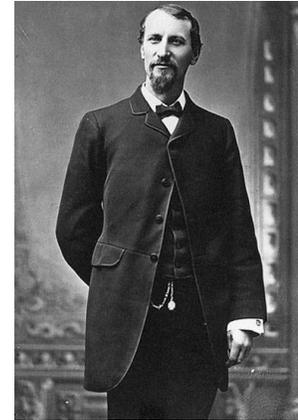


In 1876 Frederick Henry Harvey became the General Western Agent for the Burlington and Quincy Railroad, a job requiring a great deal of rail travel. Food in the West in the 1870s could be described thusly “The antelope steak was so tough that one could not stick a fork in the gravy. The biscuits were so heavy they were called “sinkers.” Of particular infamy was “railroad pie,” described as two pieces of cardboard held together with glue.” Harvey quickly became fed up with this lack of accommodations and decent food, reflecting “There wasn’t a square meal or decent lodging west of St. Louis,” and “There are no ladies west of Dodge City, and no women west of Albuquerque.” He set out to fix this almost immediately.



With a handshake deal between Harvey and Santa Fe Railroad superintendent Charles F. Morse a partnership was born. It began with Harvey purchasing the lunch counter at the Topeka Santa Fe depot in 1876. After giving it a thorough cleaning and ordering quality supplies he had people lining up four deep to eat at his lunch counter.

After this initial astounding success, he turned south, opening the first Harvey House, a luxurious hotel and restaurant, in Florence Kansas. Harvey spared no expense for this new endeavor, he got “expensive walnut furniture, Sheffield silver, and crystal imported from England, china from France, and linens from Ireland.” To ensure that the food matched the décor in quality he hired Konrad Allgaier, previously the head chef at the Palmer House in Chicago, for the astounding annual salary of \$5,000 (\$119,115.98 today), double that of the town banker. As would become a common theme for Harvey Houses travelers on the Santa Fe line began arranging their travel itineraries’ to make sure they could stop and eat at the Florence Harvey House.

These initial successes sparked an empire stretching across the West, including here in Hutchinson. The first Harvey house in Hutchinson was the Santa Fe Hotel (featured to the right during the 1903 flood) a 3-story Queen Anne style building in brick, built in 1887. This Harvey House was complete with all the accoutrement that travelers were coming to expect from the businesses, including the famous Harvey Girls.



While the food and accommodations were excellent, it was the waitresses, known as Harvey Girls, who drew the most attention. “Harvey required that his girls be well-educated and possess neatness, poise, and charm. No experience was necessary, but good character was of utmost importance.” He preferred hiring farm girls, as they were accustomed to hard work, and in the beginning in order to gain a position the women had to sign a contract for twelve, nine, or six months, during which time they agreed to not marry. When they were hired they were given a free ticket and meal pass from the

nearest Santa Fe station to their home to their first station where they would train for 30 days, additionally, they were guaranteed a free rail pass back home once their contract was up. One Harvey Girl, Johanna Klenke described her time thusly:

“we were put in the lunchroom and shown how to take orders. People were very pleasant, but oh, when the train came in! There would be customers clamoring at the counter, some with those tin buckets for coffee, yelling for refills --- you just had to ignore them, and go on with the people seated...we had to learn how to handle all those people and the rush!rush!rush! You had to face the reality of those trains real quick to survive.”

The work shift varied according to the varied busyness of each location, but all of them required the women to work six or seven days a week, sometimes with split shifts. Expectations were high, each girl was expected to keep her station spotless, set a good example when in public, remain cheerful when serving customers, and during off-peak times to clean the establishment, prepare for the next train, and polish the silver.



They were only allowed to sit down when out of sight of customers. Their striking black and white uniforms had to be kept spotless, if they became stained in the slightest they were required to change. Additionally, because Harvey was dedicated to providing the proper atmosphere for young women they were required to live in a dormitory, frequently the upper floor of the Harvey House, with a house mother (often the head waitress) who acted as a chaperone, and there was a strict 10pm curfew. Most Harvey Girls were proud of the good reputation, but that doesn't mean there was never any mischief, Mary Wright recalls:

“I have always been proud of my Harvey reputation. In all the years, I never had to sign the book at night because I could not get in on time. When they said 11 o'clock I knew that is what they meant. No, I never climbed over the back gate, either. But don't think I am an angel, for I knew just as many tricks as the next one. I could steal just as many watermelons as anyone. I was in on all the hand cars that were taken to the old swimming hole. I did my share of mischief. What I didn't know, there was always some railroad man to show me.”

While these standards were strict and exacting the compensation was excellent for its day. The starting salary for a Harvey Girls was \$17.50 (\$459.80 today) per month plus room board, tips, and laundry included as free benefits, the top of the scale was \$25/month (\$656.86 today) but in Hutchinson it was \$45-\$60 (\$1182.35-\$1576.47) along with vacation and travel expenses because of the heavy work load.





Fred Harvey died in 1901, passing the business to his sons and son-in-law. Shortly thereafter it was decided that Hutchinson should have a second Harvey House. The location chosen was 3<sup>rd</sup> and Walnut, where in times past a huge pile of buffalo bones sat waiting to be shipped East. Work began in 1906, completed in 1908. When work was nearing completion the Hutchinson News sponsored a naming contest. The new building was named after the land on which it was built, the Bisonte (Spanish for buffalo). This was the most extravagant Harvey House built

to that date at \$250,000 (\$7,053,241.39 today), Pat Mitchell wrote:

“Everyone was aghast at the luxury of a bathroom between every two rooms, one at the end of each hall, and a lavatory with both hot and cold water in every room. Four trains made meal stops each day for many years...The orders for meals were taken by the conductor while the train was still 50-75 miles from Hutchinson. A message would be telegraphed to the Bisonte giving the number to be served and each passenger’s order. When the hungry travelers arrived, their meals would be hot and waiting, always served by gracious, smiling Harvey Girls.”

For many years the hotel was occupied by thousands of people from ordinary citizens to the rich and famous. Upscale guests include Carrie Nation (famed for breaking up saloons with a hatchet), William Jennings Bryan, Teddy Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, and President Harding. Sadly, while people never stopped coming for the food as the years passed fewer and fewer people went to the Bisonte to sleep.

In 1946 The American Legion bought the hotel for \$25,000 (\$325,251.34 today), with all of its accoutrement being purchased from the Fred Harvey system. A naming contest was held again, but as one person whose name is lost to history said “You might as well as try to change the name of your burg, as to try to change the name of that hotel.” It was agreed that it would be called the American Legion Bisonte. Many dances were held over the years, and a beloved landmark had a second life. Unfortunately, it didn’t last, and in 1946 the Bisonte was sold to two Wichita investors who revealed plans to build a 100-unit three story Holiday Inn. A public auction was held to for many of the smaller items in the hotel and in November of 1964 the Legion held an Adios Bisonte party. More than 650 people came for the Bisonte’s famous charcoaled steaks.

The wrecking crews came and demolition began, but at 12:42 on March 1, 1965 a fire broke out in the basement. For fifty-seven years the Bisonte had served the people of Hutchinson, the surrounding areas, and passengers on the Santa Fe line untouched, but at the end it was claimed by a spark of unknown origin and flames reaching 4 stories into the sky.

