

Entrepreneur introduced fine dining to the wild west

Fred Harvey and his ties to Kearny County

There were few dining options for train passengers traveling across the United States in the 1870s. Not only was the food in railroad eating houses skimpy and unpalatable, but passengers rarely had time to order and eat their meals before having to reboard the train. Fred Harvey had eaten more than his fair share of the awful cuisine. He had immigrated from England as a teenager, and by the time he was 40, Harvey had worked in several capacities for both the food and railroad industries. In 1876, the ingenious entrepreneur embarked on the business venture that would make his name synonymous with fine dining and efficient service and ultimately earn him the distinction as creator of America's first restaurant chain.

Harvey struck a deal with Santa Fe superintendent Charlie Morse and sealed it with a gentlemen's handshake to take over a lunchroom on the second floor of the Topeka depot. Harvey got the space rent-free. In addition, the Santa Fe covered all the utilities and provided free transportation for Harvey's eating house provisions and employees. As landlord, the railroad also covered the major equipment expenses. Fred had to pay for the food, labor and any upgrades. The Topeka venture proved successful for both Harvey and the railroad.

Next, Harvey entered into the hotel business. Starting with the depot hotel at Florence, Ks., Harvey upgraded both the hotel and restaurant. He hired one of the top chefs in the hotel world, and a revised menu was created featuring fish and local game cooked European-style. The tablesettings were upgraded with Irish linens, china and stemware from London, and silver plates from Sheffield. "The Clifton" quickly became so successful that its rooms were constantly sold out. It wasn't long before Har-



William Allen White once wrote that Fred Harvey (pictured here) "is the great American caterer." Harvey believed in giving perfect service, complete with fine linens and silverware, excellent food, and reasonable prices. Harvey required all men to wear coats in his dining rooms and even provided dark alpaca coats so none of his guests were turned away.

vey found himself transforming yet another Santa Fe depot hotel.

Lakin's two-story dining hall had opened in 1876 according to A,T, & SF records. It was located next to the tracks near present-day Hamilton Street. Harvey took over the establishment in 1879, and although Lakin's depot hotel was not as extravagant as the

Continued on page 4

Harvey continued from page 3

Lakin's Harvey House was dismantled and rebuilt in Coolidge. Later the structure was moved so Syracuse. This picture was taken at Syracuse prior to the fire of 1906. There are no known pictures of the dining house when it was located at Lakin.

one at Florence, it still featured excellent service, imported linens and consistently good fresh food. "The best place to eat and sleep in the Wild West," the hotel quickly became Harvey's home away from home. When the town celebrated the Fourth of July in 1880, Harvey furnished much of the food for the picnic and invited everyone to a grand ball later that evening at the hotel. By the early 1880s, Harvey was operating 17 restaurants along the main line of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, but the Lakin Harvey House was short-lived. By December 1880, the dining hall had been moved to Sargent (Coolidge) which was to become the division point of the Santa Fe. This same Harvey House was later moved to Syracuse where it was destroyed by fire in 1906.

Harvey's business ventures in Kearny County were not limited to the depot hotel. He also bought into the XY Ranch, and eventually he and his partners bought so much land that their XY range

spread over four thousand square miles. Headquarters for the ranch were north of the tracks near Deerfield while the range began south of the railroad a few miles east of Lakin. The range extended down through the Oklahoma Panhandle and into Texas. Fred loved the cattle business, and he always stopped at the ranch during eating house inspection trips to check up on his cowboys and his cattle. Eventually Fred bought out his partners in the ranch, but an increasing number of settlers in southwest Kansas led to Harvey moving the XY farther west to the Granada, Colo. area in 1885.

The A,T, & SF began including dining cars on some of its trains in the 1890s. Again, Fred Harvey saw opportunity and contracted to operate the food service on the diners. "Meals by Fred Harvey," became a famous slogan. His 75-cent menu on the westbound passenger train in 1888 included such delicacies as lobster salad, blue points on shell, pickled lamb's tongue and salmi of duck.

At its peak, the Fred Harvey chain operated 65 restaurants and lunch counters, 60 dining cars, a dozen large hotels, newsstands, and all the restaurants and retail shops in five of the nation's largest railroad stations. Harvey died in 1901, and his sons and grandsons continued the restaurant business after his death. In 1968, Amfac Corporation bought the Fred Harvey Company, and their hotels and resorts throughout the world adopted the Harvey quality standard.

Sources: Kansas State Historical Society, "Appetite for America" by Stephen Fried, "History of Kearny County Vol. I," "Hamilton County History," and "Meals by Fred Harvey" by James David Henderson. Pictures courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society.