

MORE THAN BEEFSTEAK AND A CUP OF COFFEE :  
REINTERPRETING THE HARVEY GIRLS IN KANSAS

BY

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by

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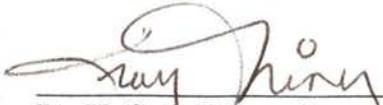
I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.



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Dr. Rebecca Conard, Committee Chair

We have read this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance:



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Dr. H. Craig Miner, Committee Member



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Dr. Gayle R. Davis, Committee Member

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those Harvey Girls who were willing to share their thoughts and memories with a stranger.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a special thanks to Dr. Rebecca Conard, not only for her direction on this project, but for her guidance and encouragement over the past three years. She believed in my abilities and inspired me to go above and beyond the ordinary. I would also like to thank Dr. Craig Miner and Dr. Gayle Davis for serving on my committee and for all they have taught me over the years. I wish to thank the Florence Historical Society for taking a chance and providing funding to design the museum exhibit which formed the basis of this work. Funding for research in Arizona was provided by the Delano Maggard Jr. Award from the Graduate School Office at Wichita State University. Dr. Maxine Edwards, Curator of the Arizona Hall of Fame Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, was very helpful in my research, as were Mike Kelly and Mary Nelson at Special Collections, Ablah Library, Wichita State University. Additionally, I would like to thank my fellow public history colleagues for their encouragement and support throughout this process. A special note of thanks goes to my family, especially my husband Gary, who provided invaluable technical and emotional support throughout this project.

## ABSTRACT

This work provides the historical research and conceptual framework for a new interpretation of the Harvey Girls. The women who worked in Harvey eating houses were more than just waitresses -- they were Harvey Girls -- an efficient, well-trained, well-groomed corps of waitresses. The popular, romanticized image of the Harvey Girls, however, portrays these women as mythical figures who brought civilization to the "Wild West." Over the past fifty years, the Harvey Girl has taken on a mystique that relegates her to a position based on her traditional feminine virtues, rather than her actions and abilities as a working woman. This type of image-making denies any real understanding of the concrete experiences and conditions of the Harvey Girls.

This study identifies the problems with current interpretations of the Harvey Girls, and outlines concepts which can be utilized in creating interpretive museum exhibitions. Focusing on those women who worked in Kansas Harvey Houses and those who left Kansas for Harvey Houses in the Southwest, this study utilizes oral history interviews to gain a broader understanding of the real life experiences of the Harvey Girls. As an integral part of the Fred Harvey system and the Santa Fe Railroad, the Harvey Girls played an invaluable role, not only in women's history, but also in railroad history. Their collective experiences serve to illustrate the roles women played in the American West.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

When Fred Harvey pushed his chain of restaurants farther and farther west along the lengthening tracks of the Santa Fe, he brought with him one of the first civilizing forces this land had known . . . the Harvey Girls. These winsome waitresses conquered the West as surely as the Davy Crocketts and the Kit Carsons . . . not with powderhorn and rifle, but with a beefsteak and a cup of coffee.<sup>1</sup>

A simple mention of the Harvey Girls brings to mind a picture of Judy Garland, star of the 1945 movie titled The Harvey Girls, in her floor-length, black and white uniform, as she serves her customer an order of beefsteak and coffee (figure 1). It is this image of the Harvey Girl that most people recognize, rather than the real Harvey Girl who waited tables in eating houses across the West for over seventy-five years. Full of romance, glamour, dancing, and singing, the movie brought attention to the profession, but did little to illustrate the actual work conditions and lives of the real Harvey Girls. Instead the movie fostered an unrealistic image of the Harvey Girl which would be perpetuated by writers for the next fifty years. Rather than showing the Harvey Girl as an active contributor in the American West, she was portrayed as a mythical figure, noted for her virtue, charm, and service. With a beefsteak and cup of coffee, she could conquer anything which came her way.

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<sup>1</sup>Eleanor Griffin and William Rankin, The Harvey Girls, produced by Arthur Freed, directed by George Sidney, 102 minutes, MGM Studios, 1945, videocassette.



Figure 1: Judy Garland as a Harvey Girl in the movie The Harvey Girls.

Source: Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Photograph Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

Although this image of the Harvey Girl has endeared her to the American public, it fails to capture her importance as an integral part of the American labor force. Even in the 1990s, little is said in popular literature about the role of the Harvey Girls in women's labor history or even railroad history. In 1980, an article titled "Fred and his Girls" states that "the Harvey Girl who served the traveler was that paragon of the West -- A Vision of Feminine Pulchritude. And morality, too, of course."<sup>2</sup> These nostalgic stories of the attractive, uniformed heroine have become the accepted historical accounts of the Harvey Girls. The result of this kind of image-making is that it denies any real understanding of the concrete experiences and conditions of the Harvey Girls. These stories fail to address the many issues and concerns the Harvey Girls faced in their time, including the public's moral and social suspicion of their choice to be waitresses, traveling hundreds of miles to a new Harvey house without knowing anyone at their destination, working long, hard hours, and living in company dormitories with strict rules.

Breaking free of stereotypes is never easy. In the case of the Harvey Girls, it is particularly complex because of the added problems of the western frontier myth. The history of western settlement has long been endowed with events of mythic proportions and stereotypical participants. Referred to as the "frontier myth" or the "American myth" by current scholars, it involves the "encounter with wilderness, the excitement of danger and challenge, the violent act of confrontation and commitment, the final slow surrender

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<sup>2</sup>Dale Bullock, "Fred and His Girls," New Mexico Magazine, April 1980, 54.

of freedom to advancing civilization.”<sup>3</sup> It is the story of how the West was won by the adventurous and heroic men who fought their way past the “uncivilized savages” to create a civilization based on the white, European man’s customs and mores. Playing an integral role in the development of the West, the Harvey system and its Harvey Girls could hardly escape falling into this myth as well. This image is illustrated in the Harvey Girl movie, as Judy Garland’s character goes off into the “Wild West” to bring civilization to a savage land. Fred Harvey has even been credited for single-handedly bringing civilization to the West by serving quality food in clean establishments.

The Harvey houses were a string of eating establishments along the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad. The first one, opened in 1876 in Topeka, Kansas, was considered a progressive new venture. Fred Harvey espoused the principles of excellent food, impeccable service, and reasonable prices. These principles were to lead to an ever-expanding empire which would stretch from Chicago to San Francisco by the early 1900s. His system was unusual, however, in its policy of hiring young women from the Midwest as waitresses. Realizing that traditional ideology must be accommodated to reality, Harvey created an image of his waitresses based on the Victorian ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.<sup>4</sup>

Much like the Lowell Mills in the early 1800s, Harvey’s system provided chaperoned dormitories and a strict set of rules to protect these young workers. The

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<sup>3</sup>Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds, The Women’s West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 16.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” American Quarterly (Summer 1966): 152.

women, in turn, provided a pliant and submissive labor force which could be molded into the image set by Fred Harvey. Other opportunities for these women included financial independence and, to a certain extent, social independence, yet all within the boundaries of the domestic definition of womanhood. In an era when women working away from home were seen as morally suspect, Fred Harvey's protective system helped to negate the social stigma of being a working woman. His system was so effective that estimates show over 100,000 women went west to work in the Harvey houses between 1880 and the 1950s, providing not only laborers, but also marriageable women.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past seventy-five years, the origin of the Harvey Girl has become something of a legend. According to the popular and romanticized version, the Harvey Girls were suddenly "borne" one day in 1883. Coming across several rude and surly male waiters fresh from a night of boozing and brawling in his establishment in Raton, New Mexico, Fred Harvey was sorely disappointed in the service being given to his customers and fired the whole lot of waiters. Acting upon a suggestion offered by the house manager Tom Gable, Harvey hired several young women to work as waitresses. As these women did not go out drinking and carousing, they soon began to distinguish themselves by providing excellent service. Harvey then decided that he should hire only female waitresses in all his houses, and began advertising in newspapers across the country for young women to go west and work in his eating houses.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Lesley Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West (New York: Paragon House, 1989), xii.

<sup>6</sup>Erna Fergusson, Our Southwest (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 194-95.

Although this account makes for a good story, it is not completely true. State census records indicate that Harvey had female dining room help already on staff in Florence and Lakin in 1880.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that in 1883 Harvey began a policy of hiring only women when they were available; however, sources show that men were still hired as waiters in 1901.<sup>8</sup> Whether actually true or not, the idea of the "creation story" helps to increase the power of the heroine image, providing additional fodder for writers in perpetuating the myth.

There is more to the story of the Harvey Girls than most writers care to find. What has been left out of the story is why so many women went to work for Fred Harvey -- they didn't all go west just to look for a husband. There are many different facets to their stories which merit a closer look. A new interpretation of the Harvey Girls is needed -- one which illustrates the much larger role they played in women's history, labor history, and railroad history. The Harvey Girls provide a rare opportunity to discuss a variety of issues in the working woman's life from the 1880s to the 1950s. Using the collective experiences of the Harvey Girls as a case-study, the historian can document significant changes that affected working women during this period.

There are several problems with the current interpretations of the Harvey Girls, including a failure to distinguish between the different stages of their history, a lack of adequate research, a reliance on romanticized primary sources, and the notion that they

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<sup>7</sup>Census records show three females, ages 19, 20, and 24, as dining room help in Florence, and three females, ages 17, 18, and 26 as waitresses in Lakin. Kansas State Census, 1880, Marian County and Kearney County.

<sup>8</sup>"Gone are the Days," Hospitality Magazine 1 (October 1949): back cover.

were just waitresses, and therefore not important. The failure of writers to thoroughly research their subject is a major cause of the misinterpretation of the Harvey Girls. Newspaper and magazine articles, as well as museum exhibits, do not provide an adequate look at the Harvey Girls because the writers either do not have the resources or do not take the time to study their subject. More often than not, writers focus on the history of the Fred Harvey system, relegating the Harvey Girls to a subordinate position of merely being the waitresses who worked in the eating houses. In an age of social history which focuses on the affairs of ordinary people, it is important to create a broader understanding of history through the lives and details of those whose names are not known, but whose contributions are historically important. The Harvey Girls were just such ordinary women who played an important role in the history of the West. To truly understand the importance of the Harvey Girls, however, one must first understand who they were and why they chose to work for Fred Harvey.

The Harvey Girls were waitresses. Yet this simple statement ignores the real truths behind why the Harvey Girls are important in history. The women who became Harvey Girls were not well-to-do women; they were working-class women searching for a new life, whether it be for financial or personal reasons. In the 1880s, they were women who answered newspaper advertisements requesting young women to go west and work in eating houses and hotels along the Santa Fe Railroad. Placed by Fred Harvey, these advertisements offered a good job, fair wages, and adventure to the women who were to become "Harvey Girls." Additionally, employment with the Harvey system offered working-class women a vehicle to the middle class, as they benefitted both financially

and socially. By the 1930s, however, the Harvey system was no longer an avenue to the middle class, as the pay rate decreased, employment standards became less rigid, and the job less exclusive. Many women were simply looking for a job to help support their families.

The Harvey Girl changed as time changed, yet few interpretations make reference to the change. The public perception of the Harvey Girl is stuck in the 1890s, as it is this era which is represented by the Judy Garland-Harvey Girl image: the long, black and white uniform with puffy sleeves, worn by a beautiful and adventurous young girl. The very name of Harvey "Girl" belies the fact that the perception did not change, even though the Harvey Girls did. Even with the influx of older women into the Harvey ranks in the 1940s, they were still considered Harvey "Girls."

No matter what decade each woman began her service, there was a continuity in the work requirements. The Harvey Girls worked hard. They served a four-course meal to rail passengers in under thirty minutes, served three to four rounds of walk-in customers at each meal setting, cleaned up afterwards until their station was spotless, and then set up for the next meal. During slow periods, they were required to polish the silver or make dozens of sandwiches for passengers on the next train. These responsibilities did not change for the Harvey Girl, whether she worked in 1880 or 1950. What did change, however, were the number of work hours each week. Longer hours, averaging sixty hours a week, were required of the Harvey Girls who worked in the 1880s to the 1920s. New Deal legislation reduced that number to forty-eight in the 1930s and 1940s, while women in the 1950s worked only forty hours a week.

For seventy-five years, young women were the mainstay of Fred Harvey service. In popular culture, the Harvey Girls were identified with the image of the civilizing domestic force. Even as women's roles in society changed during the twentieth century, the Harvey girls retained their Victorian image. The real Harvey Girl changed as older, married women joined the ranks, but the prescribed image of the young, virtuous woman remained embedded in public consciousness.

This study contrasts the romanticized, popular culture viewpoint of the Harvey Girls with new interpretations that are possible in light of more recent scholarship in labor and social history. Many Harvey scholars, however, still tend to get caught up in the romance and perpetuate the stereotypical image. Several works have been completed on the Harvey system and the Harvey Girls, but few have succeeded in placing the Harvey Girls in their proper place within women's labor history. Perhaps the best analysis, however, is The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West by Lesley Poling-Kempes. Using numerous oral interviews, Poling-Kempes illustrates the lives of Harvey Girls from the 1880s to the 1960s all across the United States. This is a reliable source for researchers, and the first to depict the real life of the Harvey Girl. Judith Stoll's research and analysis of the Harvey Girls in her master's thesis titled "The Harvey Girls: Then, Now, and Forever," takes a new look at the Harvey Girl image.<sup>9</sup> Her research develops the persona of the real Harvey Girl, attempting to reclaim their real life experiences. Another source of information is a book by Juddi Morris titled The Harvey Girls: The

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<sup>9</sup>Judith Ann Stoll, "The Harvey Girls: Then, Now, and Forever," (M.A. Thesis, Emporia State University, 1995).

Women Who Civilized the West.<sup>10</sup> This text, although aimed at a younger audience, provides a good overview of the Harvey Girls as well, although the author promotes the Harvey Girls as “civilizers.” Despite its billing as a cookbook, The Harvey House Cookbook, written by George H. Foster and Peter C. Weiglin, provides a brief overview of Harvey food service.<sup>11</sup> It does not, however, provide any sources or footnotes. Finally, Meals by Fred Harvey, written by James D. Henderson in 1969, is an excellent history of Fred Harvey and the Harvey system, as the author utilizes many primary source documents from the Fred Harvey Company which are no longer available to researchers.<sup>12</sup>

This study is predicated upon the fact that the Harvey Girls played an invaluable role, not only in women’s history, but also in railroad history. They were an integral part of the Fred Harvey system and the Santa Fe Railroad, and their collective experiences serve an important purpose in illustrating the roles women played in the American West. The geographical scope of this study is limited to the State of Kansas, as it was a vital link in the Harvey system. Kansas and the Midwest provided a large percentage of the Harvey Girls, and served as the training location for many of the newly hired women. Additionally, the State of Kansas was the point of origin for the Harvey system, and the Harvey Girls played an important role in the state’s development. The Harvey Girls,

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<sup>10</sup>Juddi Morris, The Harvey Girls: The Women Who Civilized the West (New York: Walker and Company, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>George H. Foster and Peter C. Weiglin, The Harvey House Cookbook: Memories of Dining along the Santa Fe Railroad (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup>James D. Henderson, “Meals by Fred Harvey”: A Phenomenon of the American West (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1969).

who were essential to the Harvey houses, have been virtually ignored in standard histories, appearing only in romanticized articles in newspapers and journals. The goal of an effective interpretation of the Harvey Girls is to create a real person from the mythical image. This study identifies the real life experiences of the Harvey Girls who worked in Kansas from the 1880s to the 1950s. In addition, it looks at native Kansas women who chose the Harvey system as a means to move westward.

Historical museums play an important role in educating the public about history. Consequently, museums must be aware of changing historical scholarship. New studies into the lives of ordinary people provide a more complete picture of the past, and must be incorporated into the interpretive themes of museums. Because traditional interpretations of the Harvey Girls are no longer adequate in light of new historical studies, this research also endeavors to provide the framework for a new interpretation of the Harvey Girls that can be utilized in museum exhibitions.

Divided into six chapters, each section of this thesis addresses a different aspect of the Harvey Girl interpretation. Chapters two, three, and four serve as research guidelines to be used in creating an exhibit script. Chapter two focuses on the origins of the Harvey system, identifying the principles and standards which made it so popular, and introducing the Harvey houses of Kansas. Chapter three analyzes the Harvey Girls from 1878 to 1928, while chapter four covers the remaining years from 1929 to 1957. Chapter five illustrates how new historical scholarship on the Harvey Girls can be integrated into interpretive museum exhibits, providing examples of text labels and other interpretive formats which could be used in creating an exhibit. Chapter six comes back to the details

of a new interpretation of the Harvey Girls, providing conclusions about the impact of a new interpretation on the traditional image of the Harvey Girl.

## CHAPTER II

### THE HARVEY STANDARD, 1850 - 1957

The Harvey House as an institution steadily developed into a haven of refuge for the emaciated western traveler, about which he dreamed, for which he yearned and by which he swore - developed into the most wonderful chain of hotels and eating-houses in the world, with a dining-car service which has never been excelled and seldom equalled.<sup>1</sup>

The elegant and refined characteristics of the Harvey lunch rooms, dining rooms, small hotels, and grand resorts that co-existed with the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad were a direct reflection of creator Fred Harvey's own personality (figure 2). His life and accomplishments were closely intertwined with the rise of the Santa Fe Railroad as one of America's leading railway systems. For over seventy years, these two entities would exist in harmony, creating a travel network unequalled by any other railway. While the coming of the railroad was seen as a major civilizing force in the West, Fred Harvey's system of eating houses was portrayed as a civilizing force all its own. Relying on the three guiding principles of the "Harvey Standard" -- quality, service, and price -- Fred Harvey was noted for bringing "gastronomic delights and hospitality beyond many cattlemen's wildest dreams to a business sorely in need of them."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"How Fame Has Been Won for the Harvey Service by Devotion to a Business Principle," The Santa Fe Magazine 10 (February 1916): 36.

<sup>2</sup>Pamela A. Berkman, ed., The History of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (New York: Smithmark, 1994), 34.

