

Frederick Henry Harvey: “Maintenance of Standards Regardless of Cost”
By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC

Just one hundred years ago, two architectural jewels opened at the Grand Canyon. They are the 95 room El Tovar Hotel and the Hopi House gift shop. Both reflect the foresight and entrepreneurship of Fred Harvey. An immigrant from England, Fred Harvey’s business ventures eventually included restaurants, hotels, newsstands and dining cars on the Sante Fe Railroad. The partnership with the Atchison, Topeka and Sante Fe introduced many new tourists to the American Southwest by making rail travel comfortable and adventurous. Employing many Native-American artists, the Fred Harvey Company also collected indigenous examples of basketry, beadwork, Kachina dolls, pottery and textiles.

Fred Harvey arrived in the United States in 1850 at 15 years of age. His first job was a “pot walloper”, a dishwasher in New York City at the Smith and McNeill Café. In 1859, he married 17 year-old Barbara Sarah Mottas. While the Civil War was bad for restaurants (and Confederates), it was good for the railroad business. Harvey made a career change and worked for railroads with travel opportunities for twenty years all over the United States. He learned first-hand what travelers in the West had to endure: uneatable dry biscuits, greasy ham and weak coffee. He even traveled on the Hannibel & St. Joseph known as the “Horrible & Slow Jolting”. After rejection by the Burlington Railroad, Harvey struck a deal with Charles Morse, president of the Santa Fe Railway. With only a handshake to seal their agreement, the two companies began a long and fruitful partnership.

The travelers of that era moved through Chicago on a slow journey westward on hard board seats in overcrowded crude coaches. At a time when most railroad food was poor and even inedible, Fred Harvey provided appetizing and affordable meals in comfortable dining quarters. He opened his first railroad restaurant in Topeka, Kansas in 1876 where good food, spotless dining rooms and courteous service brought booming business.

The Santa Fe Railway provided the buildings for the Harvey restaurants where all of the passenger trains would stop twice daily for meals. The railroad carried all the produce and supplies needed by the Harvey restaurants including transporting the dirty laundry. Fred Harvey hired, trained and supervised all personnel and provided for food and service. Harvey's policy was "maintenance of standards, regardless of cost." He believed that profits would grow if the food and service were excellent. "Meals by Fred Harvey" became the slogan of the Santa Fe Railway. To maintain this excellence, he hired and trained girls of the finest character as waitresses, the famous "Harvey Girls".

Harvey Girls

Harvey placed ads in Eastern and Midwestern newspapers that read: "Wanted, young women of good character, attractive and intelligent, 18 to 30 years of age as waitresses in Harvey Eating Houses in the West. Good wages with room and meals furnished." Harvey Girls were trained to high standards of prompt and courteous service. They were the key to serving hundreds of passengers in about 20 minutes...the average length of time a train would need for servicing every four hours. Their story is unique in American history. Only white women who were hired as Harvey Girls. There were no black women and only a few Hispanic and Indian women who ever served as waitresses. European immigrant women were apparently acceptable. Minority workers, male and female, worked in the Harvey kitchens & hotels where they served as maids, dishwashers and pantry girls. Harvey had no shortage of applicants. It is estimated that a hundred thousand women applied from 1883 until the 1960's.

Harvey Girls all wore the same uniform, outfits befitting a nun: a long-sleeved black dress with a stiff "Elsie" collar, black shoes, black stockings and hairnets. The company furnished a full white wrap-around apron so stiffly starched that it had to be pinned to a corset. Harvey Girls wore no jewelry, no makeup and chewed no gum. They lived in dormitories where they were closely supervised by their manager (or manager's wife), and curfews were strictly enforced in the early years. They were looked after as carefully as boarding school students in female seminaries in the East. They worked very hard and their eight-hour-a-day shifts were often split to conform to train schedules. They were told what to wear, where to live, whom to date and what time to go to bed. When the Harvey Girls were recruited in the early years, they were asked not to marry for at least a year.

The combination of good food served in a fine dining atmosphere with imported linen, china and silver created a distinctive contrast to the typical eating establishments in turn-of-the century small towns. The hope of catching the eye of one of the Harvey Girls no doubt kept many a poor farmer, rancher, and railroader coming back to dine again and again.

One of the reasons for the Harvey Houses' success was their ability to serve fresh, high quality meat, seafood, and produce at remote locations across the Southwest. Trains would deliver beef from Kansas City, seafood and produce from southern California year-round.

Harvey Service

Harvey House workers were able to handle large numbers of passengers in a short amount of time because the brakeman on the train would get menu preferences from the passengers and that information would be teletyped ahead to the Harvey House cooks. When the train pulled into the station and the passengers began to get off the train, a white-coated Harvey House staffer would hit a brass gong which stood outside the entrance to the restaurant. This let passengers know instantly where to come, and the Harvey Girls were ready to serve them.

When Fred Harvey died in 1901, his company had grown to 15 hotels, 47 restaurants, and 30 dining car operations along the Santa Fe line. By 1912, under the leadership of Fred Harvey's sons Byron and Ford, there were more than sixty-five eating houses on the Santa Fe and Frisco railroad lines, a dozen large hotels and sixty dining cars in the Harvey system. They employed about five thousand people, half of whom were women. The company continued in existence until 1968 when Harvey's grandsons sold out to AMFAC.

