

## Those Harvey

Take a gander at this old black-and-white shot of Rosine Gary. She's 20 years old, 5-foot-6, immaculate in a long-sleeved white blouse, ankle-length white skirt, white hose, white shoes and, at her buttoned-up collar, a slim black ribbon. She looks like a waitress, which she was. She doesn't look like a menace to saloons, opium dens and poker rooms. By trying to tame the Wild West, though, Gary and her fellow Harvey Girls caused twinges of uneasiness and envy among some wilder Westerners.

"There was some jealousy there," Gary said of rival waitresses who did not work for the Fred Harvey Co., which ran hotels and restaurants inside the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe's railroad stations. "We Harvey Girls felt like we were high class." Gary, now an 86-year-old San Diego resident, is part of a vanishing species. She is one of the 100,000 "Harvey Girls" who worked in the Fred Harvey Co.'s restaurants and inns between 1883 and 1951. For decades, these women were heroes of the popular culture, viewed as vanguards of civilization on the frontier.

Today, they are all but forgotten, perhaps because their numbers are so diminished. At a 2004 National Harvey Girl Symposium, Hal Ritz sought surviving Girls throughout the Western states. He found 40. All of these ladies are getting up in years," Ritz said. "This will probably be the last reunion that we will be able to have."

At once charming and odd, the tale of these women has been told in textbooks, novels and the 1946 hit, "The Harvey Girls." In that movie's opening scenes, a Harvey House opens opposite the local tavern in a dusty cow town. You don't have to be a screenwriter to imagine what follows: Cowpokes in Technicolor-coordinated bandannas sing "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe." Tavern owner John Hodiak falls for Judy Garland, the innocent Harvey Girl, and spurns Angela Lansbury, the gambling-hall floozie. Desperados abandon grub and rotgut for fine cuisine. From "Stagecoach" to "The Wild Bunch," classic Westerns revel in the myth of how the West was won; "The Harvey Girls" celebrates how the West was sissified. It's a weird movie, made even weirder by the fact that it contains a grain of truth.



"It is true that Fred Harvey helped to civilize the American West, particularly the Southwest," said Ann Collins, a University City resident and writer. In 2000, Harlequin published Collins' first novel, "Protecting Jennie," about a Harvey Girl in the Arizona Territory. Her research led Collins to conclude that Will Rogers' quip – "Fred Harvey kept the West in food and wives" – was no exaggeration. "Many of the Harvey Girls stayed in the West and married local ranchers and businessmen," Collins said. "When you get a group of upstanding women versus 'soiled doves' staying in a town and marrying, churches and schools generally follow."

Fred Harvey was a merchant, though, not a missionary. In 1876, the English immigrant opened a restaurant in the Topeka railway station. By 1889, he agreed to provide all of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe's restaurants, lunch stands and inns west of the Mississippi. His company eventually operated 155 of these establishments, including a lunchroom in San Diego's downtown train station.

Tied to the railroads, the Harvey Houses were doomed by the rise of the interstate highway system and the growth of air travel. The company was sold in 1968. In its heyday, though, Harvey Houses revolutionized railway dining. Each offered linen tablecloths. Silverware. China. An extensive menu. And, in one early misstep, a brawl between waiters. Harvey fired the men and placed ads in newspapers: "Wanted, young women of good character, attractive and intelligent, 18 to 30."

"They wanted real quality in the girls they picked," said Zada Sharon, 81, a Campo resident who worked as a Harvey Girl in 1941. "They didn't want just anybody. They wanted somebody the public would respond to."

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## Girls!

They also wanted somebody who would adhere to the exacting Harvey Way. Harvey Girls had to be unfailingly polite to every customer, without ever being flirtatious. A head waitress, an older woman with a den mother's intuition and a drill sergeant's eyes, ruled each restaurant and company-run dormitory.

"Boy, she could put on a stern face," said Sharon, remembering her head waitress, Marie Powers. "If you were the least bit sloppy, you heard about it. If you slopped coffee. If you put place settings in the wrong place. Butter knife in the wrong place. Butter pats in the wrong place."

Waitressing meant hours of tedium, and occasional moments of glamour. At La Posada, the Harvey House in Winslow, Ariz., Sharon waited on Clark Gable and Carol Lombard. "He gave me a silver dollar as a tip. The people around there wanted to buy it, just because Clark Cable had touched it." If brushes with movie stars were rare, romance was forbidden. "Fred Harvey chose uniforms that were as close to nuns' clothing as he could get, hoping they would make the girls unattractive," said Ritz, the symposium's organizer. "That didn't really work."

Many of the Girls remained in the West, a new land where they could lead new lives.

"Fred Harvey gave thousands of working women from lower-income families the opportunity to feel good about themselves, whether single or married," Lesley Poling-Kempes wrote in "The Harvey Girls," her 1989 history.

"Independence, self-esteem, travel to interesting places, were all byproducts of the system. The primary product was decent jobs for women in the American West."

In 1936, Rosine Brun left her family's Missouri farm to join the Harvey House in Kansas City. Later, she moved to the company's outposts in San Bernardino, Barstow and the Grand Canyon. At that last stop, she met Thomas Gary.

A cowboy and auto mechanic, Gary waited one night until the Harvey Girl's shift ended at the park's lodge, El Tovar. Then he took her to see "Gone With the Wind" at a theater tucked under the pines. On other nights, he took her dancing at a local honky-tonk. Once, he took her to see the rodeo in Flagstaff.

Always, he took her breath away. "He was tall and good-looking," she said, still dreamy after all these years. She left the Harvey Co. in September 1940. Three months later, she married Thomas Gary.

World War II brought the couple to San Diego, where he manned the coastal artillery on Point Loma before shipping out to the Philippines. He died 19 years ago, a victim of emphysema; she still lives in the San Diego house they bought together in 1950.

On a recent morning, she pattered in her garden and reminisced about a blue-eyed girl who left the farm to follow the rails into the unknown West. "I grew up in a small community, and I hadn't been anywhere," said Rosine Gary, one of the last of the Harvey Girls. "I'll never forget those days. They were wonderful."

*[San Diego Union Tribune, August 3, 2004];  
[http://florenceks.com/text/local/local\\_hh-girls.htm](http://florenceks.com/text/local/local_hh-girls.htm). Special thanks to Doug Fouquet for this item]*

