the (Virtual) Museum A Legacy as Deep as the Ocean



By Lisbet Tellefsen

Two years ago, historian Amy Sueyoshi and I co-curated a special exhibition at the GLBT Historical Society Museum called "[Angela Davis: OUTspoken](#)," documenting the journey of Black lesbian activist, scholar, political prisoner and public intellectual Angela Davis. A major success in 2018, the exhibition is being released as an [online exhibition](#) on the society's website on

August 10.

A Moral Center

At a moment when the concept of intersectionality is finally beginning to penetrate the mainstream, Angela Davis's life is more relevant than ever. Davis was involved with Communist Party USA and the Black Power movement, and she's still pushing the envelope around LGBTQ issues internationally, including places where it is not politically welcome. She is among the globe's foremost philosophers on freedom and has always held the moral center. After a half-century, she has maintained the ability to communicate with remarkable clarity, even while engaging with complex issues of history and theory.

Amy and I focused the exhibition around the most graphically impactful political posters of Davis from my personal archives. I came to build this collection through my longtime love of graphic poster design — the

intersection of graphics, propaganda, politics and messaging remain fascinating to me. I collected posters as a child, and growing up in Berkeley, political graphics were ubiquitous. In fact, one of my earliest jobs in high school was at The Print Mint, which was “ground zero” for psychedelic posters and early alternative comics. It was there that I learned to run a printing press, and I went on to run a print shop for the next 30 years.

Repurposing Images

Davis herself came to public prominence in the heyday of early reproductive graphics: after a full-page photograph of her appeared in *Life* magazine, artists around the world from Spain to the Soviet Union borrowed that image and repurposed it in different ways. Posters are very interesting media because while they are mass-produced, they still contain incredible original artwork. So when it came time to select posters for this exhibition, I chose those I felt were most impactful and represented significant ideas or events.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, unfortunately scuttled plans for the largest exhibition of my career, which was scheduled to open at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University this year, and in 2021 would have gone to the Oakland Museum of California. In fact, these institutions scouted material that I first displayed at the GLBT Historical Society Museum. So it's gratifying that “[OUTspoken](#)” will now get a new lease on life. Davis's five decades of activism and the legions of scholars she has mentored add up to a legacy as deep as the ocean. She's a voice that we need to center right now.

Lisbet Tellefesen has been an archivist, collector and event producer in the Bay Area for more than three decades.

Upcoming Online Events

[Living History Discussion](#)

Compton's and the Legacy of Police Violence



Wednesday, August 5

6:00–7:30 p.m.

Online program

Free | \$5.00 suggested donation

A watershed moment in LGBTQ history that was almost forgotten, the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria riot was rediscovered by researchers in the GLBT Historical Society's archives decades later. This event, co-presented with the Tenderloin Museum, will commemorate the riot with a screening of Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman's 2005 documentary *Screaming Queens*. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion featuring historians, activists and Compton's veterans who will reflect on the history of this uprising in light of the ongoing

problem of police violence and consider how communities can mobilize in response. The event will also include discussion of the play *The Compton's Cafeteria Riot*, a 2018 theater piece commissioned by the Tenderloin Museum. Register online [here](#).

[Panel/Workshop Orientation](#) [No More Silence: Digital Community Histories of HIV/AIDS](#)



Tuesday, August 11
5:00–7:00 p.m.
Online program
Free | \$5.00 suggested donation

No More Silence is an ongoing project of the University of California, San Francisco's Archives and Special Collections. The project extracts text from digitized archival materials related to

HIV/AIDS — including documents from individuals, activist and community-support organizations, medical institutions and government agencies—for use in digital-humanities projects, with the aim of bridging the gap between the empirical, scientific study of the disease and the lived experience of people with AIDS. UCSF has organized a three-part workshop from August 12 to 14 that introduces participants to basic computer-programming skills to perform work in digital history (no prior experience is necessary). Participants will apply these skills to historical documents in the collections of the UCSF archives and the GLBT Historical Society.

The workshop opens on August 11 at this joint event organized by the GLBT Historical Society and the UCSF Archives that provides an overview of the No More Silence project. A panel discussion will discuss the ways that archives and digital-humanities initiatives can support community-history efforts related to gender and sexual orientation, illuminating digital tools and techniques that can further uncover hidden narratives in these histories. The event will also serve as an orientation to the workshop, which begins the following day. More information on the workshop and registration is available [here](#). Register for the August 11 event online [here](#).

