
The Belen Harvey House and Its Several Reincarnations, 1910-2010

Richard Melzer

The Little Town of Bethlehem (Belen, New Mexico) received a fabulous Christmas gift in December 1910, courtesy of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. After years of financial setbacks and engineering challenges, the Santa Fe Railway had finally extended its new east-west line through Abo Canyon and had reached Belen by 1909. With the completion of what is known as the Belen Cut-off, Belen became a major intersection for train traffic moving both north to south and east to west. Soon known as New Mexico's "Hub City," Belen's new status was crowned with the building of a railroad restaurant, or Harvey House, just north of its depot on South First Street. Harvey Houses provided meals for hungry Santa Fe passengers as well as for Santa Fe railroad workers in need of good food and fast service at all hours of the day and night.

The Santa Fe Railway had begun building and Fred Harvey had begun managing Harvey Houses in the 1870s. Each house boasted a modern lunchroom, a formal dining room and good, fresh food, delivered daily by the railroad. Most famously, each house employed attractive, efficient young servers known as Harvey Girls.

Many Harvey Houses also served as hotels where weary travelers often stopped to rest. Guests consistently rated Harvey Houses like the



Harvey Girl Madge Pinkerton and a kitchen worker, Belen Harvey House, 1927. Courtesy of the Belen Harvey House Museum.

Alvarado in Albuquerque, La Fonda in Santa Fe and La Castañeda in Las Vegas among the best railroad restaurants and hotels in the Southwest.

BUILDING THE HARVEY HOUSE IN BELEN

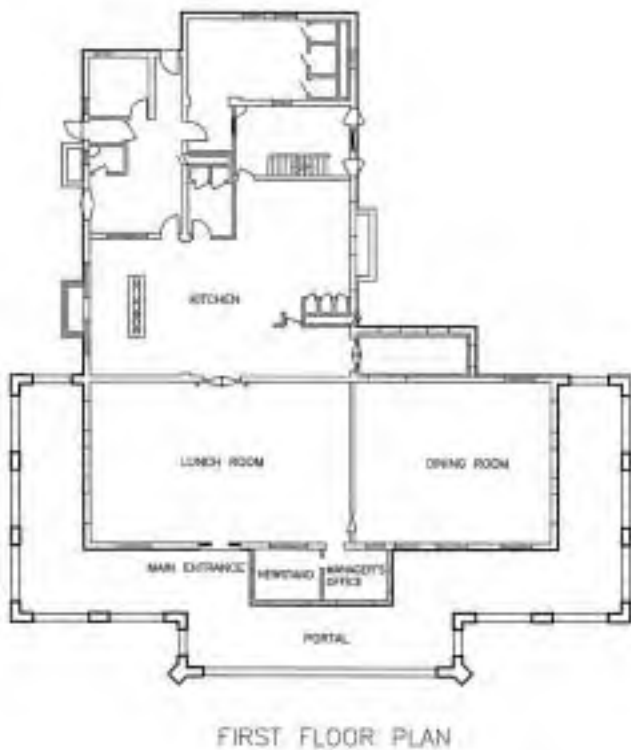
But the Harvey House in Belen never had such fine hotel facilities, no less an exotic sounding name to help draw tourists or guests. In fact, compared to houses like the Alvarado, Belen's house was relatively inexpensive and small. While the Alvarado was constructed at a cost of \$200,000 (or \$4.2 million today) in 1902, Belen's Harvey House cost \$25,800 (or about half a million dollars in today's inflated dollars). While the Alvarado accommodated 120 guests in its dining room, Belen's Harvey House accommodated sixty-four.

Belen's Harvey House was designed by Myron Church, a Santa Fe railroad architect who had designed several other Harvey Houses and depots along the Belen Cut-off. Using California Mission Revival style architecture, Church's work included the Harvey Houses and depots at Clovis and Vaughn as well as the depot in Mountainair.¹

Joseph E. Nelson and Sons of Chicago signed a contract to construct the Harvey House in Belen. Fortunately, we still have copies of this historic document, as signed and approved by the Santa Fe Railway on April 29, 1910.² The Santa Fe must have been eager for the Harvey House in Belen to be built and available to begin serving meals; the expected date of completion was December 1, 1910, a mere seven months from start to finish. The Harvey House's contract and blueprint included several interesting features. Curiously, the contract called for the construction of a "hotel," although the structure was never used as a hotel for railroad passengers. The only area that might have been used for a hotel lobby was designated on the building's blueprint as the "helpers' hall" where off duty employees ate their meals. The fourteen upstairs bedrooms were used to accommodate Harvey Girls when these hard working women were not busy serving Santa Fe guests and railroad workers downstairs.

