

## Harvey Girls: A Part of History

*by Delbert Trew*



My mother was a Harvey Girl, working approximately two years in the Harvey House Restaurant in Temple, Texas. She came from poor rural circumstances that allowed few clothes or encouragement to improve her looks.

At 16 years of age, she left home for the first time, signed a Harvey Girl contract and moved into a room above the restaurant alongside the railroad track at Temple. She and a roommate from a similar background were elated to be on their own and away from their crowded farm homes.

For the first time in their lives, they had shiny black shoes, hose and fine underwear, plus black skirts and starched white aprons to wear each day. Along with a clean room, they had a bathtub and plenty of hot water, good furniture, individual beds, a dresser with a mirror and a steady job they could depend on. Neither could believe their good fortune.

Under the strict rules of Fred Harvey, and with guidance from the company managers, my mother acquired lifelong good habits in hygiene, makeup and dress. In all the years I was around her, only once after a serious operation did I see her without her hair combed, makeup in place and wearing a clean dress and apron.

The hours were long and the work hard as they served at least four trains per 12-hour shift. Both at work and after hours, supervision was strict and dismissal swift if you did not obey the rules.

Approximately 100,000 girls signed up to work for Fred Harvey from 1901 to about 1944. It's estimated that half or more of the women married and stayed west to raise their families. There are probably many Panhandle residents who are descendants of the hard-working, independent Harvey Girls.

**History Writing:** Interview someone you know about a first job. What were the responsibilities? How many hours did you work per week? What did you like/dislike about the job? What skills did you learn?