During the 1950s and 1960s, Los Angeles police officers had a reputation for “messing with” queer people. They would raid gay establishments and arrest anyone whose perceived gender did not match the gender that was on their IDs. Occasionally, these officers would even take it as far as insulting and physically beating queer individuals. Interestingly enough, some officers would dress up as “gay”, go to gay establishments, seduce queer individuals, and arrest those who would respond to their advances. Other officers would hang out outside of these queer establishments in civilian clothing, waiting for queer couples to leave, and follow them home just to try to catch the couple in acts of sodomy. As result of police actions, many gay establishments also would discouraged or rejected transgender individuals from being there as officers would pay more attention to these individuals. If officers saw non-trans individuals entering or leaving a gay establishment, they would be more likely to raid and shut the establishment down.

In the Spring of 1959, a small donut and coffee shop in Downtown Los Angeles’ Skid Row opened for business. Cooper’s Donuts was a coffee shop quite popular with the Los Angeles Police Department (L.A.P.D.) officers, much like many coffee shops that tended to be in the greater Los Angeles area. However, at night, Cooper’s Donuts served a very different clientele. It was the hub for transgender people, queers, hustlers, drag queens-- every “social-deviant” under the sun. Because it was one of the few venues where transgender women could safely reside, it was easily a target for cops. On this particular spring night in May 1959, two cops decided to spontaneously check patron IDs. The outcome of their check was the arrest of about five customers.

Much like the Compton Cafeteria riots, and happening only a few years prior, the rage and frustration demonstrated by the many night customers of Cooper’s illustrated their impatience and intolerance for police brutality consciously directed towards LGBTQ+ individuals. In the patrons’ clash with the police, they utilized items from the coffee/donut shop itself. This included coffee, donuts, spoons, cups and so on. The officers had no choice, but to retreat from the riots only to return with more cops. The riots ensued and lead to the temporary closure of Main Street. Although smaller in scale than the Compton Cafeteria Riots and Stonewall, the Cooper’s Donuts riot was one of group resistances to general police insensitivity and violence toward LGBTQ+ people.

Although equal in importance to the the riots at Compton’s Cafeteria and the Stonewall Inn, the riots at Cooper’s Donut’ are little known and a relatively undocumented event in queer history. In his speech for the Adelante Gay Pride Gala in El Pase Texas, JOhn Rechy, a Mexican American writer, said, “Over emphasis on that single event [Stonewall] distorts our history and renders as lesser other acts of equal--and even greater--courage...”

Reminiscent of the initially poorly documented Compton Cafeteria Riot in queer history, now, of course amended, by the archival research of Susan Stryker, transgender individuals were fundamental to the Cooper’s Riot. Cooper’s importance in queer history centralizes the role of transgender people, specifically women, in the LA community. Unlike the two gay bars Cooper’s sat between,Harold’s and the Waldorf, Cooper’s did not turn away transgender customers. The practice of gay bars turning away trans customers began out of fear of attracting attention from the police. In Los Angeles, many transgender people were subjected to violence from officers and were intentionally targeted--many being imprisoned for simply walking the street. The victims of such disdain from both the straight and gay community, it became increasingly important for trans people to have a known place to congregate, Cooper’s became that place.

Among those member who were arrested, and able to escape, was John Rechy. In his novels he extensively talks about queer culture in Los Angeles and America more broadly. Sharing his first-hand account of the Cooper’s Riots in his speech at the Adelante Gay Pride Gala Rechy described: “Police attempt to arrest three people at Cooper’s Donuts in Downtown LA, a hangout for transfolk, queers, street hustlers, johns -outraged onlookers threw whatever they can find at cops, forcing a retreat. People spill out on the streets dancing on cars, lighting fires and generally wreaking havoc..”

In 2008, Cooper’s Donuts became the Daily Grind, then in 2013 it became Mrs. Chapman’s Angel Food Donuts In 2014, it was announced that Dunkin' Donuts had purchased the property. Dunkin' planned to demolish the building and was not interested in keeping the donut. The company felt that the sign did not fit with their corporate image.

When residents expressed their dismay over the removal of the donut sign due to the significance behind the history behind the sign, plans were made to donate it to the City of Long Beach. Los Angeles’ Skid Row is now much different, It is no longer the lively, albeit grimy, entertainment hub it once was with business establishments and shops on an endless stretch. It is now home to a large homeless population, but the face of Skid Row is changing. With an incoming flood of travelers, artists, and other creative typesthe area is slowly becoming trendy. It seems as if the new and the old, the past and the present will continue to collide. Although Cooper’s Donuts is no longer apart of Skid Row’s Main Street, as many of its fellow shops and businesses, its history still remains.

Cooper’s Donuts symbolized a sanctuary for not just the gay population of Los Angeles, but also for the overlooked transgender population. Their presence brought irrational prejudice, violence, and judgement, but Cooper’s allowed them a space to take part in conversations and be who they were without the fear of scrutiny. The gathering and joint effort of LGBTQ+ people on the night of the riot is representative of the family that Cooper’s created. It is important that the riots at Cooper’s Donuts don’t go unnoticed. These riots were some of the earliest to happen that brought attention to the police brutality happening towards LGBTQ+ people, but namely the intentional taunting towards transgender individuals and reminds us that transgender people and their rights matter.