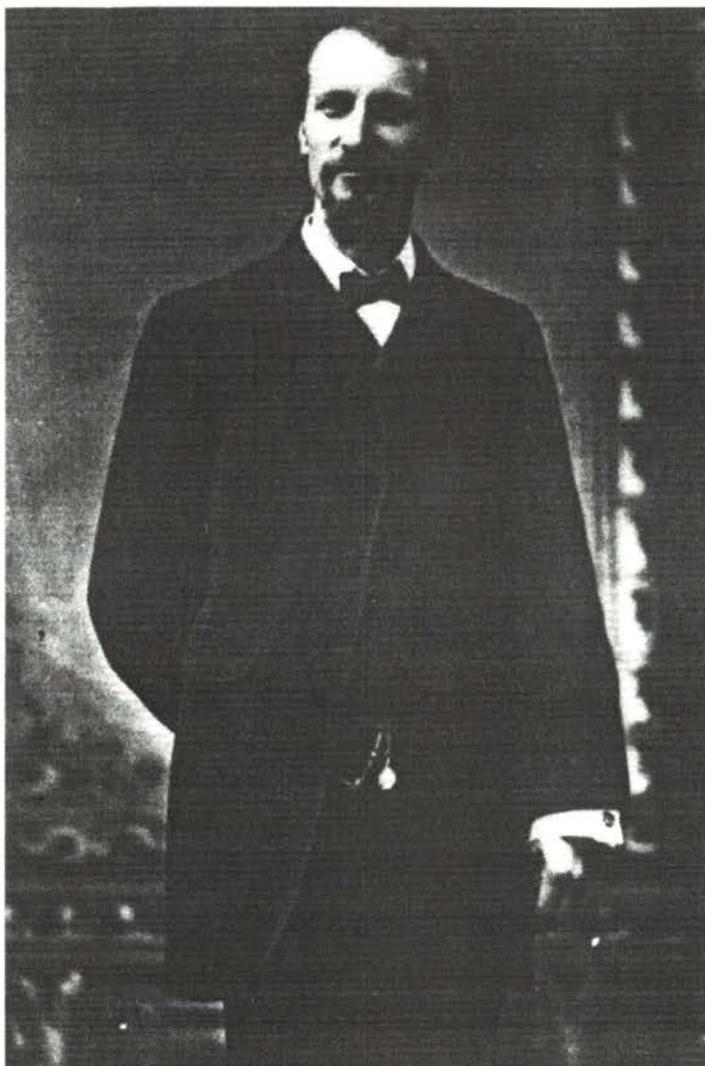


Figure 2: Fred Harvey

Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas

There is no doubt that traveling conditions were ghastly in the western states during the first half of the nineteenth century. Before Fred Harvey, rail travelers could expect rancid bacon, canned beans, eggs preserved in lime, heavy soda biscuits, and bitter black coffee when they actually had time to eat their meal. Often the train crews and restaurant owners worked together to take advantage of their customers and split the profits. The restaurant would serve passengers their meals just as the train whistle blew, leaving full plates of food which would then be recycled for the next trainload of unsuspecting passengers. Those who could not afford to eat in the railroad restaurants could bring their food with them onto the train, but the odor of fifty people eating box lunches on a hot afternoon and the accompanying swarm of flies were enough to turn anyone's stomach.<sup>3</sup> In 1876, however, the traveling public was to experience a surprise as Fred Harvey became the proprietor of an eating house on the Santa Fe line in Topeka, Kansas.

Frederick Henry Harvey was born in London, England on June 27, 1835. Emigrating to the United States in 1850, he took a job at the Smith and McNeill Cafe in New York. Finding his job as a busboy for two dollars a week unrewarding, he soon moved to New Orleans in hopes of a better future, but instead contracted yellow fever. After recovering, he moved on to St. Louis where he entered the restaurant business with a partner. Together, Harvey and his partner enjoyed prosperity in the restaurant business until the beginning of the Civil War, when the resulting loss of customers and inability to

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<sup>3</sup>Keith L. Bryant, History of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1974), 107.

procure supplies caused the small businesses to struggle. The final insult came when Harvey was stricken with typhoid, and his partner absconded with what little money was left in the business. Recovering once again, he began work as a pantryman in a cafe until he was hired as a mail clerk for the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad in 1862. It was here that Harvey would distinguish himself as one of the first two clerks to sort mail while in transit. This “traveling post office” was the beginning of what would become the Railway Mail Service.<sup>4</sup>

Harvey continued working for the railroad after it was taken over by the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad (CB&Q), eventually working up to general western freight agent. This job kept him on the road for days on end; and unsanitary lodging, inedible food, and risk of illness made this time an ordeal. With his knowledge of the restaurant business and his experience with the western railroads, Harvey soon realized the potential in providing the traveling public with good food and clean service at a reasonable cost.

In 1875, while working for the CB&Q, Harvey opened two cafes on the Kansas Pacific Railroad with partner Jeff Rice. Because he had taken an additional job of soliciting newspaper advertisements for *The Leavenworth Conservative*, Harvey had to guide the operations of the cafes in Wallace, Kansas and Hugo, Colorado from his home in Leavenworth. Even from afar, Harvey soon realized that his partner did not subscribe to the same food and service standards that Harvey demanded. Although the restaurants did very well, the operational problems between Harvey and Rice led to them to dissolve

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<sup>4</sup>Poling-Kempes, *The Harvey Girls: The Women Who Opened the West*, 33.

the business within a year. Harvey was not defeated, however, only strengthened in his resolve to provide superior service to rail passengers.

In 1876, Harvey began devising a plan for a system of restaurants linked by rail and took it to the Burlington Railroad. After the Burlington rejected his proposal, Harvey then went to Samuel F. Morse, superintendent of the Santa Fe Railroad. Morse, being a fellow railroad traveler, heartily supported Harvey's idea. This marked the beginning of a partnership between Harvey and the Santa Fe which led to the opening of the first Harvey House in 1876 on the second floor of the Topeka Station. Although there was no formal contract between Harvey and the Santa Fe, a gentlemen's handshake sealed the deal. The Santa Fe would furnish all grounds and buildings necessary for the Harvey operations, as well as provide transportation of all items necessary for operation. Harvey, in return, would furnish, supply, and staff all facilities.<sup>5</sup>

The Topeka Harvey House was innovative among restaurants of the day. Closing the lunch counter for two days, Harvey had it scrubbed and scoured until spotless and gleaming. At the restaurant's opening, customers were greeted with the sight of fine linens, polished silver, and high quality food. Quite unprecedented at the time, the menu offered a variety of attractive and delicious food. Even more surprising was the price -- only thirty five cents for a full meal -- which at breakfast included "steak and eggs, a large serving of crisp hash brown potatoes, a stack of golden pancakes with pats of fresh butter melting on top and pure maple syrup spilling down the sides. For those with bigger

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<sup>5</sup>L.M. "Mike" Hurley, Newton, Kansas #1 Santa Fe Rail Hub, 1871-1971 (North Newton: Mennonite Press Inc., 1985), 15.

appetites, there was apple pie with coffee for dessert.”<sup>6</sup> Harvey even had his own special blend of coffee, which was always brewed from fresh water brought in by tank car. One Topeka reporter wrote that so many people were eating at the Harvey House that western settlement was in danger of stopping at Topeka. He concluded that the Santa Fe needed to build more Harvey Houses at points farther down the line to encourage people to continue west.<sup>7</sup>

With the success of the Topeka lunch counter, Harvey and the Santa Fe did begin to look farther down the line, settling on a location in Florence, Kansas. They found the Clifton Hotel, a newly built hotel and eating house whose proprietor was already under contract with the Santa Fe to provide services for train travelers. Harvey requested aid from the Santa Fe to help purchase the hotel, but the railroad was tied up in a struggle with the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad and could not provide the capital required to purchase the Clifton. Rather than give up on this venture, Harvey decided to purchase the hotel himself, making an agreement with the Santa Fe that he would be reimbursed when financial conditions permitted. This proposition was suitable to both parties and was formalized on January 1, 1878, by the first written contract between Harvey and the Santa Fe. It stated that the Santa Fe would stop its mainline passenger trains at Florence for two meals each day. If the railway installed dining cars on the mainline, however, the Santa Fe would take over the hotel and pay Harvey at the fixed price stipulated in the

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<sup>6</sup>Morris, 11-12.

<sup>7</sup>L.L. Waters, Steel Trails to Santa Fe (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1950), 286.

agreement. The initial contract was for the period of January 1, 1878 to January 1, 1883.<sup>8</sup>

In January 1878, Harvey officially purchased the Clifton for the price of \$4,275. Harvey also paid an additional \$1,000 in gold to the Santa Fe for furniture and fixtures for the hotel.<sup>9</sup>

Harvey immediately set out to clean and redecorate the Clifton in a manner that befitted the developing "Harvey standard." Workers scrubbed every wall until it was spotless, scoured and polished floors, as well as every other item in the hotel. Mrs. Harvey went abroad to choose all the furnishings for the hotel, such as coal oil lamps, decorative candles, and heavy carved walnut furniture to enhance the traditional English elegance of the structure. The front yard, landscaped in true English fashion, was embellished by two huge fountains built on either side of the front entrance.

Mrs. Harvey chose Irish linens, English silver, and French china to grace the tables of the Clifton Hotel.<sup>10</sup> The pattern of the linens, imported from John S. Brown and Sons of Belfast, was created exclusively for the Harvey Houses to match the imported china which was also designed solely for the Harvey House.<sup>11</sup> The most talked about

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<sup>8</sup>Contract between Fred Harvey and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, 1 January 1878, Harvey House Museum, Florence Historical Society, Florence, Kansas. Note: This was the only contract signed between Harvey and the Santa Fe until 1889, all other operations were "gentlemen's agreements."

<sup>9</sup>Henderson, 11.

<sup>10</sup>Byron Harvey, "The Story of the Harvey Girls," Westerner's Brand Book 18 (October 1961): 58.

<sup>11</sup>Florence Historical Society, The First Harvey House (Florence: Florence Historical Society, no date): 3.

change at the Clifton, however, was the arrival of Konrad Allgaier, the famed chef of Chicago's Palmer House. Fred Harvey paid him a salary of \$5,000 per year, an almost unheard of amount in the 1870s, and reportedly twice the salary of the highest paid man in Florence, the town banker.<sup>12</sup>

The opening of the Clifton in January 1878 was a success, and it soon became a very busy place. The Harvey House served not only the Santa Fe passengers and crew, but also the citizens of Florence. Customers could expect impeccable service and appetizing food when dining at the Harvey House. On February 23, 1878, the local Florence newspaper announced that "the proprietor has no cards and we don't know his name - but he sets a square meal all the same. Everybody takes breakfast and supper there."<sup>13</sup> Customers could choose from several different main courses, as well as side dishes of potatoes and vegetables, bread, dessert, and a beverage (figure 3).

The Harvey House did not skimp on portions. Fresh strawberry and rhubarb pies, cut in five pieces instead of the traditional six, enticed the hungry passengers. Harvey believed in serving large portions so there would be no complaints from any customers, even those with large appetites. In April 1878, Harvey added an eating stand where customers could dine cheaper than in the dining room. At the lunch counter, favorites such as Monte Cristo and gourmet sandwiches were served along with New England Scallop Salad and German Potato Salad for about thirty cents.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Henderson, 11.

<sup>13</sup>Florence Herald, 23 February 1878.

<sup>14</sup>Foster and Weiglin, 144-45.

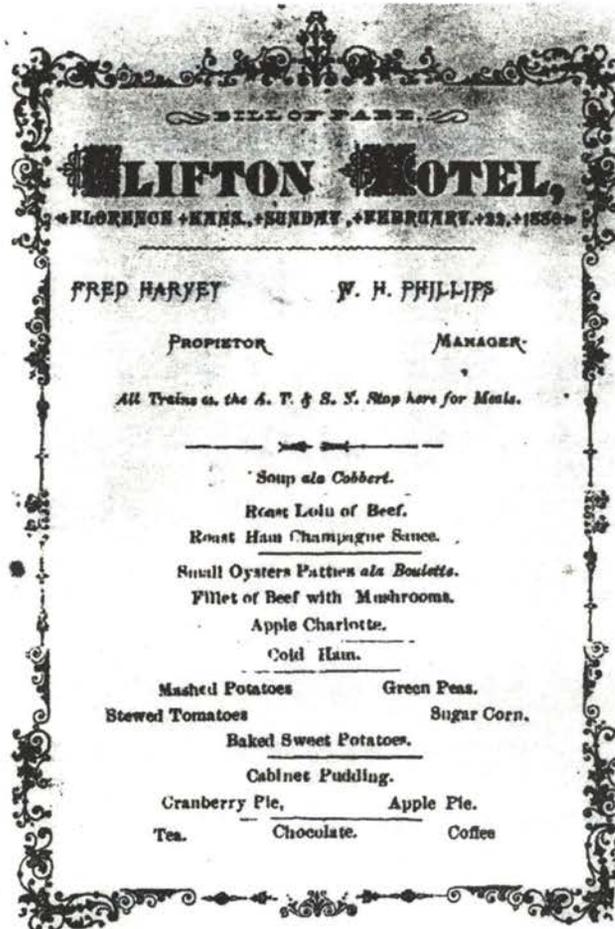


Figure 3. Clifton Hotel Menu, Florence, Kansas, February 22, 1880.

Source: Kansas Museum of History, Topeka, Kansas.

Florence's Harvey House continued to grow, becoming a meal stop for three trains daily, with an average of fifty passengers per train.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Harvey quit his job with the CB&Q and began expanding even farther westward, opening his next eating house in Lakin, Kansas in 1879. By 1883, there were additional Harvey Houses in Coolidge, Emporia, Kinsley, Newton, Hutchinson, Wellington, and Arkansas City, several of which had hotel accommodations. "Meals by Fred Harvey" soon became the slogan for the Santa Fe, and passengers began traveling with the Santa Fe specifically for the Harvey service, causing an increased amount of traffic and profit.

The "Harvey standard" was Fred Harvey's trademark. He was dedicated to bringing the best quality ingredients available to areas where it was practically impossible. He relied on the Santa Fe Railroad to provide the means of supplying his houses. Fresh water was shipped via the Santa Fe to areas where the water was not clean so that the drinking water was acceptable and the coffee would always be up to standard. Boxcars outfitted as refrigerator cars were used to ship ice, fresh vegetables, fruits, dairy products, and fresh meat. To keep a steady supply of fresh products in the Midwest establishments, Harvey established the Fred Harvey Farm in Newton, Kansas. This facility included a dairy farm and creamery, poultry farm, and a carbonating and bottling plant which bottled Coca-Cola for exclusive use in the Harvey Houses.<sup>16</sup>

Within the Harvey system, cleanliness was of utmost importance. Harvey expected every house to be gleaming at all times, from the tables and floors to the

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<sup>15</sup>Florence Historical Society, 5.

<sup>16</sup>Hurley, 137.

uniforms of the waitresses. After each meal, employees were not allowed to leave work until their job was finished and their station spotless. Harvey was known for his unexpected white-glove inspections, and woe be to the manager whose establishment was not up to standard. If Fred Harvey found even one piece of cracked china, he would pull the tablecloth off the set table, sending everything crashing to the floor. The managers of the houses were responsible for keeping everything in shape and often conducted inspections of their own. As John Preston Brady, a busboy in the Emporia Harvey House stated, his manager could "spot a speck of dust a mile away."<sup>17</sup>

There were no excuses. If it said "Fred Harvey," you could expect the best, as reflected in the Harvey Company slogan: "Maintenance of standard regardless of price." It is said that Harvey provided such good quality at low prices that his houses never made any profit. If they did make a profit, something was wrong and must be changed to insure quality. One manager was censured when it was discovered that he had cut an extra thirteen portions out of a piece of meat in order to make a financial showing. Discovered by David Benjamin, Harvey's general manager, the house manager was told:

We will stand for your operating a house without any profit-we will even stand for your operating at a loss, when the reasons therefor are good and sufficient-but under no circumstances will we permit a lowering of the standard of food or service we give the public in order to make a showing.<sup>18</sup>

The magnitude of the Harvey system allowed for cost savings which offset the price of

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<sup>17</sup>Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, 107.

<sup>18</sup>"How Fame Has Been Won for the Harvey Service by Devotion to a Business Principle," 39.

high quality standards, and free shipping on the Santa Fe provided huge savings. Despite statements that the Harvey system operated at a loss, Santa Fe records show that the Harvey system earned a total profit of \$107,273 for the year of 1897, of which the Santa Fe received \$30,303.<sup>19</sup> By 1912, the Santa Fe's share of the Fred Harvey profits had increased to \$303,749 -- ten times the amount just fifteen years earlier.<sup>20</sup>

Harvey Houses appealed to a variety of people. Lunch counters were available for people of lesser means to get a decent meal at a fair price, while those with more money could be served a more elaborate meal in the dining room. The fifty-cent meal established at the opening of the houses was soon raised to seventy-five cents, but this amount would not change again until 1918, when the price went to a dollar.<sup>21</sup> Sleeping accommodations available in some of the Harvey Houses also carried the Harvey standard. The weary traveler was pleased to find a comfortable room with clean sheets for a moderate price. Travelers on the Santa Fe could expect their own room and bed for the price they would pay for a single bunk on other railroads.

By the early 1900s, travelers and tourists were flocking to Harvey Houses across the country. There were Harvey eating houses and hotels along the Santa Fe line in

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<sup>19</sup>Letter to Aldace F. Walker, New York, from E.P. Ripley, Chicago, 26 January 1898, Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Company Collection, Fred Harvey-Operation Eating Houses, Hotels, etc, RR 475:2, File 31, New York Executive Department, 1896-1950, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

<sup>20</sup>Letter to Walker D. Hines, New York, from E.P. Ripley, Chicago, 22 February 1913, Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Company Collection, Fred Harvey-Operation Eating Houses, Hotels, etc, RR 475:2, File 31, New York Executive Department, 1896-1950, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

<sup>21</sup>Berkman, 40.

Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Colorado, and Illinois. In 1906, a contract between the Harvey Company and the Santa Fe indicated that the Harvey company was involved in the business of

conducting, managing and operating its dining-car meal service and its railroad hotels, eating-houses and lunch-stands and the business of selling in and about its railway stations curios, newspapers, books, periodicals, fruits, candies, cigars, and such other articles as are customarily sold by news agencies upon trains and at stationary news-stands.<sup>22</sup>

Prior to 1900, the Harvey system represented a utilitarian approach to providing for the traveling public. But by the early 1900s, the Santa Fe and Harvey Company were trying to enhance their solid reputations by providing more luxurious surroundings to appeal to tourists. With the relative ease and inexpensive cost of rail travel, Americans began vacationing farther from home, visiting the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Park.

In Kansas, the Santa Fe began constructing larger depots with hotel accommodations. In 1905, a new depot was built in Chanute with a lunch room, dining room and hotel accommodations. Just two years later, a newly constructed Harvey House in Emporia would also provide lunch and dining rooms and hotel accommodations. Construction in Newton seemed to be never-ending, as the Santa Fe opened the first hotel in 1883, tore it down in 1898 for a new hotel which was renovated in 1900 as the Arcade Hotel. In 1930, the Santa Fe built a new Arcade Hotel and Harvey House which still stands today. All three of these buildings featured a Harvey lunch room, dining room,

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<sup>22</sup>Agreement between The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company and Fred Harvey, a corporation, 2 July 1906, Harvey County Historical Society, Newton, Kansas.

and hotel accommodations. Additionally, new Harvey Houses were opened at the Wichita Union Station and the Kansas City Union Station in 1914, where Harvey operated lunch and dining rooms, as well as news stands.

