

# Feature

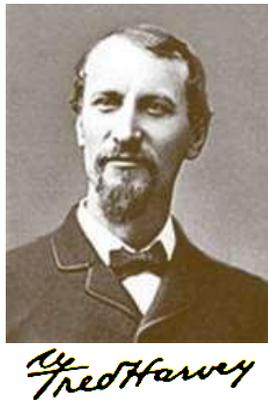


## Here Come the Harvey Girls! Jody Regan

*The brainchild of a restaurant entrepreneur to provide quality food and service to railroad passengers, the “Harvey Girls” and their distinctive attire were an American icon for nearly 80 years.*

When 17 year old Fred Harvey immigrated to the United States from England in 1852, his first priority was to find a job to support himself. Other young immigrant men he met near the docks in New York told him the best place to look for work was in the restaurants near the waterfront. Harvey found a job as a pot scrubber and busboy, and under the tutelage of the restaurant owners, his career in the food industry was launched.

As Harvey moved his way up from busboy to waiter to cook, from restaurants along the docks to more upscale eating establishments, he learned the restaurant business and formed distinct opinions about the quality of food and service. Harvey’s early experience set the stage for what would eventually set the standards for the entire American food service industry.



Within a few years, Harvey moved to St Louis Missouri, where he took over the running of a restaurant with business partner, William Doyle, in 1859. However, as the Civil War became a reality, patrons dwindled in number, the war ravaging their pocketbooks and families. Doyle ran off to join the Confederate army, taking with him all the money he and Harvey had earned. Harvey, by that time a husband and soon-to-be-father, realized he would have to find another source of income.

At that point in American history, railroad construction was in full swing. Harvey eventually found work as a freight clerk for the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad. His new job required that he travel by train to various cities along the line. During his travels, Harvey became aware of the poor choices railroad passengers had when it came to meals.

Although the trains were a faster method of transportation than any other existing at the time, it could still take days to reach one’s destination. Passengers were obliged to carry their own food with them or try to find food at poor-quality lunch counters in flea-bag hotels along the route. Because refrigeration was not yet available, food spoiled quickly. Harvey’s observations

of the problem lead him to begin forming an idea for a solution.

After the war, as the country began to recover, Fred Harvey worked at a variety of jobs. Finally, in 1875, he approached the directors of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy railroad with his idea of setting up lunch counters and restaurants which would serve decent food in clean surroundings at train stations along the route. The directors weren’t interested.

A friend encouraged Harvey not give up, and suggested that he pitch his idea to the directors of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. Harvey took his friend’s advice, and found a more open-minded audience among that railroad’s managers. They offered him a trial period to experiment with the provision of food to passengers and locals at the railway station in Topeka, Kansas.



The Topeka Depot of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe, where Fred Harvey took over the second-floor lunchroom in early 1876. Photo c. 1880 courtesy Kansas State Historical Society

Like most restaurateurs of the time, Harvey hired male waiters to staff the new lunch counters and restaurants. In more remote western towns it was a challenge to find responsible staff, and Harvey found himself up against a problem. The male staff tended to entertain themselves after work by drinking and brawling. In one particular instance in 1883, a fight that broke out in the mountain town of Raton, New Mexico, ended in a knife fight among several of the staff. Harvey shut down the lunchroom until he could resolve the chaos.

He pleaded with Tom Gable, a family friend and postal clerk, to take over as manager of the Raton location, as well as some other Harvey restaurants. Gable would agree to take on the task, but only under the condition that Harvey hire and train respectable young women to wait on customers. Harvey reluctantly consented to Gable's conditions. Neither man could have predicted how popular the Harvey Girls would become during their time, or what effect Harvey's standards for quality and service would have on the American food industry far into the future.

***Wanted: Young women, 18 to 30 years of age, of good moral character, attractive and intelligent, as waitresses in the Harvey Eating Houses on the Santa Fe Railroad in the West.***

– Ad from Leavenworth, Kansas newspaper



Harvey Girl uniform c. 1895 on exhibit at Bright Angel Lodge, Grand Canyon, Arizona. Photo: ["Apple Apple"](#) on Flickr.

