

Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

Harvey Girls

Last week I talked about visionary businessman Fred Harvey, how he built a “railroad hospitality empire” in the western US, and his company’s lasting impact in Arizona. Today I’d like to talk some more about Harvey’s famous all-female waitress staff, the Harvey Girls.

In the early 1880s, when Fred Harvey began to feed railroad passengers at regular stops along the Santa Fe Railroad in the “wild west” of New Mexico, his eating places experienced unruly behavior from local customers, clamoring to get a sumptuous Fred Harvey meal. “Rough and ready” cowboys, miners, gamblers, and confidence men continually caused trouble.

What particularly irked Harvey were racial problems between his all-male, black staff and the cowboys, many of whom were former Confederate soldiers. The situation got so bad that the black waiters lived in fear, believing that they might need to defend themselves. (See Stephen Fried’s book, *Appetite for America: How Visionary Businessman Fred Harvey Built a Railroad Hospitality Empire That Civilized the Wild West.*)

In 1883, at the suggestion of one his company managers, Harvey decided to try replacing the waiters with young white women, hoping to improve civility in his eating places. He sought out single, well-mannered, and educated ladies and placed ads in newspapers along the East Coast and throughout the Midwest for “Young women, 18 to 30 years of age, of good character, attractive, and intelligent.”

Harvey signed-up the women to six-month, renewable contracts. New hires agreed not to marry during the contract period; they were given a rail pass to get to their place of employment.

Harvey Girls underwent extensive training in serving food and the rules of etiquette. Efficient service was required to feed railroad passengers because the trains stopped for only a short amount of time. As an example of a speedy service technique, as a Harvey Girl moved to serve each customer, she let the beverage filler following her know what each diner’s drink preference was by the way she placed the coffee cup in front of him.

Originally, the girls were paid \$17.50 a month (\$388 in today’s money) plus room, board, and tips. They worked 12-hour shifts, at least six days a week, and whenever an off-schedule train arrived in the middle of the night.

The young women had to live in a dormitory, administered by a live-in older female chaperone, and were subject to a strict 11:00 pm curfew, except for Friday nights, when they could attend an eating-house-sponsored town social.

Stephen Fried describes the uniform the girls were required to wear and personal appearance rules: “a plain black long-sleeved, floor-length woolen dress with a just-short-of-clerical ‘Elsie’ collar, along with black shoes and stockings; a starched white apron from neck to ankle, which had to be changed immediately whenever the slightest spot showed. Her hair was to be kept plain and simple, preferably tied back with a single white ribbon. Makeup was forbidden.”

Those early Harvey Girls were welcome additions to the communities they served; the west was desperate for women. The men working and living in western towns were overjoyed at the “steady supply of single, personable, often comely young ladies being brought in by rail.” The roughnecks learned manner quickly! It has often been said that the Harvey Girls “helped to civilize the American southwest.”

The southwestern female staffing experiment was a huge success! Harvey soon employed Harvey Girls at every food service location along the railroad line between Chicago and Los Angeles. The Harvey Girls became one of the first significant female workforces in the country. Interestingly, “there were no Harvey Girls on wheels,” food services on railroad dining cars were provided by an all-black staff.

Harvey Girl service survived Fred Harvey’s death in 1901 and continued through three generations of the family-owned business, called simply Fred Harvey. Training manuals and several-week courses were designed and updated regularly. Harvey Girl uniforms changed a little bit over the years, but maintained their very conservative, familiar look. Harvey Girls often wore silver brooches with numbers in the center, identifying the number of years of their service. Later Harvey Girls wore name tags on their uniform.

During World War II, railroad transportation of huge numbers of soldiers strained the personnel resources of Fred Harvey; additional Harvey Girls were needed quickly! Hiring was expanded to include, for the first time, blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

Following World War II, the ranks of the Harvey Girls were depleted by marriage to returning soldiers, but the all-female waitress tradition continued until Fred Harvey dissolved in the 1960s, when railroad passenger traffic reduced drastically.

Over eight “plus” decades of company operation, it is estimated that more than 100,000 girls worked in Fred Harvey restaurants and hotels, and that of those, perhaps 20,000 wound up marrying one of their customers.

In 1946 MGM made a musical film (based on a 1942 novel by Samuel Hopkins Adams) called *The Harvey Girls*, starring Judy Garland. The film won an Academy Award for Best Song for “On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe.”

Today, you can view an exhibit at the Arizona Capitol Museum in Phoenix titled, "Civilizing the West: Fred Harvey and his Harvey Girls." In addition to Fred Harvey artifacts from the Grand Canyon, the Museum displays numerous photographs and quotes from former Harvey Girls.

A little anecdote to close this column: A knitting friend of Pat's, Rebecca Fabos, while sharing "one thing that nobody knows about me" at a recent meeting, divulged that she was a former Harvey Girl. During the summer of 1965, after her freshman year in college, Rebecca worked at Bright Angel Lodge on the south rim of the Grand Canyon:

"My first week or two were spent learning how to be a waitress. I was placed under the wing of a very experienced waitress who worked the night shift. During this stint, I was taught to memorize the day's menu, how to take orders, when to serve, proper plate placement and removal and to be pleasant and charming no matter what the circumstance. It was intense and orderly and I loved the pride exhibited by the staff.

"One incident I remember happened midway through the summer. It was the lunch-time rush and a group came in, sat at my station and one of the gentlemen requested Oyster Stew. The Bright Angel had a wonderful menu and the selections changed daily but there was never a mention of Oyster Stew. I had to tell this man that Oyster Stew was unavailable. He looked at me and said, 'Just go ask the chef if you might have Oyster Stew.' So, I did just that, and imagine my surprise when the chef looked at me and said, 'Of course. Tell him it will be ready shortly.' To me, that emphasizes the quality of the Bright Angel and its service to customers.

"Fred Harvey treated its employees well and they loved working for the company. For me, it was a wonderful summer experience."



This Harvey Girl uniform is on display at the Arizona Railway Museum in Chandler, Arizona. (Taken by Jot Powers, May, 2005)



Following her freshman year of college, Tucson resident Rebecca Fabos worked as a Harvey Girl during the summer of 1965 at Bright Angel Lodge at the south rim of the Grand Canyon. Rebecca later worked at various administrative jobs, married aerospace engineer Alan Fabos, and lived near Tohono Chul Park for a dozen years. (Courtesy of Rebecca Fabos)