The line of grand hotels built by the Santa Fe at the turn-of-the-century, however, would prove to be the most popular: the El Vaquero in Dodge City, the Bisonte in Hutchinson, and the Sequoyah in Syracuse. Santa Fe advertising promoted these new hotels which offered all the modern conveniences, including “steam heat, electric lights, and electric bells”<sup>23</sup> while being conveniently located with respect to business and sight-seeing. These hotels were built with the tourist in mind, providing luxurious accommodations far beyond the quality of the smaller Harvey Houses and hotels.

In Dodge City, Fred Harvey operated a dining room for two years out of two old boxcars on stilts. One car served as the dining room while the other was the kitchen. Travelers, tired and dirty from a long day across the Kansas prairie must surely have been crestfallen to detrain and see two ugly old boxcars for a diner. But when customers stepped inside, they were always surprised. Even in boxcars, Harvey was determined to provide elegance. The walls were scrubbed, the floors spotless, and the tables set with the traditional fine linens, china, and silver service. Glasses of ice water and vases of fresh flowers awaited the arriving diners.

In a town accustomed to the worst images of frontier violence, the refined and luxurious El Vaquero must have been quite a sight. It was said that “West of Kansas City

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<sup>23</sup>Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Timetable, 10 September 1901, Special Collections, Ablah Library, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas.

there is no Sunday. West of Dodge City, there is no God!"<sup>24</sup> Built in the Richardsonian Romanesque style at a cost of \$50,000, the El Vaquero was a showplace of magnificent brick and stone, tile and copper roofing, iron awnings, terra cotta decorative tiles, a belt course of native sandstone, and art glass windows (figure 4). The station housed a lunch room, a dining room that could seat 108 people (figure 5), and 43 hotel rooms, as well as offices for Santa Fe employees. It was divided, with the eastern half for the offices and equipment necessary to run the trains and the western half for passenger services. The entire second floor was made up of sleeping rooms and baths for the crew and passengers. The first floor, set apart by its mosaic tile floor, copper pressed ceiling, wooden Venetian blinds, and grand staircase, housed the lobby of the hotel and the Harvey eating house. The remaining portion of the depot, the penthouse, was reached by an elaborate staircase from the second floor and housed offices.<sup>25</sup>

Although a beautiful and luxurious hotel, the El Vaquero was not a favorite of Harvey employees. Harvey Girl Joanne Stinelichner said that the El Vaquero had the reputation of being a workhouse: "There was nothing close to an eight-hour day in Dodge City. There were more trains coming in there all the time because of the wheat and cattle. I didn't find it any rougher than other towns, just very, very busy."<sup>26</sup> Despite the town's rough exterior, Harvey was still determined to provide elegant service.

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<sup>24</sup>Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, 113.

<sup>25</sup>Don Steele, "Santa Fe Depot Saved," The Dodge City Legend (July/Aug/Sept 1994): 2-3.

<sup>26</sup>Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, 115.



Figure 4: El Vaquero, Santa Fe Depot and Harvey House, c1905

Source: Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Photograph Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas



Figure 5: El Vaquero, Harvey House Dining Room

Source: Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Photograph Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas

Although the hotels which fit into the category of the "grand hotel" were beautiful and luxurious, the smaller locations were still quite nice. The final Arcade Hotel, built in Newton in 1930, was constructed in the Tudor Revival style. The first floor housed the Harvey dining and lunch rooms, which were known for their beauty. The local newspaper gave a glowing description in 1930, stating:

The lunch counters are built of steel, faced with oak and have tops of black Carrara glass. The furniture and built-in fixtures for the dining room and lunch counter match in design the interior architecture. The Harvey news stand is equipped with zinc-lined cases for cigars, other cases with sliding panels, all finished thruout in oak. Beginning at the extreme east end of the building one finds the Harvey dining room which is 35 by 38 feet, calculated to comfortably seat 60 guests at one time. One enters the dining room from the track side of the station passing by the news stand which is cosily located under the east end of the large waiting porch, and also by the two horseshoe shaped lunch counters, where 40 guests can be seated at one time. This beautiful room carries out the early English design and has a heavy oak beamed ceiling, with paneled side walls, the wood being finished with a rustic adzed surface. The paint is of silver gray applied in a rustic antique finish.<sup>27</sup>

Even those locations which were just lunch rooms were attractively designed.

The Harvey House which opened in Wichita's Union Station on March 7, 1914, included a horseshoe-shaped marble lunch counter to seat thirty people, marble-topped tables to seat twenty-four more customers, and a news stand and soda fountain as well.<sup>28</sup> Even though Wichita was located on a spur of the Santa Fe Railroad, here in the small lunch room the Harvey standard still applied. Customers could expect service equal to that of the grand hotels.

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<sup>27</sup>"Newton Dream is Now Reality," Evening Kansan-Republican, 6 October 1930.

<sup>28</sup>Craig Miner, Wichita: Daylight Station of America (Wichita: Multimedia Cablevision, 1984), 21.

All of the Harvey Houses in Kansas were important stopping points for the Santa Fe trains. At the turn-of-the-century, they were welcome sights for hungry rail travelers and tourists, yet by World War I they were serving thousands of government trains carrying troops for the war. Between the World Wars, the Harvey Houses would continue serving tourists and passengers, although suffering decline during the Depression. The rise of World War II again gave a boost to business as troop trains were served, but by the late 1940s, the advent of the airplane and the traveling public's reliance on the automobile made the Harvey Houses almost obsolete.

After the death of Fred Harvey in 1901, and his first son Ford Harvey in 1928, administration of the Harvey system was taken over by Fred Harvey's second son Byron Harvey. With this change in leadership also came a change in the business philosophy of the Harvey system. Over the next ten years, dining-car usage would increase dramatically on Santa Fe lines, resulting in the closure of over two-thirds of the Harvey Houses in the Southwest.<sup>29</sup> In Kansas, houses in Arkansas City, Emporia, Wichita, Chanute, Syracuse, and Topeka would not survive the 1930s, while the Bisonte in Hutchinson closed in 1946 and the El Vaquero in Dodge City closed in 1948. The Arcade Hotel in Newton would be distinguished as the longest continuously operating eating house in the country, remaining open from 1883 to 1957.<sup>30</sup>

Most of these buildings would eventually fall prey to time and decay and be torn down, but several were saved. A portion of the Clifton Hotel in Florence would be

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<sup>29</sup>Henderson, 36.

<sup>30</sup>See appendix A for the dates of operation for all Kansas Harvey Houses.

retained as a boarding house and eventually a Harvey House Museum, while the El Vaquero in Dodge City would be left to slowly disintegrate. The Union Station Harvey House in Wichita and the Arcade Hotel in Newton were both left until the early 1980s, when they were renovated for office space. Although most of the physical remains of the Harvey empire would be left to suffer and decay, the legend of Fred Harvey and his innovative service to the traveling public would be held up in popular literature as the "civilizing force of the nineteenth-century." Despite this exaggerated, romantic vision of Fred Harvey, he still deserves a place in Western history. There is no doubt that the famous "Harvey standard" did leave an indelible mark on the public conscience.

### CHAPTER III

#### “NOT JUST THE USUAL RUN OF WAITRESSES”: THE HARVEY GIRLS, 1878 - 1928

When talking to former Harvey Girls about their experiences in the employment of the Harvey system, there is one common feature with which every woman identifies -- the belief that they were not just waitresses, they were “Harvey Girls.” Ida McLean, a Harvey Girl from Valley Falls, Kansas, who went to work in Albuquerque in 1926 states: “I was sometimes perturbed about the attitude people sometimes had towards Harvey Girls as just waitresses. And, of course, that’s what we were, waitresses. But we weren’t just the usual run of waitresses.”<sup>1</sup>

This belief that the Harvey Girl was more than “just” a waitress was the result of a conscious desire by Fred Harvey to provide the best of everything, including customer service. He attempted this by developing an image of his ideal waitress based on the Victorian concept of the “perfect woman.” By requiring each of his waitresses to fit within this developed identity, he was able to manage an entire system which provided consistent quality and service. What Harvey created was a corps of efficient, well-trained women -- dressed alike with like manners and personalities. What the traveling

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<sup>1</sup>Ida MacLean, former Harvey Girl, interview by Maxine T. Edwards, 30 March 1992, Winslow, Arizona, Arizona Department of Library, Archives and Public Records, Phoenix, Arizona.

public saw, however, was the illusion of continuity throughout his chain of restaurants. In order to get the young women who were to become "Harvey Girls" to accept the image, Harvey modified the domestic ideology to be consistent with the new identity of women as wage earners in the public arena.

The Harvey Girl was a special type of waitress: dedicated, hard-working, moral and respectable. Wearing the signature black and white uniform as a badge of honor, she put forth the image of a wholesome, morally-upstanding citizen (figure 6). She was expected to uphold the principles and standards of the Harvey system while at work, as well as be a paragon of virtue outside of the workplace. In return for projecting the Harvey Girl image, she received a well-paid job and the security of a familial atmosphere which allowed a particular level of freedom away from home.

The Harvey Girl persona was developed in response to the strict social attitudes about men and women in the Victorian era. The idea of separate spheres for men and women dominated this time period, creating boundaries within which each sex functioned. "The public sphere of business, politics, and the professional life was defined as the male sphere. The private sphere of love, the emotions, and domesticity was defined as the sphere of women."<sup>2</sup> Yet by the 1880s, industrialization and urbanization were causing great social upheaval in American society, making it possible for the gradual widening of women's spheres. Even as these spheres widened, allowing more women into the labor force, the traditional domestic ideologies remained. Alice

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<sup>2</sup>Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 4.



Figure 6: Illustration of a Harvey Girl in uniform, c1892.

Source: Lesley Poling-Kempes, Far From Home: West by Rail with the Harvey Girls (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1994), 21.

Kessler- Harris points out that,

In a broad sense, notions of propriety and role served as organizational principles for women's work force participation. They created a reciprocally confirming system in which women were defined in terms of values appropriate to future home life: gentility, neatness, morality, cleanliness.<sup>3</sup>

Young, single, working-class girls were entering the work force in ever-increasing numbers, working in "acceptable occupations" such as factories, laundries, offices, and department stores. Statistics show that by 1880, 2.6 million American women were employed, up from the 1870 figure of 1.8 million women.<sup>4</sup>

The typical white, working woman during the Gilded Age was the "young, single daughter of ambitious immigrant or native parents who were not safely entrenched in the middle class."<sup>5</sup> She generally had a minimal education, no job training, and little desire or expectation to continue as a paid employee after marriage. Women born to working-class families usually had to contribute to their own financial support within the family. Urban women could find work in textile mills and garment factories, or in retail stores or offices if they had some education. Young women in rural settings, however, did not have as many opportunities. If she was educated, a rural woman could teach, but uneducated women generally relied on domestic service for financial subsistence.

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<sup>3</sup>Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 128.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Estabrook Kennedy, If All We Did Was to Weep at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 70.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 99.

The rapid entry of women into the labor force during this period produced a variety of new social issues, including work hours, labor conditions, and a concern for the moral well-being of young working women. Additionally, as women entered the work force, they had to cope with the social stigma of being a working woman. In order to combat this negative social opinion, working women endeavored to characterize the "perfect woman" as portrayed by the Cult of True Womanhood: pious, pure, submissive, and domestic.<sup>6</sup> This was reflected in the job choices these young women made, subscribing to a hierarchical ranking which favored office work over department store clerking, with factory workers, waitresses, and domestic servants coming next in order of preference.<sup>7</sup> The quest of these working-class women, their wage labor notwithstanding, was to become more like the women of the middle class.

### *Development of the Harvey Girl Image*

Poorly educated, white working-class girls had few opportunities and a limited range of occupations open to them in the West in the late nineteenth century. Conventional Victorian social ideology put forth the notion that restaurant work presented moral dangers to young women due to the freedom of talking with strangers and the acceptance of money in the form of tips. Although many women worked as waitresses without succumbing to this danger, there were enough "bad" women to give the profession a negative reputation. The image of the Harvey Girl was developed in an attempt to counteract this negative stereotype of the "good girl gone bad."

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<sup>6</sup>Welter, 152.

<sup>7</sup>Kessler-Harris, 135.

In order to attract a particular genre of women to work as Harvey Girls -- namely the attractive, single, young, white female -- Fred Harvey had to develop an identity for her which was socially and morally acceptable to both society and the young woman. Although a step up the social ladder from domestic service, waitressing did not fit within the concepts of Victorian womanhood because it "left them open to improper advances and put them in the position of serving the personal needs of men outside a family relationship."<sup>8</sup> These women would have to adopt the image which Harvey established before he could expect them to leave home and go west to work.

Thousands of young women from all over the United States willingly accepted the image, answering newspaper advertisements placed by Fred Harvey, requesting "Young women, 18 to 30 years of age, of good character, attractive and intelligent, as waitresses in Harvey Eating Houses on the Santa Fe Railroad in the West."<sup>9</sup> Harvey not only offered a job with good wages, but also the chance of adventure to the women who were to become Harvey Girls. This policy of hiring single, young women as waitresses and Harvey's dedication to quality and service made this string of eating establishments along the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad a progressive new venture in the late 1800s.

Harvey established his idea of the respectable working woman following the model of the Cult of True Womanhood. By identifying with its concepts, Fred Harvey endeavored to form a collective identity for his waitresses around the image of the

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<sup>8</sup>Mary Lee Spence, "Waitresses in the Trans-Mississippi West: 'Pretty Waiter Girls,' Harvey Girls and Union Maids," in *The Women's West*, edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 221.

<sup>9</sup>Samuel Adams, *The Harvey Girls* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1942), 7.

“perfect woman.” Their lives were controlled twenty-four hours a day, from the uniform they were required to wear to the dormitories where they were required to live. The desired result of this control was a substitute family environment conducive to the moral protection and maintenance of a young woman’s social status. This environment also provided a source of freedom beyond the boundaries of familial control, yet within a sheltered environment. For the Harvey Girls, it became a way of life which offered freedom, within limits, however, and empowerment not available in any other field of employment at that time.

From the 1880s to the 1920s, the process by which a young woman would become a Harvey Girl could start in a number of ways. She could be referred by a friend who worked at the Harvey House, by a towns person who knew the manager of the house, or by answering a newspaper advertisement. For Mary Wright, a farm girl from Joliet, Illinois, her experience with the Harvey system began around 1903 with a small indiscretion:

At the age of 16, by saying I was 18, I got a position with the Harvey Company. I went out to 18th and Wentworth Avenue to be interviewed by a woman by the name of Mrs. Simons who hired all the waitresses. She surely put you through the third degree; she never missed a thing. She examined your ears and looked in your hair - even examined your underwear. I am sure it was never so hard to get in the army.<sup>10</sup>

Jennie F. Stout, a Harvey Girl from Kansas who was sent to Barstow, California in 1924 remembers the application process she went through:

I didn’t know what the Harvey Girls were, I’d never heard of them. This

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<sup>10</sup>Mary Wright, “My Life as a Harvey Girl,” Hospitality Magazine 5 (December 1953): 4.

friend of mine, we had met in a business college here in town, she had heard of it. All she knew was that you shipped out with the Santa Fe Railroad and you lived in a hotel connected with the station. So we decided to go, we were working at Montgomery Wards and we didn't think much of that . . . we didn't know what we were getting into. They had an office in the Union Station in Kansas City. We went down and talked to her, and she said yes, there were some openings . . . Well, she had two openings that would take two girls, of course we didn't know the first thing about where it was. There was one opening in Needles, California and one in Barstow.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Harvey company initially ran employment advertisements, by far the most effective method of hiring was by word of mouth. Proving too costly to utilize advertisements by the 1920s, the Harvey Company began to rely on an applicant list based on references from former employees and reliable townspeople. This required the applicant to submit a formal application, photograph, and names of references where previously a letter of application had been acceptable.<sup>12</sup>

Changes in the hiring practices in the 1920s may have been a direct reaction to the new social and sexual freedoms of the era. Although there is no conclusive evidence to support this, it is certainly possible that the Harvey system felt a need to tighten hiring practices. By meeting a potential applicant and knowing her background, Harvey employers could better identify the morals and characteristics of each young woman, allowing them to choose those women whom they felt would appropriately uphold the standard of the Harvey image.

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<sup>11</sup>Jennie F. Stout, former Harvey Girl, interview by author, 19 November 1994, Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>12</sup>Spence, 226.

Harvey required his waitresses to be single and between the ages of 18 and 30. Writing about 1920s era office workers, Dorothy Brown states that “while some young single women might enter the office with one eye on respectability and possible advancement and the other on marriage, their employers early in the decade not only preferred single women but frequently dismissed women when they married.”<sup>13</sup> The prevailing social attitude concerning white, working-class women was that a woman was to work only until she was married. “A woman’s job skills were to improve her marital choices to allow her and her husband to sleep more securely, and to demonstrate her moral worth through self-support under the most trying circumstances. But a woman was not to work in order to advance a career.”<sup>14</sup>

Statistics show that seventy percent of the four million working women reported in 1890 were single.<sup>15</sup> After the turn-of-the-century, however, the social stigma against married women working began to wane. One cause of this was World War I, which required many women to work to support their families. Within the Harvey system, married women began to be hired on a regular basis around 1914, depending on the location. For example, the Emporia Harvey House employed eight Harvey Girls in 1916, two of which were married. In 1921, thirteen Harvey Girls were on staff in Emporia, and three of them were married. In Newton, only single women were hired from 1885 to

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<sup>13</sup>Dorothy M. Brown, Setting A Course: American Women in the 1920s (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 96.

<sup>14</sup>Sheila Rothman, Woman’s Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), 48.

<sup>15</sup>Kennedy, 70.

1910, but of sixteen Harvey Girls hired in 1920, twelve were single, one married, one divorced, and two widowed. Chanute records show one married Harvey Girl in 1914, 1922, and 1924. Florence, however, consistently hired only single women from 1880 to 1900.<sup>16</sup>

The racial and ethnic criteria for a Harvey Girl was consistent with prevailing social attitudes -- young women of English, Irish, or Scottish descent predominated among employees. Just as middle-class women of the time preferred to employ servants of English stock or second- and third-generation Irish, so too did the Harvey system have its preferences.<sup>17</sup> Census records from 1880 show that two of the three female dining room employees in Florence were of English descent; the third, a native of Ohio, was most likely of English descent as well. In Lakin, all three female waitresses were of English or Irish descent.<sup>18</sup> For the first forty years, Harvey's front-line service people were predominantly caucasian.

It wasn't until the 1920s that the Harvey system began to hire blacks and hispanics as Harvey Girls in the Southwest, although blacks were rarely hired. Judith Stoll's study of Harvey Houses in Florence, Chanute, Emporia, and Newton reveals that the hiring of non-white Harvey Girls was very rare in Kansas. In fact, there is no mention of any hispanic Harvey Girls, and only two instances of a black Harvey Girl, both

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<sup>16</sup>Stoll, Appendices 1, 2, 3, and 4.

<sup>17</sup>Rothman, 55.

