

Title:

Fred Harvey: Founder of the Chain Restaurant

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1575

Summary:

A historical perspective of Fred Harvey and his impact on the restaurant industry, railroading, fine dining, western expansion, and women's rights.

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Fred Harvey, Harvey Houses, Harvey girls, women, restaurants, fine dining, west, railroad, trains, travel, chain restaurants, chefs, food

Article Body:

In 1850, a 15 year old boy from London arrived in New York City with \$10 in his pocket. He found a position as "pot walloper" or dishwasher at an upscale restaurant and began a lifelong passion with fine dining. From this inauspicious beginning, Fred Harvey would change the way people West of the Mississippi dined, create a marketing tool that helped create the world's largest railroad, champion women in the work force, and build an empire.

As Fred Harvey worked his way west, stopping in New Orleans, St. Louis, and Kansas City, he acquired knowledge of the restaurant industry. When he wasn't on the floor waiting tables, he was asking questions of chefs and learning everything he possibly could about every aspect of the industry. His goal was to own his own restaurant, and in that endeavor, he accepted a lucrative position as a traveling freight agent on the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad. Traveling conditions were frightful in the late 1860's and early 1870's. Trains were dusty and full of mice and flies. Experienced travelers packed their own picnic of fried chicken, hard boiled eggs, cheese and maybe a piece of cake. When that ran out, you were forced to disembark the train and take your chances on whatever was available at the station.

Along the way, anything was possible. At best, one could expect rancid, bitter coffee, brewed once a week. Rotten food was common as well as GI distress and illness from food, and the fear of being left behind in the middle of nowhere made travelers eat as fast as possible, scrambling to get back on the train. Scam artists negotiated with railroad workers to cheat travelers. Before reaching a stop, the conductor would take reservations requiring a 50 cent deposit. When the train arrived at the station, the food would be served just

as the conductor called, "All Aboard!" As the travelers ran back, the restaurateur would scrape the food back into pots for the next train passengers and give the railroaders 10 cents per head as their take. These conditions and scams made train travel dangerous to one's health, and as he worked his way across the West, Harvey realized that there was a market for clean restaurants serving good food at reasonable prices along the line.

In 1875, he approached officials at the Burlington Railroad with his idea of opening restaurants at the train depots. Railroad officials had no interest in supplying food and laughed him out of their office. But as he left the office, one of the officials commented that he should approach the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, which was the most rapidly expanding railroad in the West. Santa Fe liked the idea and a partnership was formed. Harvey opened the first restaurant, The Harvey House, in Topeka, Kansas in 1875. It was an immediate success, not only with travelers, but with local residents as well. Within 9 years, there were 17 Harvey Houses along the Santa Fe route, and the first restaurant "chain" was born.

Because of Harvey, his restaurants and the rapid expansion of the West, Santa Fe became the premiere passenger railroad, as travelers could be assured of exquisite meals in clean dining rooms. Harvey was a shrewd negotiator. When he negotiated his second agreement with Santa Fe, he obtained exclusive rights to all restaurants along their line. Not only did he obtain exclusivity, but the railroad supplied the building and property, passage for Harvey employees, and fresh laundry, ice, meat, and produce shipped in daily.

Harvey's only problem was his wait staff. The waiters were undependable, coming to work drunk, picking fights, and destroying company property. No one civilized wanted to work out West. Where could he get decent, dependable help? Women.

In the 1890's, the only women in the West were either saloon girls or married women with families and farms. It was truly the Wild, Wild West, full of cowboys, gunslingers, scam artists and roughnecks. An uncivilized place to be. So, Harvey did something truly revolutionary. He placed an ad in East Coast papers for women 18 - 30 years of age, attractive, educated, and decent. Harvey offered room and board, free train passage, and wages of \$17.50 per month. No experience necessary. Harvey wanted to train them his way. But would they come?

They came like gangbusters. In the late nineteenth century, opportunities for women were very limited. The only suitable positions were as teachers, servants, dressmakers, or factory workers. Not only was being a Harvey girl an

opportunity to make great money, it was an opportunity for adventure. But being a Harvey girl was not easy.

The standards set by Harvey were rigid. First, they were given a 6, 9, or 12 month contract during which time they were not allowed to marry. If they did, they would be financially penalized by half of their salary and lose their travel privileges. The dormitories were strict, with a house mother overseeing the girls and a curfew of 10 pm every night. If you broke curfew 3 times, you were summarily fired and sent home. The training process was a grueling 30 days of learning strict cleanliness, grooming and table service without pay. The training period was difficult and stressful, but many women spoke of how the experience gave them self-assurance and poise.

They were trained in the Harvey way. Because of the train schedule, timing was incredibly important. When the train arrived in the station, the first course was already on the table. One girl came through and took drink orders as another was right behind her pouring. A system of coffee cup placement was the key to communication. As the first course was being cleared, a manager would come in with trays of hot entrees which would be served by the girls. Generous portions and seconds were the standard. And so was the timing. The trains only stopped for 30 minutes and Harvey provided a refined, delicious dining experience on a schedule.

Cleanliness was also a key to success. If they weren't busy, the girls were expected to be cleaning; their station, polishing silver or brass, folding napkins or dusting. In spite of the dust and dirt of the West, Harvey Houses were known for their immaculate tidiness. This included the girls' uniforms. They were expected to be well-groomed, spotless and ironed. If they got dirty during a shift, they were expected to change uniforms immediately. Gum chewing was ground for dismissal. Harvey himself would make surprise inspections and literally perform a white glove test.

Harvey's chefs were also the best. When Fred Harvey traveled, he would try to lure away the chef anytime he had a superb meal. He paid his people well and believed in the best quality ingredients. The chefs had the authority to create their own menus and pay handsomely for supplies and produce. Not unlike great restaurants today, Harvey Houses had the first choice and the best supply of meat and fresh vegetables. Hence, they had the ability to provide diners with first class meals.

Harvey was also a believer of promoting men and women from within. Many women started out as a waitress, became head waitress, and some even became managers. Another way he emphasized respect and respectability was in the name he chose

for his wait staff. His girls were never referred to as waitresses. Rather, they were known by and proud to be called Harvey Girls. Being a Harvey Girl meant poise, respect, and independence.

Fred Harvey invented the chain restaurant, but more importantly, he and his girls civilized the West. Not only did they provide a service to the travelers and the communities through their restaurants and mere presence, they became the standard of civility and dining. Many Harvey girls did find marriage and adventure. Many had lifelong, fascinating careers in Harvey's empire that would have been impossible back East. Some paid for college and went on to become professionals in other careers. No matter what paths they found themselves on, the Harvey Girls became the matriarchs of the West.

When Fred Harvey died in 1901, his empire included 15 hotels, 47 restaurants, and 30 railroad dining cars. At its peak, the Harvey House restaurants were the most successful in the country, with 100 locations, and provided the Santa Fe Railroad with the marketing tool and support to become the largest passenger train company in the United States. During both World Wars, the Harvey House was instrumental in providing meals to the troops being moved across the country on trains. But the Wright brothers, the automobile, and the Great Depression led to the demise of the empire. Fine dining and civility in the West are legacies that Fred Harvey and his Girls bequeathed us all.

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