The first Harvey Girls were trained in established Harvey restaurants, mainly in Kansas. Young women were recruited through ads in local newspapers (far left) and by word-of-mouth. From 1883 to 1960, more than 100,000 Harvey Girls were hired, some working for several months, others for years. By 1901 Fred Harvey had established 47 restaurants and built 15 hotels with Harvey restaurants in them. A woman would start in the lunchrooms and work her way to the dining room

The true-life stories of the Harvey Girls are many and varied. At least one teenage girl had run away from home after standing up to a "harsh father". Another sought work outside the family home because her father was badly injured in a farming accident and the family needed the money her employment could provide. Another left Austria to live in the American West on the advice her doctor, who recommended it for the girl's asthmatic condition.



Harvey Girls in lunchroom. Santa Fe Eating House near Winslow, Arizona c. 1910



During their training, the Harvey Girls were taught to provide fast, efficient, impeccable service to customers. Fred Harvey insisted on fine quality in the food served and set high standards for his employees, as well. Each Harvey Girl signed a contract, agreeing to a specific length of service—usually six months at a stretch—and not to marry during her service. Dormitory-style living with a house-mother

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Harvey Girl uniform with white cuffs c. 1905 (left) on exhibit at Harvey Museum, St. Louis Union Station, St. Louis Missouri. Photo (above) shows the back of the dress. Photos: ["Mod as Hell"](#) on Flickr.

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presiding was provided for the waitresses. Their laundry was done for them (a crisp, fresh uniform was a must) and they were expected to present a positive image of the Harvey eating establishments in the communities where they served, no matter the size of the town.

The original concept for the Harvey Girl uniform came from Fred Harvey himself. He envisioned attire similar to that of a nun, in an attempt to give the waitresses an asexual appearance. In his mind, they would be part of the background, not the focus of the customer's attention.

The uniforms he commissioned in 1883 consisted of an ankle-length black woolen skirt, long-sleeved black shirt, and black shoes and stockings. A starched white bib apron with an "Elsie" collar went from neck to ankle and tied in the back. The hair

### Harvey's Mens' Dress Code

Prices were higher in the dining room than the lunchroom, and Fred Harvey required men to wear jackets. If they did not have one, the house would provide one.

The "coat rule" was often the cause of controversy, especially in small, frontier towns where it was viewed with disdain by local cowboys. The rule was challenged in 1921 in Oklahoma and ruled discriminatory. But the decision was appealed, and in 1924 it was set aside by the Oklahoma Supreme Court.



Fred Harvey General Manager Victor Patrosso with group of 20 El Tovar Harvey Girls in evening uniform standing by the hotel, c. 1926. Photo: [Grand Canyon National Park Museum Collection](#) on Flickr

was pulled up into a hair net and worn with a regulation white ribbon.

Harvey Girls wore no jewelry and could not chew gum or wear makeup.



Badge worn by Harvey Girls at Grand Canyon Harvey House. Photo: Bart Barton, [Arizona Railway Museum](#).

Management would sometimes run a damp cloth over a girl's face to make sure she had no makeup on. Harvey wanted to ensure these single women in the West were not targets of public criticism.

If a waitress got even a small spill on her uniform, she was sent back to the dormitory to change immediately. The uniforms were not washed by the women but sent to Newton, Kansas, or Needles, California, to be laundered.

Many Harvey Houses gave the waitresses badges with numbers, which ranked their work ethic (left). High numbers were given to new employees and points were then subtracted for having a neat uniform, helpfulness, and pleasant behavior.

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Katherine Clark Brallie, outside Fray Marcos Hotel in Williams, Az., 1926. Note black bow ties worn during and after this era. Photo: [Arizona Archives](#).

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Today's costumers wishing to replicate the Harvey Girl costume may choose from the styles of different time periods. Museum photos illustrate the changes in style most accurately.

Over the years, the Harvey Girl uniform changed with the fashions of the time, although it was still rather plain and functional. In the 1920s, styles shortened, and the skirt hem was precisely eight inches from the floor. In many Harvey Houses, the girls at the lunch counter wore an all-black uniform while those in the dining room wore all white; in others, exactly the opposite.



