

The Real Harvey Girls

During the mid to late 1800s, railroads were quickly being built all over the United States. These lines started out small and were mainly in the East, but by the late 1800s they had reached the West coast. It soon became more common to travel on trains from city to city than in a wagon or stage coach.

There was one problem with traveling on the trains, especially for the people heading west. It was almost impossible to get a decent meal. Some people tried to fix the problem by bringing their own food in a basket, but within a short period of time that food would spoil, which made the people who were eating it sick or cause a horrible stench in the train cars.

Trains had to make a stop about every 100 miles. Most of the time, these stops were in small towns. The trains would stop only long enough to stock up on coal and water, which would only be about 20 to 30 minutes, and then go on to the next stop. During these stops, passengers would get off the train in hopes of finding a meal. Sometimes they were successful and sometimes they weren't. At times, local people took advantage of this. They would sell food to the passengers for outrageous prices. Another tactic local people would use is charge a fee for the meal that passengers would pay for ahead of time. Once they arrived, the food wouldn't be ready or would be of poor quality.

Some people opened a small restaurant in their towns and would take orders from the passengers that got off the train, but the train would be ready to leave again before the food was ready, so the passengers would leave hungry and a little poorer since they had already paid for the meal. It didn't matter to the people who ran the restaurant. They would just serve the same food to the next train that stopped in their town. This situation was pretty common from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean and many people didn't want to take long trips on trains because of it. Obviously, the comfort of the passengers wasn't a very high priority.

In 1850, at the age of 15, a young man named Fred Harvey left England and came to the United States. He spent the next 20 years learning about how to run and operate restaurants, mostly in the East. In his travels, he realized that good-quality restaurants were needed along the railroad lines. He was especially interested in the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railways. He met with the president of the railways and made an agreement. Fred would open what he called Harvey Houses at each stop and the railroad would provide free shipping of all the food and supplies he needed to run the establishments. It was a win/win for both of them. The railroad would get more passengers and passengers would eat at the restaurants Fred Harvey provided.

The first Harvey House opened in 1875 in Topeka, Kansas and fifteen years later there were 84 restaurants.

The Harvey Houses provided good and reasonably-priced meals. These were served on nice white table cloths and fine china. Even more important, the Harvey Houses were able to provide each passenger who wanted a good meal within the time allotted to stock the train with coal and water.

When Fred Harvey first started his restaurants, he hired local men, and he soon began to have problems.

Brawls in the restaurants weren't uncommon and most of the men felt they needed to carry guns to protect themselves. Mr. Harvey made a surprise visit to one of his restaurants and found that most of the men he had hired were drunk and beaten up from a huge fight the evening before. Mr. Harvey immediately fired them all. He then sent out an advertisement to various newspapers with the message that went something like this:

Young girls 18 to 30 years of age, of good character, attractive and intelligent, as waitresses in the Harvey eating houses in the West. Good wages with room and meals provided. No experience necessary.

Young women answered the ad in droves and the term Harvey Girls was born. Mr. Harvey treated them well. When girls were first hired around the year 1880, the pay was around \$17.00 a month, which is equivalent to \$400.00 a month today. This amount was much more than women usually could earn in the jobs that were available to them at that time.

Fred Harvey made sure the girls were well trained and there were strict rules they had to follow and adhere to, or they would be immediately fired. But most women didn't mind the restrictions. They had a good job, a place to live, and good food to eat. Women worked as Harvey Girls until just before World War II when it became easier for people to fly to their destination. Today, most of the Harvey establishments have been shut down. There are a few that have been turned into museums and a few that are still in operation as a hotel. One of them, the El Tovar Hotel, which is located on the south rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona, is still in operation today. Most of the events of this book take place at this hotel.

We always hear that men were the ones who opened the West, but women also had a huge part in helping to make the West more civilized. This is one way in which they helped. Most of these Harvey Girls married local men in the area of the Harvey establishment at which they worked at and became important citizens in their town and cities.