Three other parts of the original blueprints are curious, given the Harvey House's location in Belen. First,

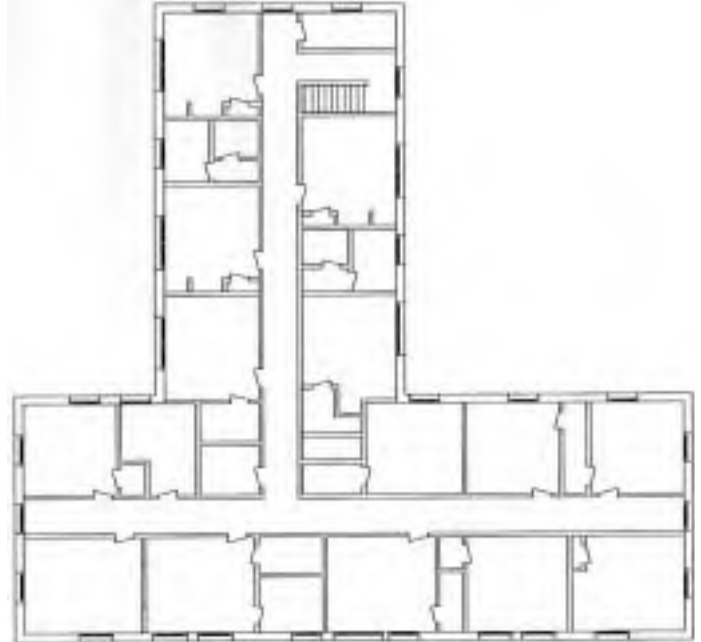
the plans included a large basement. While basements make good storage space, few buildings in Belen included them, especially given the area's high water table. As a result, the basement in Belen's Harvey House suffered chronic water problems over the years. Fortunately, it has never faced devastating floods like the two that completely destroyed the Harvey House in San Marcial, along with the rest of that small railroad town, in 1929. In the Cold War era, Belen's Harvey House basement was designated as a bomb shelter because it was one of the only basements in town.³



First story floor plans, Belen Harvey House. Courtesy of Brian Garrett and Alex Sanchez.

Designed back East, the Belen Harvey House's plans also included a small dining room labeled "colored" where black passengers and railroad workers were required to eat separately from whites. Such racial segregation was not typical in central New Mexico, if only because there were less than 1,700 black citizens, representing less than one percent of New Mexico's entire population, in 1910.

Another unusual feature of the Harvey House's contract and plans involved its construction material. All materials, including lumber, concrete, bricks and even sand, were purchased and transported by rail from out-



Second story floor plans of the bedrooms where the Harvey Girls lived, Belen Harvey House. Courtesy of Brian Garrett and Alex Sanchez.

side of New Mexico, far from Belen. With 100 percent of its building materials brought from elsewhere, it is accurate to say that Belen's Harvey House is in Belen, but not of Belen. Much the same can be said of the laborers who built the Belen Harvey House in 1910. All skilled and unskilled workers arrived from as far away as Chicago to work on one of the largest construction projects in Belen's history. Joseph E. Nelson and Sons could afford to transport workers from great distances because the Santa Fe Railway agreed to provide free transportation. The project provided work and good wages for many laborers, but not for local men who could have used the work and extra income.

Despite these oddities and possible forms of discrimination, the Harvey House was completed on time and "in a first class manner," as required in its original contract. According to the Albuquerque Morning Journal, the building opened for business on December 7, 1910. The Journal enthusiastically reported that Belen "now boasts one of the most modern and best appointed refreshment stations" in the Fred Harvey system. The building included "all the comforts and conveniences" of a large city establishment, including indoor plumbing! With lush lawns on the north and south sides of the building, the Harvey House became the pride of Belen, a real measure of town growth and prosperity.⁴

HARVEY HOUSE OPERATIONS

Belen's Harvey House remained open for the next twenty-nine years, through World War I, the 1920s and most of the Great Depression. Hundreds of people worked there, including Fred Harvey's most famous employees, the Harvey Girls. Nellie Berg was a typical Belen Harvey Girl. Like most Harvey Girls, Nellie was born in a small town in the Midwest, in her case in Iowa. After graduating from high school, where dances were forbidden and only board games were played at school gatherings, she was eager to see more of the world, or at least as far as California.⁵