<sup>18</sup>Kansas State Census, 1880, Marion County and Kearney County.

appearing in Newton in 1900 and 1905.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to young and single, the request that the Harvey Girls be attractive and intelligent was in keeping with the accepted labor practices wherever employees dealt with the public. As an unspoken rule, young women who worked as store clerks and in offices were required to be attractive and intelligent so they might “better serve the public.” Stores happily hired women who were neatly dressed and well-spoken because they could pay them much less than the male floorwalkers who supervised them and instructed them in their modes of dress. Clerical workers were considered the elite of working-class women, yet they too suffered the indignity of employers’ preferences for hiring young, attractive women to adorn the office.

Fred Harvey also requested women of good moral character. Although this expectation was not unusual, he required that they sign a statement vouching for their character. The girls were also required to sign a contract for twelve, nine, or six months, agreeing not to marry during the duration. If they did marry, they forfeited their pay and their railroad pass.<sup>20</sup> The Harvey Girls were proud of their good reputations, and most took care to follow the rules. Mary Wright, reminiscing on her experiences at Hutchinson, states:

I have always been proud of my Harvey reputation. In all the years, I never had to sign the book at night because I could not get in on time. When they said 11 o’clock I knew that is what they meant. No, I never climbed over the back gate, either. But don’t think I am an angel, for I knew just as many tricks as the next one. I could steal just as many

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<sup>19</sup>Stoll, Appendices 2 and 4.

<sup>20</sup>Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, 43.

watermelons as anyone. I was in on all the hand cars that were taken to the old swimming hole. I did my share of mischief. What I didn't know, there was always some railroad man to show me.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Work Environment*

Harvey preferred to hire inexperienced farm girls because they were used to hard work and had no preconceived notions about waitressing. Ida MacLean, in talking about her experiences with Fred Harvey, states:

I've heard lots of the girls, most of the girls, talk about how hard you worked. But we were farm girls, we were used to working hard. Early in the morning to maybe late at night. And if you were keeping house, and doing that, and teaching school too, it's going to take a lot of hard work. Six hours a day was a dream. So don't ask me if I worked hard. I thought it was a vacation.<sup>22</sup>

The working shift varied according to the level of business at each location, but all required the women to work six or seven days a week. Some houses required split shifts scheduled around meal times, while others required the waitresses to be on duty from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. or 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. At the Bisonte in Hutchinson, however, the Harvey Girls worked eight hours a day, six days a week in 1925.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to other lines of employment available to women, the Harvey Girls' working conditions were good. They were, of course, required to serve the meal trains which passed through daily, and at off-peak times they cleaned the establishment, prepared for the next train, and polished the silver. They were allowed to sit down, but only where

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<sup>21</sup>Wright, 12.

<sup>22</sup>Ida MacLean interview.

<sup>23</sup>"Contented Help Means Service," Hutch News, 15 August 1925.

they could not be seen by the customers. Considering that factory workers were on their feet for twelve hours a day and workers in garment factories were bent over a sewing machine for the same amount of time, the conditions were better for the Harvey Girls.

Although conditions in the Harvey Houses were better than in many other jobs available to women around the turn-of-the-century, there were other difficulties which the Harvey Girls faced. Successful applicants were required to go through one month of training without payment until the training was completed. Then they were sent out to an establishment in the Midwest or Southwest. They did earn a good salary, but some Harvey Girls were required to furnish their own uniforms. Their aprons were laundered by the Harvey system, and laundry facilities were available to wash their skirts, blouses, and underclothing.

Pay rates varied according to the location and size of the Harvey House and the experience of the waitress. In the late 1880s, the base pay was \$17.50 a month plus room, board, and tips. By 1900, it had increased to \$25.00 a month, rising to \$35.00 by the 1920s.<sup>24</sup> In 1925, however, waitresses in Hutchinson were making from \$45.00 to \$60.00, depending on experience.<sup>25</sup> This was at least comparable to the \$5.00 - \$6.00 made each week by factories workers from 1900 - 1920 and the \$7.00 - \$10.00 weekly wage made by clerks, typists, and cashiers.<sup>26</sup> The Harvey Girls, however, did not have the additional costs of room and board or clothing maintenance, which could be \$3.00 -

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<sup>24</sup>Spence, 227.

<sup>25</sup>"Contented Help Means Service," Hutch News, 15 August 1925.

<sup>26</sup>Rothman, 53.

\$5.00 per week.<sup>27</sup> They did have better work conditions than other waitresses. For example, waitresses in Chicago in 1914 were required to pay \$1.00 per week for laundering expenses, a weekly fee to the busboys, and a charge for food returned by dissatisfied customers.<sup>28</sup> For the Harvey Girls, tips were an additional source of money, and the standard tip up to 1920 was a dime.<sup>29</sup>

The benefits are what set the Harvey system apart from other employers. The Harvey Girls received a rail pass to their initial work destination, with the guarantee of a return pass home after fulfillment of the contract. If a woman decided to renew her contract, she received a week of unpaid vacation and a rail pass. If the Harvey Girl did not fulfill her contract, however, she was left to find her own way back home. While on the job, the Harvey Girl received free room and board. Such benefits were almost unheard of in other lines of employment.

### *The Work Community*

The typical women's work community around the turn-of-the-century was a "youthful, sex-segregated social world where important conservative values about femininity were reaffirmed by women themselves."<sup>30</sup> Among their peers, women were encouraged to follow the traditional ideals of the "perfect woman" and to seek out

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<sup>27</sup>Kennedy, 76.

<sup>28</sup>Leslie Woodcock Tentler, Wage Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900-1930 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 24.

<sup>29</sup>Spence, 227.

<sup>30</sup>Tentler, 80.

husbands rather than attempting a career. Although the work experience rarely provided a young woman with the means to challenge domesticity as an appropriate life goal, this was even less likely within the Harvey system, based as it was on the ideals of domesticity.

One means of creating a sheltered living situation for vulnerable young women was the provision of dormitories or hotel rooms staffed by live-in housemothers. This living establishment was the most important part of the work community for the Harvey Girls. The Harvey system in the early years required that single women live in the dormitory provided by the Harvey Company, where they were housed two women to a room. At the El Vaquero in Dodge City, the dormitory adjacent to the depot housed both male and female Harvey employees. In Newton, second-floor hotel rooms housed the Harvey Girls, while in Hutchinson, an apartment complex housed all thirty waitresses.

The off-work time for the Harvey Girls was as controlled as their on-work time. A ten o'clock curfew was established for all women, regardless of their age, and those who did not make it in by curfew were required to sign in with the manager or the housemother. Too many missed curfews could result in termination. A newspaper article commenting on Harvey practices in Hutchinson states:

Each girl has her own single bed. The dormitory is taken care of by a maid and matron and the girls have certain hours to be in, unless they have a special permit to stay out longer; in this way the management is sure that each girl will get the required amount of rest and will be able to be on duty the next day.<sup>31</sup>

Jennie Stout remembers that fellow Harvey Girls who had missed their curfew several

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<sup>31</sup>"Contented Help Means Service," Hutch News, 15 August 1925.

times were finally punished with a dose of castor oil ministered by the head waitress. They did not dare miss their curfew again.<sup>32</sup>

For the Harvey Girl, the work community was a substitute for the familial environment she had left behind. The Harvey system itself was considered a family, and the general managers kept a very close watch on the finer details of the system. Within each house, the Harvey employees were a close-knit group. This “family” included the manager and his family, chefs, cooks, bakers, busboys, clerks, cashiers, dishwashers, laundresses, chambermaids, and the Harvey Girls. This group constituted the foundation of the Harvey Girl’s social circle. Each of the other employees played a part in creating an acceptable social atmosphere for the impressionable young Harvey Girls. Joanne Stinelichner, a Harvey manager in the late 1920s, remembers her experiences with the Harvey Girls fondly, stating “I took care of the girls. They were like my family, my daughters. Some were very young -- one lied and was only fourteen -- they would get homesick and I’d arrange to get them a pass home. After a few weeks home, they’d be back, anxious to work again. The Harvey Girls were very happy women.”<sup>33</sup>

Apart from the obvious financial rewards the women reaped from free room and board, they also received social rewards from this communal living environment. The young women often worked in isolated communities hundreds of miles from home, with little opportunity for family contact. This living arrangement brought the women together, creating a web of social networks to help the younger waitresses. Often the

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<sup>32</sup>Jennie F. Stout interview.

<sup>33</sup>Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, 95.

women would spend their days off together, visiting friends in town, shopping, or sewing.

Jennie Stout recalls group outings on days off, stating:

In Barstow there was a reservoir. I never did understand where they got their water, but there was a reservoir that they changed the water in. It was cold as cold could be. You could go out and swim in it, but it was so cold that you didn't go until the last day, just before they changed the water. A bunch of us went at night, boy it was cold, because as soon as the sun went down that sand cools . . . we had a bonfire and all, but you couldn't stay in the water but a few minutes at a time, then you had to warm up. There were things you could do, we'd go for a hike.<sup>34</sup>

The community within which the Harvey Girls functioned, like those in other workplaces, was one with an active social life. Time during and after the work hours was spent together with other Harvey Girls (figure 7). Leslie Tentler's observations of factory women apply as well to Harvey Girls: "Group friendships were an extremely important source of job satisfaction and the rewards of friendship often outweighed, in the mind of the worker, the burdens attendant on most unskilled employment."<sup>35</sup> The system encouraged friendships, and even assigned women to locations in pairs. Vella M. Stokley, reminiscing about her own experiences as the sister of a Dodge City Harvey Girl in 1917, states that "most of the girls who worked with my sister seemed like my own sisters also, and therefore, I was the lucky recipient of many lovely gifts and goodies!"<sup>36</sup> There was, however, one rule of socialization which was not to be broken. Harvey Girls were not to socialize with male Harvey employees. They were allowed to date townsmen

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<sup>34</sup>Jennie F. Stout interview.

<sup>35</sup>Tentler, 64.

<sup>36</sup>Correspondence between Vella M. Stokley and Dee A. Harris, 29 August 1994.



Figure 7: Harvey Girls in Hutchinson, Kansas, c1915.

Source: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Photograph Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

and railroad men, but not Harvey men. Hazel Williams, a fifteen year old Harvey Girl from Dodge City was fired for talking to a busboy on the dormitory steps in 1918.<sup>37</sup> As she found out, this was not a rule to be broken without dire consequences.

In the role of the Harvey Girl, young women experienced a small level of freedom while working within the limitations placed upon them by society. Although there were a few advancement possibilities in traditional female occupations, the Harvey Girls could climb several rungs on the promotional ladder. The inexperienced Harvey Girl was first put to work in a training Harvey House, pouring water and serving the employees. After reaching a certain level of proficiency, she could then begin serving at the lunch counter or in the dining room of a small eating house (figure 8). The next step was to move on to the lunch counter or the dining room of a larger house. If a woman remained within the system for three to five years, she could make head waitress, and possibly even manager. Although there were few women who made it into the managerial ranks, Joanne Stinelichner did. Speaking of her experiences, she states:

It was unusual for a woman to be a manager, but I loved it -- managing the entire house, hiring, firing, buying food, everything. I relieved a manager and that's how it started. I was never a Harvey Girl again, unless someone needed temporary help. I was sent wherever the head office needed me: Guthrie, Canadian, Topeka, Amarillo, Slaton, Clovis, San Bernardino, Galveston, Dodge City. It was wonderful.<sup>38</sup>

These promotion opportunities reinforced the young women's self-confidence and provided added security which benefitted both the employee and the employer. However,

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<sup>37</sup>Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, 116.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 94-95.



Figure 8: Harvey Girls at the lunch counter in Emporia, Kansas, 1924.

Source: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Photograph Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas

the idea that a woman could actually have a career was not really an issue because the work community, however relatively empowering, reinforced the sense of domesticity instilled into the girls from an early age. Despite its requirement that Harvey Girls not marry during their contract, the Harvey Company advertised that women were finding men while working in the western Harvey Houses. Their contact with so many men during the day made husband-finding a continuing theme for the Harvey Girls.

The values of loyalty, dedication, and hard work that the Harvey Girls learned in their communal setting would last for a lifetime. Although the job was rather mundane and habitual, their daily routines were filled with adventure and excitement by each train that stopped for meals. The whole image of the Harvey Girl was infused with a sense of purpose, elevating the individual to a position above that of the average working-class girl. Customers noticed this image, personified by each Harvey Girl, and often took time to praise the women. In a letter written to Fred Harvey in 1927, a satisfied customer commended the manager of the Arkansas City Harvey House, stating "His lady helpers are all well trained and every one very obliging and courteous, every one rating much higher than the average girls doing this class of work, We are proud of the Arkansas City Harvey House."<sup>39</sup>

The Harvey Girl was imperative to the maintenance of the Harvey system. As her image evolved in the 1880s, it became a persona with which each successive Harvey Girl could identify. The requirements which made up the image remained basically the same

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<sup>39</sup>Letter to Fred Harvey, Kansas City, from Carl P. Eiffler, Arkansas City, Kansas, 14 September 1927, Fred Harvey Company Papers, 1896-1945, Box 15, Special Collections, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

from the 1880s to the 1920s; however, the era of the 1920s was a sort of transitional period. As society in general experienced a loosening of social and moral restrictions, the Harvey Girl image changed as well. The standards by which a Harvey Girl was hired loosened, work hours decreased, and wages increased, all while job opportunities for women expanded. Even the traditional uniform of the Harvey Girl changed, as women's clothing in general became shorter and slimmer. Despite this change, the Harvey system continued to maintain a level of standards for its Harvey Girls. Although conformity to these standards exacted costs from a woman's personal freedoms, the benefits were numerous: a good paying job with a limited amount of security, a new social circle, and the chance to travel beyond the immediate geographical confines of her hometown. But most of all, the Harvey Girl experienced a new-found sense of freedom as she ventured beyond the traditional limitations set for women.

## CHAPTER IV

### “IT WAS A WONDERFUL PLACE TO WORK”: THE HARVEY GIRLS, 1929 - 1957

The experiences of the Harvey Girls were constantly evolving from the 1930s to the 1950s, mirroring changes in the American labor force. Life for the Harvey Girl in 1935 was much different from that for the Harvey Girl in 1955. One common factor of the entire period, however, is the pride with which women from all three decades remember their experiences with Fred Harvey. In the words of Mildred Land Brooks Wiggins, a Topeka Harvey Girl in 1937, “It was a wonderful place to work.”<sup>1</sup> Although the very basis of the Harvey Girl image began to slowly disintegrate in the 1940s and 1950s, female Harvey employees continued to identify with the traditional image of the wholesome young woman throughout the decades.

Life changed for working women in general during these thirty years. With the onset of the Great Depression in 1930, America quickly plunged into an economic tailspin from which it would not fully recover until World War II. During this time, many American women confronted new and drastic circumstances as they struggled to replace money lost by unemployed or underemployed husbands and to provide for their families. But the Depression meant different things to different women, depending on their

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<sup>1</sup>Mildred Land Brooks Wiggins, former Harvey Girl, interview by author, 19 November 1994, Kansas City, Missouri.

circumstances, as Robert Daniel explains:

To the homemaker the depression meant the loss or threatened loss of her husband's job; to the working woman it often meant the loss of her own. To the woman who came of age during the thirties, it imposed an austere style of life and uncertainty about whether she could finish school, whether she could find employment, whether she should defer marriage, or if married, whether she could have a child.<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that to all men and women, the Depression meant hardship and employment anxiety. For women as a group, however, economic survival during this time was less difficult than that for men. Women generally fared better than men due to the segmentation of work into men's and women's jobs. No man was willing to work in stereotypical "female" jobs such as nursing, housekeeping, or clerical work where the Depression hit the lightest. Although this afforded some job security for women, Susan Ware explains that it came at the expense of "heightened sexual stereotyping of men's and women's work: women continued to be shunted into low-paying, low-status jobs in the economy, while skilled and professional jobs were reserved for men."<sup>3</sup> Additionally, most government relief and recovery programs were designed for men.

The boundaries of women's work began to change as new opportunities opened for women in the late 1930s. The Depression, which should have driven women back to their homes, instead solidified their positions in the labor force. Women began to make real gains in new or expanding sectors of the economy, finding work in such positions as

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<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Daniel, American Women in the 20th Century: The Festival of Life (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 86.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Ware, Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 199-200.

telephone and telegraph operators, clerks and bookkeepers, saleswomen, buyers, designers, decorators, and copywriters.<sup>4</sup>

The first half of the 1940s brought new challenges to women workers as they replaced men in the war industries “for the duration” of the war. Although the war strengthened the economy, it also disrupted the social arrangements of society and made unprecedented claims on the lives of men and women. Yet, substantial positive changes in women’s roles occurred during this period, as the value of women in extra-familial roles increased in the public consciousness. No longer were women praised merely for their role as mother and housewife, they were now made aware of their importance as workers, citizens, and even soldiers. Statistics show that by mid-1942, employers were hiring women in seventy percent of semiskilled positions and in sixty-three percent of professional and managerial positions.<sup>5</sup> The war, however, afforded more than just factory work. It provided the first opportunity for women to serve as regular members of the armed forces, as women enlisted in the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots, Women’s Army Corps, Marine Corps Women’s Reserves, and the Army and Navy Nurse Corps.

The end of the war brought a renewed emphasis on the home, as the national goal changed from military victory to domestic social stability. Whether by force or by choice, women began to leave the labor force, particularly those working in heavy industry. This return to the home was encouraged and reinforced by a powerful media appeal, and by

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 224.

<sup>5</sup>Susan M. Hartmann, The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 55.

1946, the number of working women had declined from its wartime peak of 19,170,000 to 16,896,000.<sup>6</sup> Even this decreased number, however, was larger than the figures recorded for 1940. Despite this initial drop after the war's end, women did not quit working, they simply moved out of "men's" jobs into "women's" work. By the end of the decade, the numbers had once again risen, as twenty-nine percent of all women were working, constituting thirty percent of the entire American workforce.<sup>7</sup>

The 1950s saw even more changes in the role of the woman as worker and housewife. Rising consumerism served as a major force driving women to seek jobs during this decade. Eugenia Kaledin indicates that "women who did not have to work were beginning to see themselves not as neglecting their families by working outside the home, but as helping them by raising their standard of living."<sup>8</sup> As a result, the average age of the woman worker began increasing. Women over forty-five years of age began contributing significantly to the number of women in the work force. Contrary to the notion that the 1950s was an era of stay-at-home moms, statistics show that the proportion of women with small children who sought to go out to work increased by thirty-three percent, while those women with children less than six years of age increased by twenty-five percent in the work force.<sup>9</sup> Women were now asking for equal access to

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<sup>6</sup>Hartmann, 24.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Eugenia Kaledin, Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s (Boston: Twayne, 1984), 64.

<sup>9</sup>Kessler-Harris, 303.

employment, not as a “special favor to help them maintain their fitness to perform home roles, but as their right as members of a free-market economy that theoretically offered the opportunity to compete to all who wished to try.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Changing the Image*

The Victorian-based image of the Harvey Girl was well established in the minds of the general public by 1930. She was wholesome, neat, pretty, submissive, and friendly. Wherever travelers went, they could expect to find the same type of service at any Harvey House across the country. Yet with the onset of the Great Depression, the prevailing Victorian social notions that the Harvey Girl image had been built upon took a backseat to economics. The standard wage for the Harvey Girls, originally so high, sunk to \$15.00 - \$16.00 a month, less even than the original 1880s wage. Becoming a Harvey Girl no longer provided an access to the middle class, and the job lost its exclusivity.

