

## **“Harvey Girl” Service: Can You Deliver It?**

Before there was a Walt Disney, before Ray Kroc flipped his first McDonald’s hamburger, before Fred Smith built Federal Express, there was Fred Harvey.

Most people don’t know him by name, but Harvey single-handedly “civilized” the old West with his vision of customer service and foodservice. His Harvey Houses became the standard of American service excellence for three generations, from the 1880’s thru World War II, and his “Harvey Girls” would transform the profession of waitressing forever.

Fred Harvey was a traveler and entrepreneur who saw the lack of foodservice along the early transcontinental railroad routes as an opportunity. He struck a partnership with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad to provide meals and accommodations to these new travelers.

His food quality and service, both on board the trains and in the towns where they stopped, quickly became the Santa Fe’s number one competitive advantage. “Meals by Fred Harvey” became the symbol of quality in hospitality, and by the turn of the century, there were 47 restaurants, 15 hotels, and 30 dining car operations along the Santa Fe line bearing his name.

At that time, “honorable” women in the workforce were either teachers or nurses. Waitresses were considered the lowest of the low in terms of social status, but Fred Harvey ignored the social connotations and created an entirely new class of waitress: the “Harvey Girls”.

He recruited in newspaper ads across the United States for women of “good moral character” with at least an eighth-grade education, good manners, neat and articulate. When employed, Harvey Girls agreed to a six-month contract, agreed not to marry, and to abide by a strict set of rules during their employment.

The Harvey Girls’ appearance was to emulate the clean, businesslike and efficient Harvey Houses themselves; black uniforms identically plain and starched, with black-and-white skirts and full wrap-around white aprons, starched and crisply pressed, with no jewelry or makeup. If a woman spilled on a uniform, she immediately changed no matter how small the stain.

The Harvey House meal operation was as precise and efficient as any military exercise. Before pulling into a Harvey House town, the train’s brakeman would teletype the passengers’ orders ahead to the restaurant. The trains required 20 minutes of service for

every 4 hours of operation, and so the 40 to 50 passengers were given only 20 minutes to exit the train, take their seats at the Harvey House, enjoy their meal, and board again. The railroad relied on the Harvey Girls to keep their trains on time and on schedule.

Waitstaff had a specific code for what each diner wanted to drink by the position of the coffee cups at their place. Orders were never written down; they were immediately repeated to the kitchen, and served on plates that had been kept warm in a steamer. Coffee was poured expertly, serving was done quickly, and the Harvey Girls were as polite as they were hard-working.

Harvey's meals were indeed extraordinary, having the advantage of transporting the finest meats and ingredients to each location via the Santa Fe; but the experience of dining at a Harvey House was made all the more enjoyable because of the Harvey Girls.

As train travel gave way to automobiles and the interstate highway system, the Fred Harvey Company began a slow but steady decline in popularity, and the company was sold in 1968. What Fred Harvey did for customer service, however, is forever etched in the annals of American history.

The Harvey Girls brought respectability to the work of waitressing, and with it the opportunity for the service industry to rise to the place of importance it holds today. Service is indeed a differentiator in today's economy, and while the Harvey Girl era is over, don't we all secretly want others to serve us like that?

Harvey's impossibly high standards of service were sometimes frustrating to those who were in his employ, but with those high standards he set the bar for everyone else to follow. He was once quoted as saying, "Anyone can serve and satisfy a gentleman. It is our job to please the impossible customer."

Fred Harvey seized an opportunity and created a new standard. What are you doing to become the Fred Harvey of the business you're in?

(Note: My thanks to Dr. Charles Harvey from Riverside Medical Center, our newest local neurosurgeon and the great-great grandson of Fred Harvey himself, who first introduced me to the Fred Harvey story at a recent dinner gathering and contributed to this piece.)

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