Nellie received her Harvey Girl training at Vaughn before being assigned to the Harvey House in Belen. She fit in quickly, getting along well with her fellow workers, passenger guests and railroad employees. Nellie worked hard, helping to serve whole trainloads of passengers within thirty minutes, or the time it took for a steam powered train to take on coal and water. Harvey House workers managed this remarkable feat because they used several time-proven methods to work as efficiently as possible.⁶

Before a train arrived at a station anywhere along the Santa Fe line, its conductor wired the manager at the next Harvey House to report the total number of passengers on board. If the train was arriving for breakfast, the Harvey House manager knew that he could expect that ninety percent of the passengers would be dining. At lunch forty percent could dine. And at dinner sixty percent could be expected. Management had learned this "90-40-60" rule after serving thousands of passenger trains over dozens of years.⁷

The manager at the Belen Harvey House only had to be concerned with one part of the "90-40-60" rule because only one passenger train stopped for meals at his establishment each day. The Santa Fe Railway's famous Mission train from Chicago to Los Angeles stopped in Belen on its westbound journey at 5:05 or 5:10 p.m. for years. Alerted of the number of passengers on board when the Mission stopped in Vaughn, the Harvey House staff knew to expect that sixty percent of this number would probably be dining in Belen.⁸

After arriving at the Harvey House in Belen, passengers sat on one of forty-five swivel chairs around a large marble lunch counter. Harvey Girls took their guests' drink orders using a "cup code." Harvey Girls



Chef Barberi and cooks Ramon Saavedra, Joe Taylor, and Joe Tafoya, Belen Harvey House, ca. 1931. Courtesy of the Belen Harvey House Museum.

turned up the cups of customers who ordered coffee. Other cup positions indicated other drink preferences. A second Harvey Girl filled the orders by "reading" the code, serving beverages from three serving stations built in the center of the u-shaped lunch counter. Meals came next. Expert chefs like Joe Tafoya prepared meals based on menus planned at corporate headquarters in Kansas City. After working for the railroad for forty years and eating in Harvey Houses on countless occasions, Hank McCormick of Belen asserted, "I don't believe I ever ate a Fred Harvey meal that wasn't a good one."⁹

BELEN'S HARVEY GIRLS

Nellie Berg and her fellow Harvey Girls were held to the highest standards. They wore spotless black and white uniforms that were ironed with so much starch it was said they could stand up by themselves. Adhering to strict rules and manners, Harvey Girls served each customer with the utmost kindness and respect.¹⁰ But not everyone could meet such high standards. Some employees were fired during surprise inspections by company officials, including members of the Harvey family itself. Nellie recalls at least two girls who were let go. As Nellie put it, "Not everyone was cut out to be a Harvey server."¹¹

The Harvey Girls received good compensation for their hard labor. In addition to a monthly check, they benefited from free room and board and often-generous tips. Nellie recalls a railroad worker nicknamed "Cocky Joe" who sometimes left Indian-made rings as

tips for his favorite Harvey Girls. Most girls doubled their income from such tips.¹²



Harvey Girls and kitchen workers playing in the snow, Belen Harvey House, ca. 1925. Courtesy of the Belen Harvey House Museum.

When not hard at work, Nellie and her fellow Harvey Girls enjoyed their free time in Belen. They often walked to the post office, shopped at the Becker-Dalies mercantile store, watched movies at local theaters, played croquet on the Harvey House's



Harvey Girls sunbathing on the second floor roof, Belen Harvey House, ca. 1925. Courtesy of the Belen Harvey House Museum.

south lawn and attended the Belen fiestas. Girls played in the snow in the winter and sunbathed on the Harvey House's roof in the summer. Many Harvey Girls also dated local men. Indeed, the arrival of new Harvey Girls was quite an event in a small town like Belen. Young men found excuses for having to go to the Harvey House to see the new girls. Although there were rules against dating fellow Harvey House employees, many men and women met at work and later married. Nellie's sister, Olga, became a Harvey Girl in Belen and married Pat Lamb, a cook. Some couples took what they had learned from Fred Harvey to open successful restaurants of their own.¹³