Harvey operations at Union Stations in Cleveland, Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago and Los Angeles included newsstands, gift shops featuring Indian jewelry and weavings, barber shops, liquor stores, private dining rooms, restaurants, coffee shops, cafeteria, haberdashery, candy and fruit stands, miniature department store, cocktail lounges and soda fountains. Harvey was among the first to market its own name-brand "designer" goods: Fred Harvey hats, shirts, shaving cream, candy, playing cards, even Harvey Special Blend whiskey. Except for the prohibition years, Harvey sold exclusively a Scotch distilled by Ainslie & Heilbron in Glasgow. As a

forerunner to Starbucks, Harvey packaged its own select coffee for public sale in 1948. The blend was already famous among Sante Fe travelers and Harvey sold 7,000 pounds in the first two weeks. The press named him “Civilizer of the West” and said “he made the desert blossom with beefsteak and pretty girls.”

Harvey Hotels

The Harvey company built luxurious resort hotels within sightseeing distance of major western attractions in national parks like the Grand Canyon and the Petrified Forest. Architect Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter (1889-1958) was Harvey’s prime architect and interior designer from 1902 to 1948. She was a pioneer female architect who designed hotels, train stations, restaurants and gift shops with a brilliant use of Native American and Hispanic art and artifacts. The famous Western writer Frank Walters wrote, “For years, an incomprehensible woman in pants, she rode horseback through the Four Corners making sketches of prehistoric ruins, studying details of construction, the composition of globes and washes. She could teach masons how to lay adobe bricks and plasterers how to mix washes.” She spent almost her whole long career working for the Fred Harvey Company and the Sante Fe Railway.

Before Harvey, there were no other clean hotels out west, only saloons or public rooms with cots. In 1870, Harvey built the Clifton Hotel in Florence, Kansas. The Clifton resembled a fine English home with fountains and candelabra in the surrounding garden and luxurious guest accommodations inside including an elegant dining room. At the turn of the century, another Harvey House of equal beauty was the Bisonte Hotel in Hutchinson, Kansas followed by the Sequoyah in Syracuse and El Vaquero in Dodge City, all built in Spanish Mission style. The first Harvey House hotel in Emporia, Kansas served such celebrities as Shirley Temple, Will Rogers, Jackie Cooper and Gloria Swanson.

The chaotic Kansas frontier included a transient cowtown population of cowboys and herd bosses, cattle-selling Texans, prostitutes and saloon-buffs. Harvey even built the Arcade Hotel in “bloody Newton, the wickedest town in the West”, after the cattle industry moved to Dodge City. Later, Harvey moved his district headquarters to Newton from Kansas City including construction of a major dairy, an ice plant, meat locker-rooms, a creamery, a poultry feeding

station and produce plant, a carbonating plant for bottling soda pop and a modern steam laundry. By 1921, Newton's central laundry cleaned four million pieces a year.

As the Santa Fe Railway moved across Kansas to Colorado and to New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas, Harvey Houses opened every hundred miles or so. New Mexico was the home of sixteen, five of which were among the most beautiful in the system: the Montezuma and Castaneda in Las Vegas (NM), La Fonda in Sante Fe, the Alvarado in Albuquerque, El Navajo in Gallup and El Ortiz in Lamy.

Each of these hotels was unique but perhaps none more so than the long-forgotten Montezuma in Las Vegas, New Mexico. An enormous castle-like structure, built adjacent to hot mineral springs, it was the largest wood frame building in the country with 270 rooms and an eight-story tower. Its connected spa-bathhouses served five hundred people a day and competed with the finest health resorts in the United States and Europe. After it burned to the ground in 1884, Harvey and the Santa Fe immediately rebuilt the million dollar hotel. This second structure also suffered a serious fire and was again replaced in 1899. After Harvey's El Tovar opened at the Grand Canyon, the Montezuma closed in 1903.

From 1901 through 1935, the Harvey Company and the Sante Fe built twenty three hotels of which only the following are still in operation: El Tovar and the Bright Angel Lodge in the Grand Canyon, Arizona and La Fonda in Sante Fe, New Mexico.

In 1944, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer made a movie called "The Harvey Girls" based on a novel by Samuel Hopkins Adams. The musical film featured Judy Garland, Preston Foster, Angela Lansbury and Cyd Charisse. It had songs such as "The Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe," "Wishing on a Load of Hay" and "In the Valley Where the Evening Sun Goes Down," Naturally, the movie idealized an unrealistic image of the Harvey Girls but did stress the civilizing influence of the Harvey Houses and the Sante Fe Railroad.

Will Rogers wrote about the Harvey Girls:

“In the early days, the traveler fed on the buffalo. For doing so, the buffalo got his picture on the nickel. Well, Fred Harvey should have his picture on one side of the dime and one of his waitresses with her arms full of delicious ham and eggs on the other side, ‘cause they have kept the West supplied with food and wives.”

This article is excerpted from my book: “Great Hoteliers: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry” to be published at the end of 2007.

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