Re-enactors model traditional (c. 1910) and La Posada (c. 1935) Harvey Girl uniforms. La Posada, the last of the grand Harvey Hotels, opened near Winslow Arizona in 1930.

There may have also been variances in style within a particular time period due to regional differences in dress or availability of fabrics and notions. For example, a waitress in cosmopolitan Chicago may have worn something a bit different from a waitress in a more remote area of New Mexico. The same can be said of the plain and fancy architecture of the Harvey hotels, restaurants and train depot lunch counters.

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*Fred Harvey kept the West in food and wives.*

– Humorist, Will Rogers

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There is a great deal more to the story of Fred Harvey and the Harvey Girls. It has been estimated that of the 100,000 young women hired by the Harvey industry from 1883 to the 1960s, about 20,000 of them married their customers, often men of high standing positions in the community. Thus, the Harvey Girls played a significant role in civilizing and populating the American West.

In the 1946 movie *The Harvey Girls*, starring Judy Garland (right), costumer Helen Rose is likely to have exercised her creativity more on the costumes worn by the Harvey Girls for their train journey, the ball and other after-hours activities rather than the waitress uniform. The black and white costumes worn during their work hours in the film are distinctive only for the nipped-in apron waistline and the leg o' mutton



Postcard of Judy Garland and John Hodiak from the film *The Harvey Girls*, c. 1947. Photo: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Judy_Garland_and_John_Hodiak.jpg).

sleeves. And of course, there's the large white bow worn in the hair. It is interesting to see the late 1800s traveling suits worn by the actresses in the opening railway depot scene as part of the same wardrobe as the 1940-ish ball gowns worn later in the movie.

In 2004, the San Diego Model Railroad Museum held a Harvey Girl symposium to honor those young women who played such an important role in settling the Old West. A member of the San Diego Costume Guild was approached by the museum curator who asked if guild members would dress as railway passengers from 1883 through the 1950s and participate in the symposium.



Harvey Girl uniform with shorter skirt and bow tied in front, worn at El Tovar at the Grand Canyon, c. 1950. Photo: Bart Barton, [Arizona Railway Museum](#).

It was a privilege to meet Harvey Girls who were still living, hear some of their stories, and imagine what it would have been like to be a train passenger looking forward to enjoying a meal at one of the many Harvey House restaurants along the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad.

Since that time, I have presented a class on the Harvey Girls and their significance in American history at Costume College, an annual costuming conference sponsored by the California-based Costumer's Guild West. For the presentation, I wear an Edwardian-era head waitress costume consisting of a white blouse with pin tucks in the bodice and leg o' mutton sleeves, black bow tie, 5-gore black skirt, and black high-top, laced boots.



Harvey Girls compare a 1940s style uniform (left) to that worn in the 1870s (right). Photo: [National Park Service](#).



Belen, New Mexico 1950's uniform. Photo: National Park Service.

I'm very careful not spill anything on myself, in case a house-mother should appear and order me to change my uniform.

## Resources

[Harvey House Museum](#), Florence, Kansas.

[Harvey Girl Historical Society](#) at the Orange Empire Railway Museum.

*Appetite for America: How Visionary Businessman Fred Harvey Built a Railroad Hospitality Empire That Civilized the Wild West* by Stephen Fried.

*Harvey Girls: The Women Who Civilized the West*, by Juddi Morris

*Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West*, by Leslie Poling-Kempes

*The Harvey House Cookbook: Memories of Dining Along the Santa Fe Railroad* by George H Foster and Peter G. Weiglin

*Far from Home: West by Rail with the Harvey Girls*, paper doll fashion history series by Leslie Poling-Kempes; illustrated by Lynette C. Ross (contains diary entries made by an actual Harvey Girl).

“Fred Harvey: Introducing Cuisine and Comfort to the Wild West.” Candice Reich, [Great Plains Foodways Connection](#).

Vintage and modern Harvey Girl aprons patterns are available from [DustRivers.com](#).

*Jody Regan works as a project manager in behavioral health care insurance to support her passion for her avocation, which is costuming. Her skills include writing, editing, speaking, teaching, organizing people and projects, including fashion shows for the San Diego Costume Guild, where she is a past president.*