Many Harvey Girls married Santa Fe Railway workers who ate at the Harvey House, using company-issued coupons which gave them 20 percent discounts on all meals. To be sure that there would always be room for them, railroad workers sat at a specially reserved section of the lunch counter. As regular customers, the men got to meet and admire many Harvey Girls. Belen Harvey Girls Irene Armstrong, Eva P. Fuqua and Madge Pinkerton met their railroad husbands in this way, as did Bessie Tate when she married Mal Tate, a railroad engineer who later served as the mayor of Belen for many years. Former Harvey Girls and their railroad worker husbands often obeyed the unofficial Fred Harvey "rule" that their first sons should be named Fred and their second sons should be named Harvey, to honor the man who had unintentionally brought the couples together. The humorist Will Rogers once quipped that Fred Harvey kept the West in good food and young brides.¹⁴

Harvey Girls lived upstairs in comfortable 12'x16' rooms at the Belen Harvey House. Each room included a closet, dressers and two twin beds. All girls shared a bathroom located down the hall. With two girls assigned to a room, the Harvey Girls lived in a semi-sheltered environment under the protective, watchful eye of a resident matron. Matrons strictly enforced house rules to help maintain the high moral standards expected of all Harvey Girls. Curfew rules were the hardest to keep. All girls were required to be home by 10:00 p.m. on weeknights and 11:00 p.m. on weekends. But even the most conscientious Harvey Girls broke curfew on occasion. Like many girls, Ruth Roarke, a Harvey Girl that Hank McCormick dated in his youth, devised a way to enter her upstairs room without detection after curfew. Others were less successful. Nellie says she crept up the stairs as quietly as possible, but one of the house's twenty-five stairs must have creaked because she was always caught on the rare occasion when she arrived home late. Hank McCormick's date Ruth undoubtedly knew the noisy step's location and remembered to cautiously step over it.¹⁵

Harvey House managers and their families also lived upstairs in a small three-room apartment. Manager Nicholas Fink and his wife Ida Mae were living in this apartment when Ida Mae gave birth to their son, John, on July 27, 1914. John may have been the first and only baby born in the Belen Harvey House. To cel-



Harvey House manager (standing), newstand manager (sitting), and Harvey Girls, Belen Harvey House, ca. 1931. Courtesy of the Belen Harvey House Museum.

celebrate the grand event, John's proud parents held a "stork party" with guests from local families, including the Beckers, the Dalies, the Fischers and the Goebels.¹⁶

Like most Harvey Girls, Nellie Berg has mostly fond memories of her years as a Harvey Girl. She is nevertheless saddened by memories of the Harvey Company's unfair treatment of minorities. Only white women were hired as Harvey Girls before World War II. Local Hispanics could only work behind the scenes in the kitchen. Pueblo Indians from Isleta sold their pottery and jewelry, but only on the sidewalk outside the front door. The small "colored" dining room designated in the Harvey House's original blueprint was never used, but black customers and black railroad employees had to eat at the end of the lunch counter. Even then, some Harvey Girls refused to serve blacks, and Nellie feared losing her job the one time she served an Indian.¹⁷

A SOCIAL CENTER

Belen's Harvey House served passengers and railroad workers, but it also served local residents. Margaret Glasebrook remembers eating in the Belen lunchroom with her mother, Marion Herlihy. Worn out after working at the First National Bank of Belen six days a week, Marion treated herself and Margaret to dinner at the Harvey House every Sunday evening. Margaret was impressed by the spotless Harvey Girls, the immaculate surroundings, the tall coffee urns and, especially, the wonderful ice cream shipped all the way from Kansas City by rail.¹⁸

Teenage residents of Belen sometimes took their

dates to the Harvey House after an evening of dancing or going to the movies. Bill Gore remembers that a Coke cost a dime at the Harvey House, more expensive than anywhere else in town. Boys took their dates to the Harvey House if they really wanted to impress them as big spenders! As one of the "fanciest" restaurants in all of Valencia County, the Harvey House's formal dining room was chosen as the location of many special events, from business banquets to high school proms. Local clubs met there too. Founded in March 1937, the Belen Rotary Club met at the Harvey House every Wednesday evening at 7:00 p.m. The dining room was so formal that all men were required to wear formal dinner jackets or they would not be seated and served. Harvey Houses kept a stock of spare jackets for gentlemen who might lack them.¹⁹

Local residents also went to the depot and Harvey House to engage in one of their favorite pastimes: watching for celebrities on passenger trains traveling through Belen. Hank McCormick remembered seeing several celebrities, including the famous cowboy movie star Tom Mix, during Hank's boyhood "star gazing" days.²⁰ Belenites also watched military trains before and after World War I. When Pancho Villa attacked Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916 local citizens watched National Guard troops and equipment roll through town en route to help guard the border. Residents gave fruit and cookies to soldiers on troop trains en route to Europe during World War I.