According to Lesley Poling-Kempes,

The Harvey Girls changed quickly from a precision group of women at least outwardly mirroring one another, to a corps of waitresses that included women who under the old ‘standard’ would not have measured up (educational background, marital status, physical poise) and would have been turned away at the Harvey employment offices.”<sup>11</sup>

No longer could the Harvey system require the strict “standards” for its Harvey Girls as they had in the previous fifty years. A new image of the American woman was developing, based on her individual right to choose to go out to work, rather than being restricted by the belief that married women had a responsibility only to the home. As

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 310.

<sup>11</sup>Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, 193.

married and older single women began entering the Harvey system, the image of the Harvey Girl began to change from the original ideal of the wholesome young woman.

The typical woman worker in the 1930s was more often married, tended to be slightly older, and was probably a little better educated than the working woman of the 1920s.<sup>12</sup> As this change occurred in the work force, it also changed within the Harvey system. Consequently, the Harvey employment office was forced to change hiring patterns during the 1930s and 1940s, and the traditional “standards” required of the Harvey Girl began loosening. Word of mouth continued to be an important source of new applicants, although potentials could apply at the local Harvey House or send a resume with references to the employment offices in Chicago and Kansas City. In 1929, more than half of the new Harvey Girls were hired by correspondence alone.<sup>13</sup> Aileen Dighero recalls getting her job at the Newton Harvey House in 1933 through her sister-in-law, a Harvey Girl from Amarillo, Texas. When she married and left the Harvey House just one year later, her sister Marian replaced her.<sup>14</sup> Verna Welsh, a Newton Harvey Girl in 1937, remembers asking her father if she could work in the Harvey laundry in Newton. Because her father did not want her to work at a laundry, he talked to the house manager and got her a job. Recollecting her experience, she states “I went down and I can’t remember an interview, I just remember going to work. Previously I had served private

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 254.

<sup>13</sup>Spence, 226.

<sup>14</sup>Aileen Jordan Allen Dighero, former Harvey Girl, interview by author, 17 December 1994, Halstead, Kansas.

parties, dinners, and I had also served banquets at the Rickman Hotel. So I had some training.”<sup>15</sup> For Virginia Paulsen Green, a sixteen-year-old Topeka girl who became a Harvey Girl in Barstow, California in 1936, her reason for employment was quite a different story:

I wasn't well. I was a real skinny little girl when I was young, and I got pneumonia every winter. My doctor advised me to go to a warm climate for the winter, he didn't think I'd make another winter in Kansas City. And, I had no way of going, we was very poor people. And he said "Would you go to work for the Harvey House?" And I said "Where's that?" I didn't know what the Harvey House was, I was just a teenager. And he told me, "I've got a friend down there, and so you won't be going alone, see if you've got a girlfriend that'll go with you, and I can get the two of you a job down there." "But," he said, "You've got to be of age. Your mother will have to sign that you're of age." Well, mamma lied and signed for me.<sup>16</sup>

When asked why she went to work for Fred Harvey in 1953, Helen Collins replied that because she had not graduated from high school, she did not have the education required for clerical jobs. She went to work for Harvey because she could make good tips and work the late shift from 4:00 p.m. to 12:00 a.m., the same shift her husband worked.<sup>17</sup>

The contractual demands of not marrying and of staying for a six or nine-month duration, lessened during the 1920s, were eventually dropped in the 1940s. Managers

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<sup>15</sup>Verna Northcott Welsh, former Harvey Girl, interview by Maxine T. Edwards, 3 April 1992, Arizona, Arizona Department of Library, Archives and Public Records, Phoenix, Arizona.

<sup>16</sup>Virginia Paulsen Green, former Harvey Girl, interview by author, 11 September 1994, Pleasanton, Kansas.

<sup>17</sup>Helen Hays Collins, former Harvey Girl, interview by author, 4 April 1996, Halstead, Kansas.

were simply looking for women to fill a uniform during and after the war.<sup>18</sup> Although the Harvey Company had previously dropped the requirement of being single, as societal pressures forced married women out of the labor force during the Depression, the Harvey system followed suit, generally employing only single girls during the 1930s. The 1940s, however, saw mostly married women hired as Harvey Girls.

The harsh economic times of the Depression induced the belief that married working women were “stealing jobs” from men. The idea of a married woman working only for “pin money” still existed, and many states and the federal government adopted laws and regulations to exclude married women from public employment. “To explain why a slowly rejuvenating economy could not provide jobs for men required a scapegoat,” writes Alice Kessler-Harris. “Who better than the women who seemed simultaneously to be taking jobs away from the male bread-winners and destroying the family.”<sup>19</sup> The Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor defended married women workers throughout the 1930s. A 1933 bulletin, for instance, states that “If a married woman is working in a factory, a laundry, or a restaurant kitchen, one may be pretty sure that her husband or sons are unemployed, or their wages are too low to properly shelter, feed, and clothe the family.”<sup>20</sup> As it had done since its inception, the Women’s Bureau defended the woman’s right to work based on her role as mother and wife, and not

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<sup>18</sup>Lesley Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, 193.

<sup>19</sup>Kessler-Harris, 251.

<sup>20</sup>Eleanor Nelson, Women at Work: A Century of Industrial Change, Women’s Bureau Bulletin No. 115, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933), 7.

because she had the right to work. The Bureau's justification for married women working was because the mother had a responsibility to her family. In 1933, one of the worst years of the Depression, Women's Bureau literature stated:

With a scarcity of jobs, an attack has been made on the married woman and her right to work has been challenged. Sometimes wholesale dismissal of married women workers has taken place. When unemployment is widespread this is particularly devastating to the lives of many of these women. At this time the burdens of family support, which many of them bear, become greater and their wages become even more necessary to themselves and to their families.<sup>21</sup>

In a study of census records and city directories for Chanute, Emporia, Florence, and Newton, Judith Stoll reveals that married women were readily being hired in Kansas Harvey Houses by the 1910s. In Chanute, a married woman was hired as early as 1905. This study also reveals a reduction in the number of married women hired during the Depression, following the national trend. In Emporia, for example, the study shows that married women were steadily hired from 1910 to 1930. However, no married women were hired during the 1930s, although single women continued to be hired. Data from Chanute follow the same trend, with married women hired throughout the 1920s, but in 1929 and 1931 only single women were hired. For those houses which stayed open in the 1940s, the study reveals that more married women were hired than single women.<sup>22</sup> Helen Collins indicates that of the fourteen to twenty Harvey Girls employed in Newton from 1953 to 1957, all were married or widowed except one.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>22</sup>Stoll, Appendices 1, 2, and 4.

<sup>23</sup>Helen Hays Collins interview.

Age limitations, originally a part of the standard, also changed during these decades. With the onset of World War II, the Harvey Houses began looking for women with previous Harvey experience. In fact, Harvey Company literature began touting the mature woman worker, producing literature featuring pictures of smiling women in their fifties. In 1945, one such advertisement, titled "Back in the Ranks" begins by detailing a 5:00 a.m. phone call to a mature woman asking for her help. The response: "Certainly she can. She has two sons in the service. And she's always on call to help in a pinch at Fred Harvey's -- the same Harvey House where she was a "Harvey Girl" forty years ago. Except for patriotic women like her, many of our young fighting men would go hungry."<sup>24</sup>

Racial considerations were also relaxed during this time. Previous to the 1930s, generally only caucasian women were hired. As Kessler-Harris explains, "one measure of genteel employment for native-born white women was the absence of immigrant or black work mates."<sup>25</sup> The conspicuous absence of nonwhite Harvey Girls certainly supports this view, though the need for workers in the late 1930s and 1940s caused the Harvey system as a whole to begin hiring women of varied racial backgrounds. In Kansas, however, the Harvey Girls remained predominantly white during this period. Judith Stoll's study reveals that in Chanute in 1929 and 1931 only white women were hired, as was true in Emporia in 1930, 1931, 1934, and 1936. As late as 1948, 1952, and 1955, all

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<sup>24</sup>"Back in the Ranks," a publicity brochure prepared by the Fred Harvey Company, 1945, Volume 23, Miscellaneous Records, Fred Harvey Company Papers, 1896-1945, Special Collections, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

<sup>25</sup>Kessler-Harris, 137.

the Harvey Girls working in Newton were caucasian as well.<sup>26</sup> This followed the common realities of the job market for nonwhite workers. Black women continually faced discrimination as they were confined to the bottom of the labor market pool in such occupations as laundry and domestic work. Within the Harvey system, black women were hired, but generally only in such positions as chambermaids or laundresses.

Perhaps the biggest difference in the new Harvey Girl image was the uniform. Although the colors of black and white remained the same, by the 1930s the skirt had been shortened to just below knee length. Detailing her memories of the uniforms in Barstow, California in 1937 (figure 9), Virginia Green recalls wearing:

White bibs, wrap around skirts and black blouses. Stiff collars. When we'd sit, they had barrels for us to sit on so you could open your skirt in the back and sit on the barrel and your skirt would hang down around it and wouldn't get wrinkled. Oh boy, and you had to be examined before you went on the floor. You spread your arms up in the air like this, up above your head, to be sure you had no sweat rings under your arms, cause the sweat stains show up on them black blouses. And that was the days before deodorant. You'd have to put your hands up and turn around for her -- the head waitress. And then she'd check to be sure you had your hairnet on, and see if your seams were straight in your stockings.<sup>27</sup>

Green also remembered that at the lunch counters, the uniform standard was black shoes and stockings for breakfast and lunch, and white shoes and stockings for dinner. In the dining room, the Harvey Girl wore white shoes and stockings at all times. During World War II, the uniforms became more utilitarian, as long sleeves gave way to short sleeves, and the apron and bib became just a shirt and skirt (figures 10 and 11).

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<sup>26</sup>Stoll, Appendices 1, 2, and 4.

<sup>27</sup>Virginia Paulsen Green interview.



Figure 9: Virginia Paulsen Green and Lucille Maxie, Barstow, California, 1937.

Source: Virginia Paulsen Green



Figure 10: Helen Hays Collins, Newton, 1953.

Source: Helen Hays Collins



Figure 11: Uniform from the Newton Harvey House, c1957.

Source: Harvey County Historical Society, Newton, Kansas.

One thing which remained the same about the uniform was the standard of cleanliness. As Mildred Wiggins recalls, "when we got through serving one meal, we threw that apron and bib in the laundry. When I went back at noon, I had a complete new apron and bib. So we'd just change right there at the Harvey House."<sup>28</sup> Although the uniform style changed over time, color was the one characterizing feature which identified the Harvey Girl, no matter what time period she worked. The distinctive black and white uniform was a mainstay of the Harvey Girl image.

### *The Work Environment*

As changes occurred in the image of the Harvey Girl, so too did they occur in the work environment. Social legislation which changed the working hours, conditions, and minimum pay for women in general also improved conditions for the Harvey Girls. In 1934, the National Industrial Recovery Act set restaurant codes for hours, wages, and salary deductions. For women, the act set a maximum of forty-eight work hours per week, allowing for only twelve hours within a twenty-four hour period, and not more than two split shifts per day. Wages were set at \$8.44 to \$9.33 per week, depending on the size of the city, except in Kansas and Missouri, where the minimum rates were allowed by code to be ten percent lower. Deductions were set at twenty-five cents for each meal up to a maximum of \$3.00 per week, \$2.50 a week for lodging, \$5.00 for uniform purchase, and twenty-five cents for each item laundered.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Mildred Land Brooks Wiggins interview.

<sup>29</sup>Harriet A. Byrne, Employment in Hotels and Restaurants, Women's Bureau Bulletin No. 123, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 6-7.

Reports of the working hours for Harvey Girls varied according to the location and level of business for each Harvey House. Aileen Dighero reported working six hours a day in split shifts in Newton in 1934-1936, while Mildred Wiggins remembered working three shifts in Topeka in 1937:

Oh, I lived right close, about two blocks from the Harvey House. Working three shifts a day, it made it awful handy to live close. Specially I had three little boys, and had to be [home]. Of course the hours that my husband worked, we could kind of change off. When I was going to work, he would be coming home from work 'cause he worked nights there for a while. I'd be going to work at 6:00 and he'd be coming home at 6:00.<sup>30</sup>

Verna Welsh, recalled that her work on a split shift in Winslow, Arizona, started at 6:00 a.m. and ended at 10:00 a.m., and then required her to return again from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m.<sup>31</sup>

The 1940s brought a whole new dimension to work schedules, as troop trains brought large numbers of customers to the Harvey Houses. Clara Conner Groshowski, a Harvey Girl in Newton during the war, recalls how the troop trains changed business at the Newton Harvey House. She remembered having only one and a half to two hours notice to get to the depot to meet troop trains. The train crew would call into the Harvey House and let them know they were arriving, then the house would call its workers, who would come in and set up table settings especially for the troops. The train stops were thirty to forty-five minutes each, and everything was ready when the men stepped off the

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<sup>30</sup>Mildred Land Brooks Wiggins interview.

<sup>31</sup>Verna Northcott Welsh interview.

train.<sup>32</sup> Helen Collins remembers that from 1953 to 1957, a forty-hour work week was strictly followed.<sup>33</sup>

Pay rates for the Harvey Girls fluctuated during this period, revealing the ups and downs of the economy. In 1929, a Harvey Girl began at \$35.00 a month, which included room and board. After the first six months and annually thereafter, she could gain a \$5.00 increment until she reached the maximum allowed of \$50.00.<sup>34</sup> Aileen Dighero, however, reported that she was making only \$15.00 a month in Newton in 1933, but that tips averaged about ten cents per customer. Virginia Green also remembers making \$15.00 - \$16.00 a month in 1936. For Aileen Dighero, pay rates increased dramatically in 1940 when she became head waitress in LaJunta, Colorado, and began making \$40.00 a month.<sup>35</sup> By the 1950s, the Harvey system was paying its waitresses by the hour. Helen Collins recalls earning forty-five cents per hour for an eight-hour shift in Newton in 1953, with tips averaging twenty-five cents per customer.<sup>36</sup>

Benefits for the Harvey Girls remained essentially the same as those provided from the 1880s to the 1920s. Room and board was available, but the women were no longer required to live in company dormitories. Meals continued to be an important

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<sup>32</sup>Clara Conner Groshowski, interview by Jane Jones, 1986, videotape, Portraits of History, Newton Public Library, Newton, Kansas.

<sup>33</sup>Helen Hays Collins interview.

<sup>34</sup>Spence, 227.

<sup>35</sup>Aileen Jordan Allen Dighero interview; Virginia Paulsen Green interview.

<sup>36</sup>Helen Hays Collins interview.

benefit, especially during the Depression. Although the Harvey Girls were not allowed to eat some of the more expensive foods, they were provided with three meals a day. One Harvey Girl remembers the manager telling her that “Any girl who couldn’t take what she wanted to eat wasn’t smart enough to work for Fred Harvey.”<sup>37</sup> Although travel expenses were still paid by the company for employees sent out by the main office, it was not a major concern as most Harvey Girls were hired locally by the 1940s and 1950s.

### *The Work Community*

The work community of the Harvey Girls changed more than any other aspect during this time period. With the hiring of older, married women, the requirement for dormitory living became unnecessary. Judith Stoll’s study is helpful in determining time periods for dormitory living, indicating, as a general rule, that Harvey Girls in the 1930s lived onsite, while they lived offsite in the late 1940s and 1950s. The dormitory in Newton, for instance, housed the Harvey Girls, railroad men, and married employees. The women’s quarters were in a separate hallway, and each room had two twin beds with the bathroom down the hall.<sup>38</sup>

Although Harvey still provided dormitory rooms for those single women who chose to live in them, they were not required to live onsite. This change undermined the very fabric of the work environment. No longer did the Harvey Girls have a common lifestyle to bond the image. Social activities among the Harvey Girls were also curtailed as a result of this change in the living environment. As one would expect, those women

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<sup>37</sup>Aileen Jordan Allen Dighero interview.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

who shared living spaces experienced a more vibrant social life together. Virginia Green recalls taking fellow Harvey Girls to town in her 1932 Ford to spend their day off at a cabin which the girls rented communally. They would spend this time together cooking, shopping, and visiting. Another activity she remembers with fondness is driving from Barstow to Los Angeles for the races on her day off.<sup>39</sup> Marian Berger and Aileen Dighero both went out dancing with fellow employees in the evenings, and attended bonfires and skating parties at Newton's Sand Creek.<sup>40</sup> By 1950, however, the surrogate familial bond was almost completely gone.

What did remain, however, was the familial atmosphere that surrounded the Fred Harvey system as a whole. Within each Harvey House, the workers felt that they were part of a larger family unit. Even as late as 1953, an employee attitude survey of the Fred Harvey Company indicates that workers were happy with their jobs. Answering the question of whether they felt a part of the Fred Harvey organization, fifty-eight percent of the respondents felt like they really belonged.<sup>41</sup>

Although the period from 1930 to 1960 saw many changes, as well as the ultimate decline of the Harvey system, it was a period of positive increases for the Harvey Girls, including a rise in pay and a decrease of hours. Those Harvey Girls who worked as late as the 1950s continued to have the same pride in being a Harvey Girl as those who

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<sup>39</sup>Virginia Paulsen Green interview.

<sup>40</sup>Marian Jordan Berger, former Harvey Girl, interview by author, 17 December 1994, Halstead, Kansas; Aileen Jordan Allen Dighero interview.

<sup>41</sup>"You Said It, A Report on the Attitude Survey," Hospitality Magazine 5 (October 1953): 5.

worked in the early 1900s. Reflecting on her time with Harvey, Virginia Green recalls:

They taught me to wait tables. Taught me the finer points. You know we served under glass, and on silver service. Not in no beaneries. I never worked in no little places. I always worked in nice places. . . . You could really come out of there an a-one waitress. I could go anyplace in California and get a job. All I had to do was say 'I worked the dining room at Harvey' and you were in. If they didn't hire you that day, you knew they'd probably hire you soon."<sup>42</sup>

Most women who worked for Fred Harvey during this period truly believed in the image created back in the 1890s. This image was romanticized in the 1945 production of the movie The Harvey Girls (figure 12). Cooperating with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer on the movie, the Harvey Company published literature on the movie, billing it as a story of how "Fred Harvey waitresses of the 1890s brought romance and a civilizing influence to a typical frontier town."<sup>43</sup> While the image of the Harvey Girl changed in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the Harvey Company sought to hold on to the old Victorian image which had been so popular at the turn-of-the-century. As society returned to some of these ideals in the 1950s, the Harvey system sought to capitalize on the popularity of the Harvey Girl. Although the Harvey Girl of the 1950s was very far removed from that of the 1890s, the mere comparison of the two seemed to bring back images of the golden era.

