

## **THE HARVEY GIRLS**

**1880s-1950s**



## **PIONEERS OF THE WEST**

The Harvey Girls were the true pioneers of the America West – thousands of young women aged eighteen to thirty who worked six days a week at ground-breaking rail station diners in the Southwest and West. The majority of the brave women had left everything they knew behind, including their childhood homes and parents, just to have a chance to earn a decent wage and be independent, while unknowingly helping to change the landscape of the new American territory.

In 1876, Fred Harvey, who immigrated from Liverpool in 1853 at age seventeen, partnered with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad to open the first Harvey House in the Topeka Santa Fe Depot Station. By the late 1880s, there was a Harvey establishment every 100 miles along the Santa Fe line from Kansas to California.

The men Harvey hired were too wild so he began hiring women. They needed an eighth-grade education, good moral character, good manners, and be neat and articulate. Harvey Girls resided in housing adjacent to the restaurants, where they were supervised by senior Girls, who enforced curfews and chaperoned male visits. They also had to remain unmarried for at least the first six months. That clause was added after some Harvey Girls were lost within a short time when they married men they met on the job. Roughly 5,000 Harvey Girls moved out West to work. This highly structured system provided a sisterhood in a rough land, a unique opportunity to forge a new life: independence, self-esteem, and travel to interesting places.

In Harvey's heyday, for example, you could ride in grand style on the Santa Fe Railroad to Dodge City, get off, and step into the depot for a fine meal at a Fred Harvey restaurant. At its peak in 1928, there were 84 Harvey Houses, including at Guthrie, Hugo, Pauls Valley, Purcell, Sapulpa, Snyder, Vinita and Waynoka.

In the restaurant men were required to wear a coat or jacket. Harvey Houses provided jackets for customers without them. Purcell was the place of a famous court case brought by a man who was denied service because he was not wearing a jacket – and declined to put one on. The case ultimately reached the Oklahoma Supreme Court, which ruled that the rule was not unreasonable, especially since coats were provided, and “if restaurants weren't allowed to have some rules of decorum, the next thing might be for customers to appear dressed in their underwear”.

The Harvey Girls' day-to-day lives were portrayed in a 1946 movie starring Judy Garland and Angela Lansbury, about finding love at a New Mexico Harvey House. “On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe” won the Academy Award for Best Song.

Harvey Girls have been remembered in movies, poems, songs, stories and countless books. As years passed and travel by automobile and airplanes became more popular, the Harvey Houses fell into disrepair. Soon communities longing for nostalgia began to preserve some of the famous Harvey Houses.

Oklahoma maintains three Harvey Houses today. The Guthrie and Hugo Harvey Houses function as restaurants. Waynoka renovated theirs in an operational restaurant and museum.