[Film Screening](#) [Revisiting Gay USA: A Community Experience](#)



Friday, August 21
6:00–8:00 p.m.
Online program
Free | \$5.00 suggested donation

This event is a screening and discussion of Arthur J. Bressan Jr.'s groundbreaking 1977 documentary *Gay USA*, which vibrantly captured Gay Freedom Day marches and celebrations in June 1977 across the country. The film was beautifully

restored in 2018 by the University of California, Los Angeles Film and Television Archive in collaboration with Frameline and Outfest. Film historian Jenni Olson, who guided the restoration of the film, and LGBTQ historian Don Romesburg, who co-curated the GLBT Historical Society's online exhibition about the first decade of San Francisco Pride, will lead a conversation and Q & A session after the screening. The discussion will focus on the importance of documenting the history of Pride and encourage audience members to engage in their own community-history efforts by sharing their Pride stories and helping to identify unknown individuals depicted in the film. Register online [here](#).

Workshop

Leaving a Legacy: Archival Estate Planning



Friday, August 28

12:00–1:00 p.m.

Online program

Free

The items we collect and produce over a lifetime tell a unique story about who we are, what we value and the impact we have had over the course of our lives. The first event in a two-part series offering estate-planning tools and resources, this workshop focuses on how to prepare personal papers, photographs, objects, ephemera and other materials for possible donation to archives. Archivists at the GLBT Historical Society will share recommendations on preparing and organizing your personal archival materials and provide an overview of the considerations involved in intellectual-property transfer, focusing on areas of particular concern for LGBTQ people. This event will include a Q & A session for those who register in advance. Learn more about this series and how to plan for the future [here](#). Register online [here](#).

Workshop

Leaving a Legacy: Financial Estate Planning



Friday, September 4

12:00–1:00 p.m.

Online program

Free

Careful financial planning ensures that our legacies live on by providing for our spouses, partners, children, relatives and friends. The second event in our two-part series offering estate-planning tools and resources for LGBTQ people, this workshop focuses on a range of financial-planning strategies and instruments. Attorney Alma Soongi Beck will discuss wills, living trusts, powers of attorney, marriage and domestic partnership considerations, document language for nonbinary and transgender people, property tax and co-ownership issues for unmarried couples who are not domestic partners. This event will include a Q & A session for those who register in advance.

Learn more about this series and how to plan for the future [here](#).
Register online [here](#).

Current Online Exhibitions

Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker

Examine how rainbow-flag creator Gilbert Baker blurred the lines between artist and activist, protester and performer.

50 Years of Pride

This photography exhibition documents the evolution of San Francisco Pride, the event that most powerfully represents and celebrates the Bay Area's LGBTQ community, over the past half century.

Labor of Love: The Birth of San Francisco Pride

Learn how San Francisco forged the internationally renowned annual celebration that would come to be known as Pride.

AIDS Treatment Activism: A Bay Area Story

Explore the rise of and growth of the treatment-activism movement in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s and 1990s.

Wear Your Pride!

Click to visit the GLBT Historical Society's Online Store



Visit Us & Online Resources

The museum and archives are online only until further notice, but

archives staff members are still available to work with researchers; please contact us at reference@glbthistory.org.

Online exhibitions: Our online exhibitions are available here.

Online archives resources: Browse dozens of digital collections.

Upcoming events: More information about all of our online events.

Past events: Video footage of a large number of our past programs.

THE GLBT HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

Exhibitions & Programs

www.glbthistory.org/museum

DR. JOHN P. DE CECCO ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Research & Public History Center

(415) 777-5455

www.glbthistory.org/archives

Donate

Volunteer

Join

CREDITS. FEATURE: Inside Gene Compton's cafeteria in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood, ca. 1966; photo by Henri Leleu, Henri Leleu Papers (1997-13), GLBT Historical Society. **FROM THE STAFF:** Photo of Andrew Shaffer courtesy of same. **AT THE MUSEUM:** Angela Davis, photograph by Allen Zak, Berkeley Graphic Arts, 1970; collection of Lisbet Tellefsen, used with permission. **UPCOMING EVENTS.** Living History Discussion 8/5: See feature caption. Panel/Workshop Orientation 8/11: Computer code and typed document produced by ACT UP; document in the ACT UP Golden Gate Records (MSS 98-47), UCSF Library and Special Collections. Film Screening 8/21: Still from *Gay USA* showing an interviewee, courtesy of Frameline. Workshop 8/28: Clockwise from top: Reference archivist Isaac Fellman, photo courtesy of same. The stacks of the GLBT Historical Society; photo by Dave Earl. Director of Archives and Special Collections Kelsi Evans; photo courtesy of same. The reading room of the GLBT Historical Society's archives; photo by Dave Earl. Workshop 9/4: Photo of Alma Soongi Beck courtesy of same.

Editor & Communications Manager: Mark Sawchuk
Director of Development and Communications: Andrew Shaffer
Executive Director: Terry Beswick

Copyright © 2020 GLBT Historical Society

Back Issues