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<sup>42</sup>Virginia Paulsen Green interview.

<sup>43</sup>"So Long, son." a publicity brochure printed by the Fred Harvey Company, 1945, Volume 23, Miscellaneous Records, Fred Harvey Company Papers, 1896-1945, Special Collections, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.



Figure 12: Scene from the movie The Harvey Girls, 1945.

Source: Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Photograph Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas

## CHAPTER V

### EFFECTING AN INTERPRETIVE CHANGE: THE HARVEY GIRLS IN MUSEUM EXHIBITION

The goal of any new historical interpretation is that it be accepted by the general public. Before public perception can change, however, the sources that provide the basis for the perception must change. For the American public, museums, television, and popular literature are the main sources of historical information. The creators of television programs and museum exhibits, as well as the writers of popular literature, must first understand that they may be perpetuating a perception that is distorted and incorrect. Because museums play such an important role in educating the public about its history, this chapter seeks to identify how museums can establish an appropriate interpretation for the Harvey Girls.

In 1994, the author designed an exhibit for the Florence Harvey House Museum entitled "Meals by Fred Harvey."<sup>1</sup> The exhibit was based on the secondary sources available on the subjects of Fred Harvey, the Harvey system, and the Harvey Girls. Intensive research has since shown that the conventional interpretations of the Harvey Girls, as advanced in the exhibit, are not adequate. A new appraisal of the exhibit reveals that while it explained who the Harvey Girls were, it did little to place the Harvey Girls within the larger context of women's labor history.

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix B for the complete exhibit script.

The process of interpretation allows historians to impart their historical perspective by effectively translating the abstractions of the past into more understandable terms of human and material resources. Museums, however, often have a tendency to “embody the ‘selective tradition’ and the predetermined ‘significant past.’ They transmit the stories that are allowed, but in so doing neglect many unheard stories to which attention might be directed.”<sup>2</sup> In many museum interpretations, the past is represented as consensual, harmonious, and preferable to the present. Domestic life is shown without conflict or violence, and work is presented without drudgery or exploitation. Life in general appears without emotions or feelings. Museum professional Jeanne Cannizzo identifies the root of this problem, stating:

Museums are carefully created, artificially constructed repositories; they are negotiated realities. We need to examine the ideology and cultural assumptions which inform our collecting policies, which determine our display formats and influence the interpretations placed upon the objects which we designate as the essence of our cultural historical identity.<sup>3</sup>

In order to negotiate this reality, museums must expand the length and depth of their interpretation. In his book History Curatorship, Gaynor Kavanagh indicates that “large areas of human experience are omitted, either because little material evidence remains or because they have been excluded from curatorial interest.”<sup>4</sup> This problem is of particular importance when considering the Harvey Girls.

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<sup>2</sup>Gaynor Kavanagh, History Curatorship (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 63-64.

<sup>3</sup>Jeanne Cannizzo, “How Sweet it is: Cultural Politics in Barbados,” Muse (Winter 1987): 22.

<sup>4</sup>Kavanagh, 140.

The most common mistakes that occur in traditional museum interpretations of the Harvey Girls are a result of inadequate sources and a dearth of artifactual evidence. There is very little documentary or material evidence of a primary nature on any aspect of the Harvey system. Museum collections generally include artifacts from the Harvey Houses and hotels, including photographs, menus, tableware, china, and crystal; yet they have few items related to the Harvey Girls themselves. Usually the only artifacts available to museums are photographs of the Harvey Girls in uniform. As for research libraries, they too hold very little primary documentation, as few official records of the Fred Harvey Company exist, and what is available is mostly from the 1940s through the 1960s.

This lack of information is of great consequence in evaluating museum exhibitions. Museums must often create an effective interpretation with very little supportive material. In the case of the Harvey Girls, however, there are several different avenues that can be taken to create educational exhibits while working with available resources. The place to start when writing the exhibit script is, of course, the research. Invaluable primary sources include Santa Fe Magazine, a publication for Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad employees from 1906 to 1957, and Hospitality Magazine, a publication for Harvey employees from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Several Fred Harvey manuscript collections in Kansas and Arizona provide primary sources. However, most of the information in these collections is Harvey

publications and letters to the Harvey Company.<sup>5</sup> The collections at the University of Arizona and at the Kansas State Historical Society hold photographs of both the Harvey Houses and the Harvey Girls. Three additional secondary sources which provide good background information are Keith L. Bryant's History of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, L.L. Waters' Steel Trails to Santa Fe, and James Marshall's Santa Fe: The Railroad that Built an Empire.<sup>6</sup> All three sources devote a chapter to the history of the Fred Harvey system and its relationship with the Santa Fe Railway.

Another source for information on the daily activities of the Harvey Houses across the state is newspaper clippings. If time does not permit the researcher to browse through newspapers, he or she can write or visit libraries and historical societies, which generally have a newspaper clipping file on their local Harvey House. Visiting with local historical societies is also the best way to learn about possible oral history interview sources. Oral histories are, by far, the best available source on the Harvey system. Because there are so few tangible remains of many Harvey Houses, lingering memories are the major source of information. However, memories can prove to be unreliable, so care must be taken to use information from oral histories to support the verifiable facts.

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<sup>5</sup>Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Company Collection, Fred Harvey-Operation Eating Houses, Hotels, etc, RR 475:2, File 31, New York Executive Department, 1896-1950, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas; Fred Harvey System Collection, 99.3, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas; Fred Harvey Collection, microfilm, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas; Fred Harvey Company Papers, 1896-1945, A2 326, boxes 1-17, Special Collections, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona; Northern Arizona University also holds an unprocessed Fred Harvey manuscript collection which is presently unavailable for use.

<sup>6</sup>James Marshall, Santa Fe: The Railroad that Built an Empire (New York: Random House, 1945).

Once the research has been completed, the next step must be to evaluate what is important, and what will be useful to tell the story of the Harvey Girls. Because the mythical heroine image is so deeply ingrained in the literature and in people's minds, the idea of the image often influences exhibits. The opposite can also be true, as space limitations may lead curators to treat the Harvey Girls in a superficial manner which does nothing to provide a real understanding of their lives. For example, the permanent exhibit of the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka, Kansas, includes a large photograph of the Harvey Girls in the Bisonte Dining Room in Hutchinson (figure 13). Although the photograph contains visual information, such as uniforms, race and age of waitresses, luxury of the house, and types of customers, the text label which accompanies the exhibit is quite brief. It reads:

Harvey Houses became famous for quality ingredients, reasonable prices, immaculate dining rooms, and their waitresses, the Harvey Girls. These young ladies were all between the ages of 17 and 30. They were hired for their attractiveness and intelligence. Although much was demanded of them, they were rewarded with good wages and living conditions.<sup>7</sup>

This label leaves open many questions about why they were hired for their attractiveness and intelligence, what was demanded of them, and what were good wages and living conditions. More information is needed for the audience to truly understand who the Harvey Girl was.

Museums can explain the human experience in a variety of interpretive forms. It is important to consider more than just text labels. Interpretation can also be accomplished through photographs, poetry, oral history interviews, sounds, and live

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<sup>7</sup>"Eating on the Move" Kansas Museum of History, Topeka, Kansas.



Figure 13: The Bisonte, Harvey House Dining Room, 1926.

Source: Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Photograph Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

demonstrations. Although exhibit labeling is by far the most popular form of interpretation, Kavanagh provides a guideline for using labels, stating that:

Labels should function to add information and perspectives that cannot be provided in any other way. They can be written to help people to think and look. They can also be presented to prompt feeling, imagination and questions. The more distant and unfamiliar the theme or object, the greater the need to provide text that jolts the view and enlarges understanding. In sum, they are a key part of the museum dialogue; the voice to which the visitor should relate and respond.<sup>8</sup>

Label writing is an essential skill in museum work, as it is the label which often conveys the educational message. One form of label writing that is under-utilized by museums is the one that draws directly on the words of the people involved. Oral history excerpts offer museums a directness with unparalleled impact. This format would be an excellent choice for the Harvey Girls. Who better to tell their story than a Harvey Girl herself?

The goal of an effective interpretation of the Harvey Girls is to create a real person from the mythical image. They were women with real concerns and emotions. They experienced fear and happiness, exhaustion and elation, anxiety and security, anger and love, yet the public is rarely allowed to see any of these emotions. For example, exhibits seldom discuss the loneliness and anxieties felt by these women who were so far away from home. Research shows that many were homesick and scared, but the subject is not treated in the traditional interpretations. Oral interviews are an excellent source of information about the emotions felt by Harvey Girls who worked in the latter decades. To understand the lives of these women, we must first have a knowledge of all parts of their lives. Only then can a more objective interpretation be developed.

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<sup>8</sup>Kavanagh, 141.

The history of the Harvey Girls cannot be told without acknowledging the development of the Harvey eating houses. Photographs of Fred Harvey or the eating houses in Kansas are appropriate visuals to accompany text relating this information. An example of what facts are important can be illustrated by the following text which is part of an exhibit at the Arizona Hall of Fame Museum in Phoenix, Arizona. The exhibit, titled "Fred Harvey and the Harvey Girls in Arizona," provides an overview of the Harvey system in Arizona. The case label, subtitled "Fred Harvey" reads:

#### Fred Harvey Since 1876

Inventors and innovators have been as dynamic a force in American food service as they have been in industry or art. Sometimes this was just plain good food, or even simple cleanliness, two innovations Fred Harvey launched in depot restaurants along the Santa Fe Railroad in 1876.

Trains headed west had meager access to even the most elementary food service. Eating rooms along the way were decrepit and often served substandard food. The railroad towns themselves were often temporary, being torn down as the railroad workers moved on down the line. It was into this sad landscape that Fred Harvey brought his vision of good food and clean service.

After being turned down by Burlington with the idea of setting up cafes along their route, Harvey approached the owners of the struggling Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railway. He convinced the Santa Fe officials that a significantly better food service would not only enhance the railway's reputation but would also induce more passengers to choose Santa Fe over the other railroads operating in the region.

The plan was not only to improve the quality of food available to travelers but to change completely the image of the railroad eating room. They chose Topeka, the state capital, as the place to start. Harvey was to provide the equipment and expertise, while the railroad delivered his supplies free of charge.

The business expanded so quickly and successfully that at Fred Harvey's death in 1901 the System included fifteen hotels, forty-seven restaurants,

and thirty dining cars on nearly 12,000 miles of railway -- as well as on one steamer. Ford Harvey, successor to his father as President of the System said, *Whatever success the Fred Harvey System has attained is very largely due to its founder's ideals and principles.*<sup>9</sup>

Although quite long, this label is a good example of the how the history of the Fred Harvey system can be set within the larger social context.

Developing an interpretation for the Harvey Girls requires an ability to synthesize a large amount of information into a readable, educational format. Additionally, the exhibit text writer must be aware of the more important aspects of the Harvey Girl experience in order to choose information that will adequately represent them. Is it more important to discuss how they were hired or why they went to work for Fred Harvey? Choices such as these are vital to the overall interpretation.

To create an interpretive exhibit that truly represents the real life experiences of the Harvey Girls, the historian must place these women within the context of their time. This is one reason why conventional interpretations are not effective -- they present the Harvey Girl without the context of time. Most exhibits present the Harvey Girl of the 1890s -- the one represented by the Judy Garland image. This leaves out those women who worked for Harvey in the twentieth century, particularly after the 1930s. Their lives were dramatically different from the Harvey Girl of the 1890s. Since the requirements and standards for the Harvey Girls changed in the 1930s, the exhibit must reflect these changes in its interpretative theme, and indicate how they relate to the changing nature of society from the 1930s to the 1950s.

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<sup>9</sup>"Fred Harvey and the Harvey Girls in Arizona," Arizona Hall of Fame Museum, Phoenix, Arizona.

There are two major aspects of the Harvey Girl interpretation that must be addressed: who was the Harvey girl and what did she do? Social life and uniform requirements are two additional subjects which should also be addressed, either within the broader subject categories or separately. By identifying these different aspects in the exhibit, it can evolve into a more comprehensive analysis of what the experiences of the Harvey Girls really were. The image of the Harvey Girl as a mythical heroine can be changed to a new image of her as a part of an efficient, well-trained, and well-groomed corps of waitresses who provided high quality service to their customers.

### **Who Was the Harvey Girl?**

The real Harvey Girl changed as times changed. The young, attractive, single woman of the 1880s turned into a more mature, married woman in the 1930s. Interpretive exhibits must address this issue. An overall explanation of the Harvey Girls is a good place to start the interpretation. In addition to text, photographs of Harvey Girls from different decades can provide a visual understanding of who she was (figure 14). The length of any exhibit is important, and the following two examples show how space can be accommodated. The first example is a short, yet concise example of the early Harvey Girl:

**WANTED:** Young women, 18 to 30 years of age, of good character, attractive and intelligent

Harvey House became famous for quality ingredients, reasonable prices, immaculate dining rooms, and their waitresses -- the Harvey Girls. Advertisements ran in many Eastern newspapers looking for young women to move west and work. These young women were required to work twelve-hour shifts, seven days per week. They received \$17.50 per



Figure 14: Harvey Girls taking a break in Hutchinson, Kansas, c1915.

Source: Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Photograph Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas

month, plus room, board, and tips.<sup>10</sup>

This next example, however, provides a much fuller explanation of who the Harvey Girls were, and can be utilized if additional exhibit space is available:

In the early 1880s, Fred Harvey began hiring female waitresses to work in his growing number of restaurants. For his waitresses, Fred Harvey advertised in eastern newspapers, *Young women, 18 to 30 years of age, of good character, attractive and intelligent*. A number of young women responded. Those who survived an initial screening became the first *Harvey Girls* -- a title Harvey used to signify that they were more than simply waitresses. Harvey preferred inexperienced girls. A Harvey Girl started out with a week to one month of training in the smaller units, then was transferred step by step to more important dining rooms and restaurants. She was hired for a minimum of six months and was given a ticket and meal pass from the Santa Fe station nearest her home to her first assignment.

Starting out, the Harvey Girl was paid \$17.50 a month, plus room, board, and tips, a package comparative to prevailing wage rates. Living quarters were in a dormitory adjacent to or above the restaurant. Curfew was 10:00 p.m., overseen by a more senior Harvey Girl who had worked her way up to become a housemother and supervisor. After six months she was entitled to a month's vacation without pay and a round-trip ticket back home.

One liability to hiring attractive women was the chance that they would soon marry and quite their jobs. Thus, the Harvey Girls were required to sign contracts and forfeit half their base pay if they married before their contract elapsed.<sup>11</sup>

Additional specific aspects should also be addressed, including the fact that Harvey mostly hired women from the rural Midwest, and excluded blacks and hispanics.

A sample text label might read:

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<sup>10</sup>"Meals by Fred Harvey," Florence Harvey House Museum, Florence, Kansas.

<sup>11</sup>"Fred Harvey and the Harvey Girls in Arizona," Arizona Hall of Fame Museum.

Although many different kinds of women became Harvey Girls, blacks and hispanics were excluded from their ranks. The core of Harvey Girls was made up of farmer's daughters and women from small-town America. Rural families were often poor and many of their daughters found a way to help through hard times by working for Fred Harvey. Harvey encouraged initiative, occasionally promoting women to managerial positions. Ultimately, the profession of waitressing was elevated to the point where the Harvey Girl became a model of gentility, sophistication, and refinement.

Few exhibits ever tell the story of those Harvey Girls who were sent from Kansas to the Southwest only to find they were unhappy. If the young woman wanted to return before her contract was up, she had to find her own way back home. Fred Harvey would only pay to send a girl home after she fulfilled the terms of her contract. Where was the paternalistic "we are your family" system for those young girls? Additionally, those women who made poor matrimonial choices without the benefit of the familial approval system are never considered either. Some ended up abandoned in a town far away from home with no means of returning. These types of issues are continually ignored in traditional interpretations.

Issues relating to the negative side of the Harvey Girl job would make a good contrast with the happy-go-lucky image of the traditional Harvey Girl. Exhibit creators might actually want to discuss the differences in text, or just let the photographs stand in comparison to the introductory text. The movie The Harvey Girls could be discussed here, as it was instrumental in creating the mythical figure. Photographs from the movie, or even drawings which represent the image of the Harvey Girls, could be used as visual aids. For example the following poem might illustrate how some men saw the Harvey Girls, and could be accompanied by a photograph or illustration (figure 15):

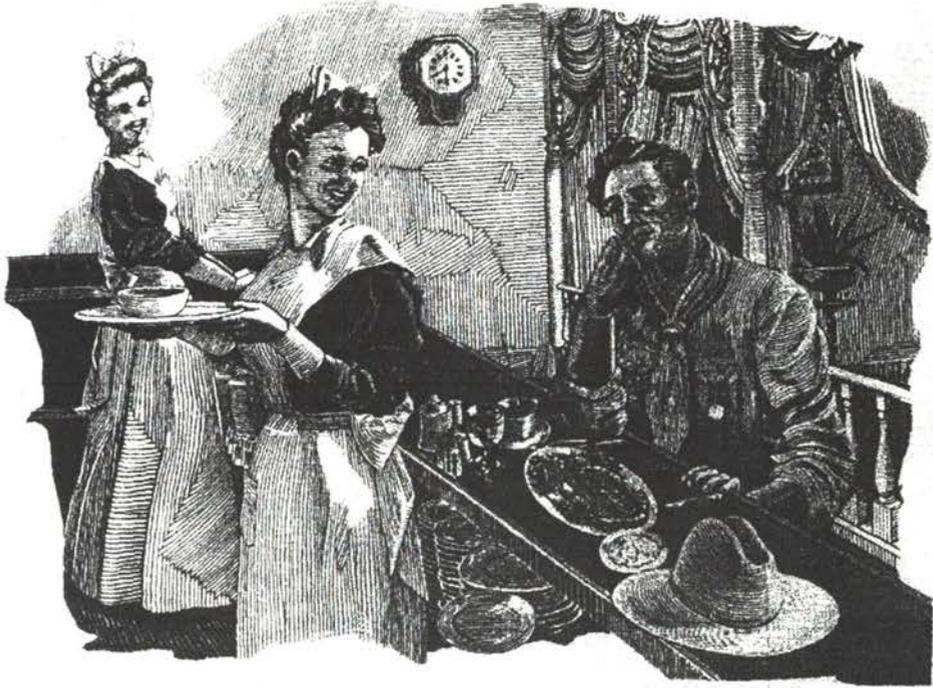


Figure 15: Line drawing of a Harvey Girl and her suitor.

Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

At the Topeka Lunch Counter

I'm all confused and bothered with a problem I must face--  
 To solve it incorrectly may involve me in disgrace.  
 I ordered from a toothsome girl a set of flapjacks hot,  
 With butter 'n maple syrup which the same she went and got.  
 The stand and steam before me, 'neath the heat-conserving lid,  
 But I -- I simply goggle at the snowy-aproned kid!  
 The thing that has me groggy and my mind all in a whirl  
 Is: Why not pay the flapjacks and eat the Harvey girl?  
 There's butter 'twixt the steaming cakes and syrup on the side;  
 They'd do a world of benefit within my hungry hide.  
 They'd taste like all of Harvey's food -- as good as food can be, --  
 But yet the question which to eat keeps pestervating me.  
 She looks as sweet and good to eat as waffles rolled in honey,  
 And hence I think I'll eat the girl and hand the cakes the money.  
 If you have been Topeka way and seen the girl I saw,  
 You'll understand my ignorance regarding which to chaw!<sup>12</sup>

What is most important in detailing the Harvey Girl is to show how the Harvey Girl changed with time. The 1940s era Harvey Girl was far removed from the woman of the 1890s. Uniforms, hiring requirements, and social environments changed dramatically between the time periods. Although these changes do not make the Harvey Girl of the 1930s and 1940s any less important, they do mean that text labeling must address this aspect. A sample interpretive label illustrating this change might read:

Life for the Harvey Girl from the 1930s to the 1950s was much different from that of the Harvey Girl in the 1890s. Although she still wore the traditional black and white uniform, it was much shorter in length. Employees were no longer required to live in company dormitories, and married women were employed in increasing numbers. Wages in the 1930s were approximately \$15.00 per month, and each woman worked forty-eight hours per week. By the 1950s, the Harvey Girls worked forty hours per week and earned an average wage of forty-five cents per hour.

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<sup>12</sup>Strickland Gilliland, "At the Topeka Lunch Counter," Santa Fe Magazine 18 (April 1924): back of frontispiece.

## What Did the Harvey Girl Do?

Work requirements is perhaps the hardest area to distill into short museum text labels, since there is so much to illustrate. The Harvey Girls were kept quite busy all the time, and it is difficult to depict a bustling dining room. This section does, however, have several different interpretive formats which could be utilized. Of course, photographs of dining rooms and lunch counters can provide visual context; however, museum collections of dishes and tableware could be utilized to represent the work they performed. For example, the Florence Harvey House exhibit utilizes a single place setting as a visual, while the text label provides a detailed depiction of the serving process. The label reads:

The Clifton was a meal stop for three trains each day, with about 50 customers per train. Each stop averaged 25 minutes.

While the train was still miles away from Florence, the conductor would record each passenger's meal preference. The tally was sent to the Harvey House through a series of train whistles.

A gong sounded as the train pulled into the station. The first course, consisting of fruit or salad was waiting as the passenger exited the train. Customers were seated ten to a table at each of the six tables. A waitress arrived immediately to take meal and beverage orders, while a second waitress followed pouring beverages. The main course was always served by the manager of the house, followed by dessert and coffee served by a waitress.<sup>13</sup>

For a more general label of the work Harvey Girls did, the following example might be helpful:

Harvey Girls were hardly delicate, since they performed truly strenuous

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<sup>13</sup>"Meals by Fred Harvey," Florence Harvey House Museum.

and demanding work under rush conditions. They had to be prepared for the arrival of trains and their passengers, however frequent or however late they might be.

It took skill and hard work to serve sixteen people (the per-station average) in twenty-five minutes, and they worked twelve-hour days, six or seven days a week.

Some waitresses remember lying across their beds, too tired to remove their shoes, until the next train.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most effective method of explaining the work role of the Harvey Girl is through oral histories. For example, the following excerpt from a former Hutchinson Harvey Girl does much to illustrate the high level of perfection expected from the Harvey Girls:

I was sent to Newton, Kansas. Everyone from the middle division had to go to Newton for training. I was only there about a month when they opened the new Bisonte (Hotel) at Hutchinson and they sent me there, but for the life of me I will never know why, because I never had waited on anyone but on the head waitress and with empty dishes at that. You had to know just where every dish should be placed and just how far the silverware should be placed from the edge of the table, and just why it should be like that. I thought that was silly at that time, but now I am very grateful for that wonderful training. My other chore was to set up the train tables. One morning after the dining room had closed, and we had gone to our rooms, a knock came on my door. It was the head waitress. She told me to put on my uniform -- also my hair net -- and come on down to the dining room. So naturally I thought I was going to get to wait on someone, but that was not what it was. I had left a steel knife crooked on one of the train tables. I had to take everything off and reset the whole table. I never left another one out of place.<sup>15</sup>

Even excerpts from travelers' letters about Harvey service provide a good look at the

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<sup>14</sup>"Fred Harvey and the Harvey Girls in Arizona," Arizona Hall of Fame Museum.

<sup>15</sup>Mary Wright, "My Life As A Harvey Girl," Hospitality Magazine 5 (December 1953): 4.

experience at the Arkansas City Harvey House in 1921, states:

Waiting to learn our needs, faultlessly dressed young women stood at their respective stations with a poise bespeaking competence and experience in their work. . . . Solicitous to just the right degree, each waitress kept careful watch over those she was serving, suggesting a second portion of this or that; the excellence of her work lending much to the atmosphere, "we want to give you the best of service," which one felt as he entered the room.<sup>16</sup>

An appropriate interpretation of the work conditions which the Harvey Girls faced can provide a solid basis for changing the traditional stereotypical perception. However, just understanding their work is not enough. The "civilizer" role of the mythical heroine must be banished from the accepted historical record. Although museums and writers cannot always deal with all these issues in the short interpretive space allotted to them, it is important that they keep away from the shallow stereotypes that have developed over time. Neither Fred Harvey nor the Harvey Girls were civilizers, though they did bring an era of refinement to many of the rough and tumble pioneer towns of the West in the 1880s and 1890s. For this, they do deserve special recognition.

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<sup>16</sup>W.L. Taylor, "Does Service Count?" Santa Fe Magazine 16 (June 1921): 98.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

A reinterpretation of the Harvey Girls reveals a whole new look at waitressing in the American West. Despite the decades that separate the many Harvey Girls, they all identified with the idea that they were not just waitresses -- they were Harvey Girls. For the public, however, they were mythical figures in the American West who brought civilization and refinement as they traveled westward. This image, so prominent in popular media, is responsible for a lack of understanding about the experiences of the real Harvey Girl. Over the past fifty years, the Harvey Girl has taken on a mystique that relegates her to a position of glory based on her traditional feminine virtues, rather than her actions and abilities as a working woman.

This distorted image must undergo a change in order for the Harvey Girl to truly take her place in the annals of working women's history. New research in social history illustrates the value of information about the average daily worker in reconstructing a more comprehensive history. Museum exhibits can be utilized to interpret these aspects of social history to the general public. By utilizing objectivity and in-depth research, museums can provide a more complete picture of daily experiences and work routines, thus preparing a place for the Harvey Girl within the wider context of working women in the American West.

The Harvey Girls were truly more than “just waitresses.” Waitressing was what a Harvey Girl did, not who she was. Their own words reveal who the Harvey Girls really were. They were not necessarily beautiful or extraordinary women. They were adventurous women who were willing to give up the security of home for the rigors of the working world. They were not working for women’s rights -- they worked for Fred Harvey. They were working for financial gain, the chance to travel, and perhaps even the possibility of meeting a future husband. At one point in time, the Harvey Girl was a young, single, woman who agreed to travel to the West for a six-month stint. At another time, the Harvey Girl was a college student working for Harvey during the summer to earn tuition money. At yet another point, the Harvey Girl was an older, married woman, working to provide food for her family during the Depression. No matter when these women worked, however, there was a continuity to their experiences.

So what can the experiences of these women tell us? Most importantly, we know that these women worked very hard, performing mundane tasks and routines. Their jobs were not glamorous -- for three meals a day, they waited tables, served food, and cleaned up after customers. They worked forty-eight to sixty hours a week, often on a split shift. Yet their daily routines were infused with a sense of purpose that elevated the Harvey Girl in her own eye, as well as in the eyes of the public. The Harvey system provided adventure for even the poorest midwestern farm girl, as the daily trains brought customers from many different parts of the world. Additionally, a Harvey Girl could travel to resort locations along the Grand Canyon, and even become head waitress in one of the more luxurious Harvey Houses.

The paternalistic Harvey system provided an invaluable opening for many women of the Midwest. Women could be assured of protection and security while experiencing a small amount of freedom away from the familial environment. Originally open only to those women who fit within the acceptable "standard" -- white, single, young women -- the Harvey system provided working-class women access to the middle class as they benefitted both financially and socially from their job. The 1930s, however, brought lower pay and lower standards, changing the job from an avenue to the middle class to just another working-class job.

Fred Harvey's goal was to change the face of railroad passenger services. This he did by standardizing food and hotel service. Whether it be in the food preparation, food service, or hotel cleanliness, these standards provided a continuity in all Fred Harvey services which the public came to expect. In the process of standardizing the system, however, Fred Harvey also standardized his waitresses. His efficient and well-trained corps of women represented continuity in appearance and service from the 1880s to the 1950s.

The Harvey Girls were a highly valued asset to the Harvey system. Their cheerful demeanor and fresh, crisp appearances impressed the public. Train passengers could look forward to dining at any Harvey House with the knowledge that the Harvey Girls provided consistently superior service across the Southwest. The words of Elbert Hubbard best describe the Harvey Girl that the traveling public saw:

At Fred Harvey's you are always expected. The Girls are ever in their best bib and tucker, spotlessly gowned, manicured, combed, dental flossed -- bright, healthy, intelligent girls -- girls that are never fly, flip nor fresh, but

who give you the attention that never obtrudes, but which is hearty and heartfelt.<sup>1</sup>

The real Harvey Girls were not at all like the Harvey Girls portrayed in the 1945 movie. They were not all socially polished and movie-star beautiful, and they certainly didn't dance and sing as they worked. The real Harvey Girl was too busy waiting tables and polishing silverware. She was not a "civilizer of the West," rather a simple woman working for a wage. Ask any former Harvey Girl and she will tell you that there was a lot more to her job than simply conquering the West with a beefsteak and cup of coffee.

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<sup>1</sup>Elbert Hubbard, quoted in Pamela Berkman, The History of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe, (New York: Smithmark, 1994), 43.

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APPENDIX A

Major Fred Harvey Establishments in Kansas<sup>1</sup>

| <u>Date</u> | <u>City</u>   | <u>Hotel/Restaurant</u> | <u>Close</u> |
|-------------|---------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| 1876        | Topeka        | Lunch/Dining Room       | 1940         |
| 1878        | Florence      | Clifton Hotel           | 1900         |
| 1879        | Lakin         | (Moved to Coolidge)     | 1880         |
| 1880        | Coolidge      | (Moved to Syracuse)     | 1880         |
| 1880        | Emporia       | Hotel                   | 1937         |
| 1883        | Newton        | Arcade Hotel            | 1957         |
| 1883        | Hutchinson    | Bisonte Hotel           | 1946         |
| 1883        | Wellington    | Santa Fe Hotel          | 1939         |
| 1883        | Arkansas City | Lunch/Dining Room       | 1933         |
| 1896        | Ft. Scott     | Lunch/Dining Room       | 1930         |
| 1898        | Dodge City    | El Vaquero              | 1948         |
| 1903        | Chanute       | Lunch/Dining Room       | 1931         |
| 1908        | Syracuse      | Sequoyah Hotel          | 1936         |
| 1914        | Wichita       | Lunch/Dining Room       | 1935         |

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<sup>1</sup>Compiled from Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Timetables, and Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: The Women Who Opened the West, appendix B.

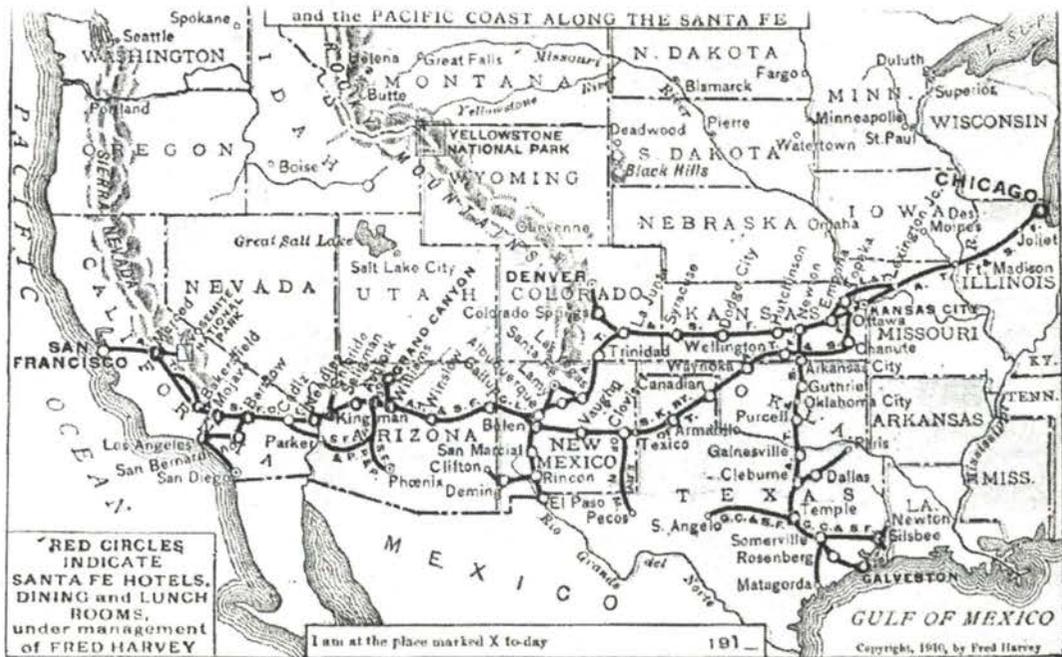


Figure 16: Postcard of the nationwide Fred Harvey system, 1910.

Source: Ralph W. McClenahan

APPENDIX B<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Meals by Fred Harvey." Florence Harvey House Museum, Florence, Kansas (figure 17).

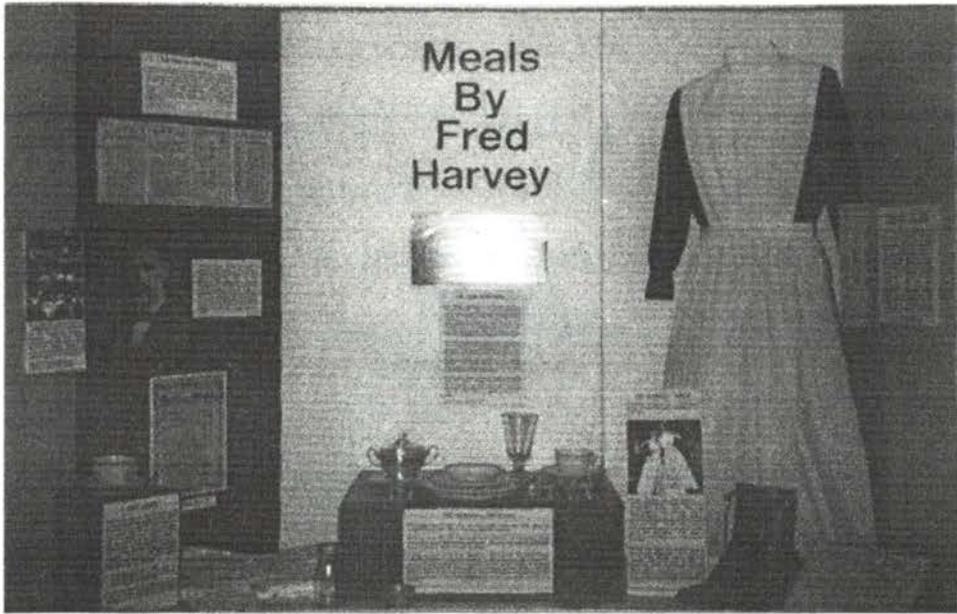


Figure 17: "Meals by Fred Harvey," Florence Harvey House Museum, Florence, Kansas.

Source: Dee A. Harris

## "Meals by Fred Harvey"

An exhibit for the  
Clifton Hotel  
Harvey House Museum  
Florence, Kansas

Designed by  
Dee A. Harris  
May 1994

The Clifton Harvey House in Florence, Kansas has a rich and eventful past. Not only did this hotel become one of the largest establishments in Kansas in the 1870s, it became a daily meal stop for westbound Santa Fe trains. The exhibit "Meals by Fred Harvey," created for the Florence Harvey House, is designed to explain the history of this Harvey House. In addition to illustrating the history of the Harvey House itself, this exhibit will provide information on the "Harvey Girls" who served as waitresses in the Harvey House and the growth of the Harvey System in the southwestern United States.

Because the history of the Florence Harvey House is so eventful, select pieces of information which depict the origination of the hotel, the daily operation, and the closing of the hotel have been chosen as representative of its life. Other aspects of the hotel include information about the hiring and daily life of the Harvey Girls. The selection of information is based on research from Special Collections and Ablah Library at Wichita State University, the Florence Historical Society, the Florence Public Library, the Kansas State Historical Society, and the Kansas State Historical Museum.

The life of Fred Harvey is especially important to the story of the Clifton Hotel, since it was his experiences as the general western freight agent for the Burlington Railroad which caused him to envision better traveling conditions on westbound trains. Harvey often had to sit down to the normal railroad fare consisting of "leather-tough antelope steak, rancid bacon, eggs preserved in lime, and leaden and worm-eaten biscuits called 'sinkers'."<sup>1</sup> Because of these experiences, Harvey created a plan for a restaurant serving quality food at reasonable prices and presented it to the Burlington Railroad. When he was turned down, Harvey presented his plan to Charles F. Morse and Thomas Nickerson of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad who wholeheartedly supported his ideas.

Harvey started his venture by purchasing a run-down restaurant on the second floor of the Topeka, Kansas depot in 1876. Within a few weeks of opening, the Harvey lunchroom was doing capacity business. In fact, it became so popular that Topeka residents began commenting that Harvey needed to open another restaurant further down the Santa Fe line so settlement of the west would not stop at Topeka.<sup>2</sup>

In 1878, Harvey and the Santa Fe, encouraged by the success in Topeka, ventured farther down the line to Florence, Kansas. The Clifton Hotel, built by Ben Putnam in 1876, was purchased by Fred Harvey at the price of \$4,275.<sup>3</sup> In just a few months, the hotel and restaurant were doing capacity business. It was soon obvious that the hotel was not large enough to hold the number of visitors who arrived daily, so it was enlarged to 30' x 130'. The new building was divided into office rooms, sample rooms, and chambers.<sup>4</sup> In 1879, a total of 2,300 guests were housed during a six month period.<sup>5</sup>

Before the house opened in 1878, Harvey insisted that it be scrubbed until it was spotless and gleaming. All the furnishings were imported from Europe, including the coal oil lamps, candles, and heavy carved walnut furniture.<sup>6</sup> The linens were imported from Belfast, Ireland, the silver from Sheffield, England, and the china from France. Harvey required the best of everything for his restaurant-just one part of the famed "Harvey Standard."

As Florence continued to grow, the Harvey House became a meal stop for three trains daily, with an average of fifty passengers per train.<sup>7</sup> The serving process, however, began when the train was still miles away from Florence. The conductor passed through the train, requesting each passenger's meal preference. This information was then given to the engineer who sent the message to the Harvey manager through a series of train whistles.

A gong sounded the arrival of each train and galvanized the Harvey House into action. The first course of the meal was waiting as the passengers exited the train. Customers were seated and served family-style, with ten people to each of the six tables. The waitress arrived immediately, taking orders for meals and drinks. Moments later a second waitress followed with the beverage using the "cup code." The cup code provided a system where the first waitress adjusted a customer's cup in a way that symbolized what beverage was ordered. Right side up meant coffee, upside down was for hot tea, upside down and tilted against the saucer symbolized iced tea, and upside down and off the saucer meant milk.<sup>8</sup> The main course was always served by the manager of the house, followed by dessert and coffee served by the waitress.

One of the most well-liked aspects of the Harvey Houses was the waitresses, designated as "Harvey Girls." These "girls" were attractive, single women, ages 18 to 30, with intelligence and good character. Before hiring, Harvey Girls had to sign a contract vouching for their good moral character and promising not to marry for the length of the contract, usually six months to a year. Harvey Girls worked twelve hour shifts, seven days per week, with an occasional split shift around meal trains. They received a salary of \$17.50 per month, plus room, board, and tips.<sup>9</sup>

Harvey kept his waitresses occupied keeping up the standard of excellence within his Harvey Houses. Harvey Girls were not to be seen sitting, and were expected to keep everything spotless and gleaming. The traditional Harvey standard also applied to the waitresses themselves. They were required to wear "plain, starched, black-and-white skirts, bibs, and aprons; and high collared shirts, with black shoes, black stockings, and hairnets."<sup>10</sup> They were housed in a dormitory on the second floor of the Clifton, but

exceptions were made for those who lived in Florence. Usually four of the seven Clifton Harvey Girls were hired from the local community, with the other three sent from Kansas City or Topeka.<sup>11</sup>

By the late 1890s, the Clifton's fame was beginning to fade. Faster trains were alleviating any need for trains to stop in Florence for a meal. They could continue on to Newton, and some even had their own dining cars which Fred Harvey staffed. Pullman sleeper cars also eliminated the need for passengers to sleep overnight at the Clifton. Train #7 was the last train to be fed at the Florence Harvey House on the evening of March 31, 1900.<sup>12</sup> This marked the end of an era for Florence.

The closing of the Clifton, however, only marked the end of that particular Harvey House. The Harvey system continued to move westward, building larger and grander hotels as it went. Hotels were built all over the southwest, but most were built near tourist attractions, like Bright Angel Lodge on the rim of the Grand Canyon. The Harvey Hotels continued as a driving force in the Southwestern United States up until World War II. With the rise of the automobile and airplane as standard modes of travel, the need for restaurants along the railroads lessened. Many of the Harvey Houses were simply abandoned or torn down, but several like the Florence Harvey House have been saved by communities who realize the importance that Harvey Houses hold in the history of the West.

This exhibit seeks to explain the history of the Clifton Hotel in Florence, and show that the Harvey system was indeed important to the settling of the west. Since this is such a large area to cover, important details have been chosen to provide a comprehensive picture of the life of the hotel. The title of the exhibit "Meals by Fred Harvey" was chosen

because it was used as a slogan by the Santa Fe in the 1880s and 1890s to attract customers. With the success of his ventures in Topeka and Florence, Harvey's chain of restaurants began growing, following the Santa Fe westward. Within just a few years, his name became synonymous with a standard of excellence never before associated with restaurants along railroads.

In designing this exhibit, there are several different issues which need to be showcased, but a basic chronological pattern is followed. Eating on trains in the 1860s and 1870s is the first issue which is dealt with. An 1876 AT&SF train schedule reproduction is displayed with a label describing the gastronomical nightmares which travelers suffered before the introduction of Harvey Houses. This label reads:

#### EATING ON THE MOVE

Feeding passengers was often a problem on westbound trains in the 1860s and 1870s, since dining cars were not introduced until the 1880s. Many passengers brought their own food or bought it from vendors on the train. Some ate at grimy eateries at stopping points along the tracks. The combination of hurried meal stops, hot and dusty weather, and the swaying and bumping of the train made eating an unpleasant experience.

To illustrate the introduction of Fred Harvey and the Santa Fe Railroad, which is the first step to the story, a text label is placed next to a picture of Fred Harvey. The label reads:

Frederick Henry Harvey did much to improve food service on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. In 1876, Harvey leased the Santa Fe lunch counter in the Topeka depot. He built his business on cleanliness, quality food, and good service. The AT & SF was impressed with his operation and gave him a monopoly on food service along the railroad. By the early 1880s, Harvey had restaurants and hotels at Florence, Newton, Hutchinson, Dodge City, and Lakin.

Photographs of the interior of the Topeka depot are also be included in this introductory section, the caption reads:

Fred Harvey started his first restaurant for the Santa Fe in the depot in Topeka, Kansas. The Irish linen tablecloths, fine china, and delicious food were a welcome respite for the tired and hungry train travelers.

A photograph of the Clifton Hotel in 1892 is displayed, since it is the only known photograph of the house before 1900. Along with this picture, the text label reads:

#### A NEW VENTURE

The Clifton Hotel was purchased by Fred Harvey in 1878. Harvey began by scrubbing and scouring until everything was spotless and gleaming. He imported fine furnishings and tableware from Europe in an effort to provide high quality and service. The hotel was an immediate success among railroad passengers and the townspeople. By 1879, Harvey had to remodel, enlarging the structure to 30' x 130'.

The Clifton Hotel was important to the young city of Florence. It employed many people from the community including Matilda Thomas, Leah Meredith, and Minnie Fink Ginette as Harvey Girls. Phebe Amelia Lofgren worked at the house as a young girl, helping her mother wash dishes. The Harvey House also purchased fresh game, dairy products, and fruits and vegetables from the townspeople.

By the late 1890s, trains no longer needed to stop at Florence. Faster trains could continue on to Newton, and many trains had their own dining and sleeping cars. Train #7 was the last train to be fed on the evening of March 31, 1900.

The fine furnishings which were purchased for the hotel are illustrated through the display of a place setting, including china, silverware, glassware, napkin, and a menu. Although the china and silverware are not originally from the Clifton or its time period, the table setting still gives the visitor an idea of the fine products which Harvey insisted upon. It also provides a structured format in which to display the additional pieces of Harvey china in the museum collection. An enlarged menu is included in the exhibit to depict the

fine foods which were served at the Harvey House. This copy is taken from an original menu from the Clifton Hotel, served in 1880.<sup>13</sup> The caption for the menu reads:

Fred Harvey maintained high food-preparation and service standards in his eating houses. A customer could expect high quality food, large portions, a fair price, and excellent service. This menu is typical of a \$0.75 dinner at a Fred Harvey establishment.

Information regarding the daily operation and method of serving is provided in a text label next to the table setting display. It reads:

#### THE SERVING PROCESS

The Clifton was a meal stop for three trains each day, with about 50 customers per train. Each stop averaged 25 minutes.

While the train was still miles away from Florence, the conductor would record each passenger's meal preference. The tally was sent to the Harvey House through a series of train whistles.

A gong sounded as the train pulled into the station. The first course, consisting of fruit or salad was waiting, as the passengers exited the train. Customers were seated ten to a table at each of the six tables. A waitress arrived immediately to take meal and beverage orders, while a second waitress followed pouring beverages. The main course was always served by the manager of the house, followed by dessert and coffee served by a waitress.

The "cup code," which is unique to the Harvey system, is explained in a text label next to a cup and saucer from the Harvey collection of dishes. This label reads:

#### CUP CODE

The Harvey system had a streamlined process for serving customers in a short amount of time, and the Cup Code was one unique way of serving beverages. The code allowed one waitress to take the meal and beverage order, while a second waitress followed behind pouring the beverage without asking what was ordered. The first waitress simply adjusted the customer's cup to signal what beverage was ordered.

Cup upright on the saucer: Coffee  
Cup upside down on the saucer: Hot Tea

Cup upside down, tilted against saucer: Iced Tea

Cup upside down, off saucer: Milk

Of course, sometimes customers found themselves with a beverage other than ordered because they fiddled with their cup.

To convey the history of the Harvey Girls, a text label and a photograph of early Harvey Girls is utilized next to a model of the uniform worn in the from the 1880s to the 1920s. The text label reads:

### THE HARVEY GIRLS

WANTED: Young women, 18 to 30 years of age, of good character, attractive and intelligent.

Harvey Houses became famous for quality ingredients, reasonable prices, immaculate dining rooms, and their waitresses, the Harvey Girls.

Advertisements ran in many Eastern papers looking for young women to move west and work. These young women were required to work twelve hour shifts, seven days per week. They received \$17.50 per month, plus room, board, and tips.

Harvey Girls were expected to keep up the "Harvey Standard." They were not to be seen sitting down, and their stations were to be kept spotless and gleaming. They wore plain, starched, black skirts and high collared black shirts with white bibs and aprons. Black shoes and black stockings completed the uniform.

Although the end of the Harvey House is addressed with the 1892 picture of the Clifton, information regarding the growth of the Harvey System is provided in a text label next to a 1915 Santa Fe train schedule, which shows the many Harvey Houses along the railroad line. This label reads:

### DECLINE OF THE HARVEY SYSTEM

Fred Harvey began a dining car service on AT & SF trains in 1888. By 1892 he was feeding passengers on runs across the country. The diners became very popular features because they offered Harvey's usual high quality. Harvey Houses continued to be built as the Santa Fe Railroad moved westward. After Harvey's death in 1901, his sons continued the business. Declining passenger traffic forced the closing of the last railroad

Harvey Houses in the early 1950s. Harvey's dining car service, however, continued until 1968.

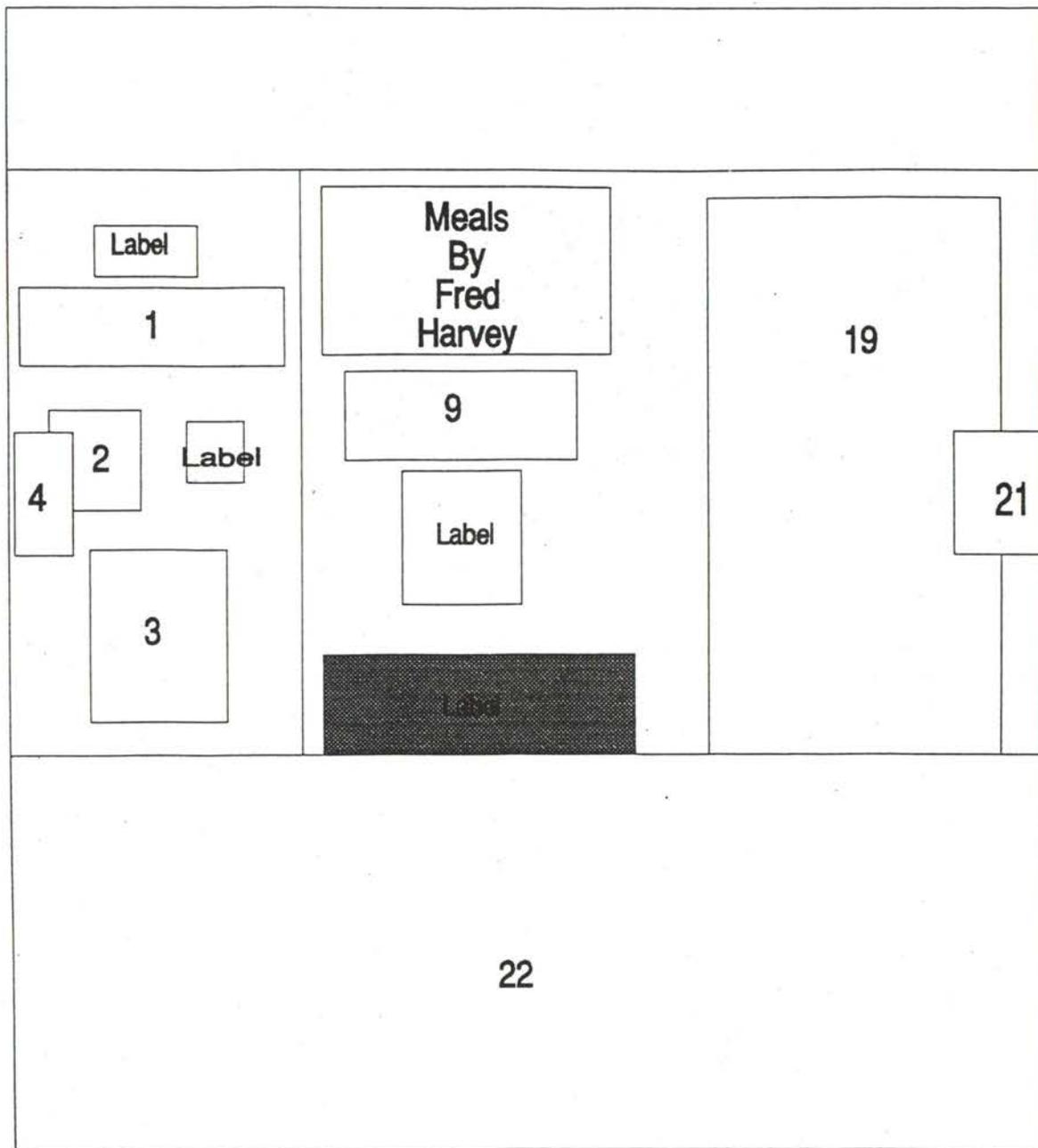
The object of this display is to utilize the current collection of the Florence Harvey House Museum to create a museum exhibit which showcases the collection and provides an explanatory history of the Harvey House. Most of the items on display are taken from the Florence Harvey House Museum collection. Other items displayed, however, are credited to the Kansas State Historical Society. The exhibit measures 6' wide, 3' deep, and 7' tall, and is painted cream and maroon to match the museum interior. Although this is only a small exhibit, it is an important addition to the Florence Harvey House because it gives visitors knowledge about the Museum and its history.

## List of Artifacts

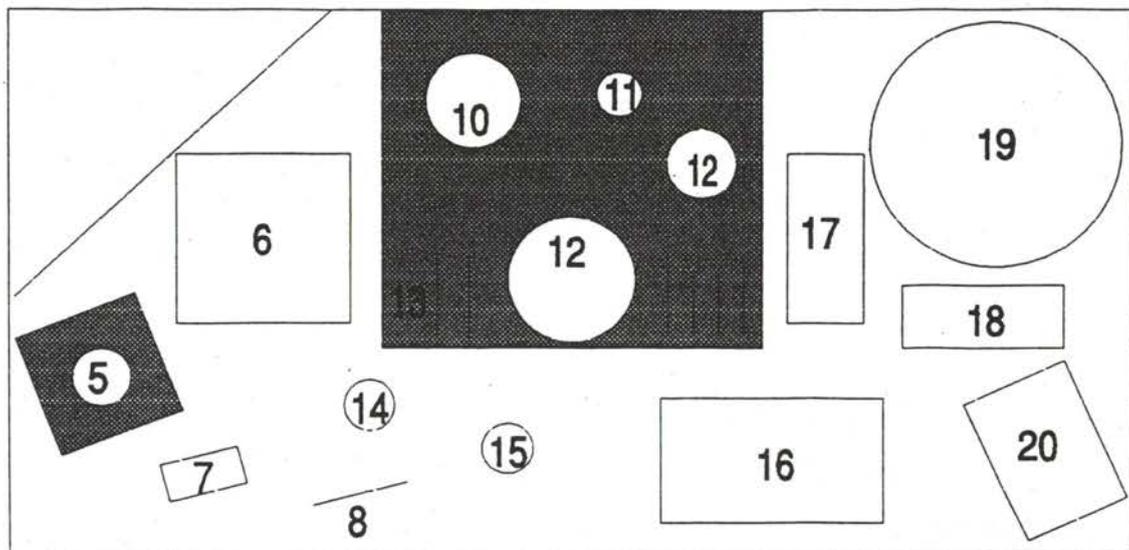
1. 1876 Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe schedule, reproduction  
Credit: Old Cowtown Museum.
2. Photograph of Fred Harvey, copy  
Florence Harvey House Collection
3. Clifton Hotel Bill of Fare, February 22, 1880, copy  
Credit: Kansas Museum of History
4. 2 photographs of interior of Topeka lunch and dining room  
Credit: Kansas State Historical Society
5. Cup and saucer, blue chain pattern  
Florence Harvey House Collection
6. Fred Harvey bath towel  
Florence Harvey House Collection
7. Advertisement for Harvey Houses on AT&SF Railroad, copy  
Source: Lesley Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, page 36b.
8. Silver spoon with "Fred Harvey" engraving  
Florence Harvey House Collection
9. 1892 photograph of Clifton Hotel, Florence Harvey House  
Credit: Kansas State Historical Society
10. Silver sugar bowl with "Fred Harvey" engraving  
Florence Harvey House Collection
11. Water goblet  
Florence Harvey House Collection
12. Plate, bread plate, bowl, cup, and saucer, blue chain  
Florence Harvey House Collection
13. Knife, 2 forks, and 3 spoons, silver with "Fred Harvey" engraving  
Florence Harvey House Collection
14. Fred Harvey cream jar  
Florence Harvey House Collection

15. Collapsible tin cup, made exclusively for Fred Harvey  
Florence Harvey House Collection
16. Deck of playing cards, made exclusively for Fred Harvey  
Florence Harvey House Collection
17. Photograph of Harvey Girls in Hutchinson, ca. 1915  
Source: Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas
18. Ladies Boots, size 7  
Florence Harvey House Collection
19. Harvey Girl Uniform, reproduction  
Source: Dee A. Harris and Pauline Harris
20. Map of Santa Fe Railroad and Fred Harvey System, copy  
Source: Lesley Poling-Kempes, The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West, introduction.
21. 1915 Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe train schedule, copy  
Credit: Harvey County Historical Society
22. Exhibit case  
Built by Gary W. Harris

Front View of Exhibit



## View of Floor of Exhibit



## End Notes

1. Lisa Kingsley. "Whistle Stop Fare," Country Home, April 1992, 134.
2. Keith L. Bryant, Jr. History of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1974), 109.
3. James D. Henderson. Meals by Fred Harvey. (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1969), 11.
4. Florence Herald, March 8, 1879 and March 29, 1879.
5. Florence Herald, August 23, 1879.
6. Florence Historical Society, The First Harvey House, 3.
7. Ibid., 5.
8. Ibid., 6.
9. James A. Cox. "How Good Food and Harvey 'Skirts' Won the West," Smithsonian. September 1984, 134.
10. Lesley Poling-Kempes. The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West. (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 55.
11. Margaret E. Lyons. "Fashionable Clifton House Was First of Fred Harvey Hotels on Santa Fe Route," Wichita Eagle Magazine. 8 May 1955, 23.
12. The First Harvey House, 7.
13. Copy of original bill of fare for the Clifton Hotel, Sunday, February 22, 1880. Kansas Museum of History, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