HARVEY HOUSE DECLINE

The Belen Harvey House prospered until the outset of the Great Depression. Cars and buses competed with trains, and new trains with budget prices and modern dining cars competed with old Harvey Houses. By 1936 passengers eating all three meals in dining cars on trains like The Scout paid just 90 cents a day. As a result, forty-nine Harvey Houses were closed in the 1930s, including those in Vaughn, Lamy and Rincon. Belen's turn came in 1939. Learning the sad news from the Harvey House's last manager, Marshall Van Coerveden, Nellie Berg, her sister and their fellow Harvey Girls offered to work for only room and board and tips if the railroad would reverse its decision. But the Santa Fe had made up its mind.²¹ Harvey Girls who wished to continue working for the company could be transferred elsewhere. Male employees were often given jobs with the railroad.

Joe Tafoya, who had worked as a highly respected chef in Belen's Harvey House since 1926, worked as a section laborer until his retirement at age 65.

Although many mourned its passing as a Harvey House, no one at the time could have known that the building was not dead. It would, in fact, experience three important rebirths in its long history. It experienced its first rebirth within a year: The Santa Fe Railway converted the Harvey House into a Reading Room, opening in May 1940.²²

RAILROAD READING ROOMS

The Santa Fe Railway had operated Reading Rooms since the 1880s and had opened one such facility in Belen about the time the town's Harvey House had been built in 1910. Located just south of Belen's train depot at the east end of Castillo Rd., Belen's one-story Reading Room had cost \$5,238 (or about \$120,000 in today's money) to construct.

The Santa Fe offered Reading Rooms for its employees who had long layovers in railroad centers, or division points, like Belen. In a typical operation, a Reading Room's main room provided newspapers, magazines and books to entertain and inform workers who might otherwise succumb to temptations in town and arrive for work in less than ideal condition. Some railroad towns were said to have six bars for every grocery store; the ratio of bars to churches was similar, if not worse. By 1899 the Santa Fe had implemented its famous Rule G: "The use of intoxicants by employees on duty is prohibited."²³ Fearing the loss of his job, a railroad worker in Vaughn probably spoke for the men in Belen and elsewhere when he anticipated the opening of his town's Reading Room, saying, "The boys are all looking forward to a place where they can spend their leisure hours without violating Rule G."²⁴ Intoxicated workers were far more likely to cause costly accidents involving lost lives, time and property.²⁵ To emphasize the importance of work safety, Reading Rooms were often used to hold safety lectures for Santa Fe employees.²⁶

Reading Rooms offered a wholesome social life, including regular entertainment for railroad workers, their families and local residents in railroad towns. The Santa Fe booked entertainment from across the United States and as far away as Canada and Europe. Entertainers performed in exchange for free travel to whatever destination they preferred along the Santa Fe line. In the candid

words of the Santa Fe's president, Edward P. Ripley, "We want better men, and we are willing to spend money to make them better, because they will do the work more intelligently and more conscientiously, besides being much happier themselves."²⁷ Put another way, railroad officials believed that an employee who got a bath, a book and entertainment was more likely to become "more faithful to himself and more valuable to his company." By 1902 there were fourteen Reading Rooms on the Santa Fe line. By 1915 there were twenty-five, and by 1925 there were thirty-five.²⁸

Like its Harvey House, Belen's Reading Room was neither large nor elaborate. It was, however, similar to the Reading Rooms in other railroad towns in New Mexico like Raton, San Marcial, Clovis and Gallup. By 1913 Belen's Reading Room claimed that its library could "compare very favorably with libraries in many of the larger cities."²⁹ The Reading Room's books included works on history, biography, travel, fiction, science and technology. Years before Google, Belen's book collection was ready to answer almost every question and resolve almost every dispute that might arise among the men.³⁰

The Reading Room also offered some of Belen's most popular entertainment, based on the ideas and values of the times. In 1913, for example, Maran-Atha Shrine Minstrels of Chicago entertained local audiences with what we now consider racist comedy and songs. An advertisement for the event warned that those who attended might not be able to sleep after the show because they would not be able to stop thinking about all the funny skits they would see at the Reading Room.³¹ In another typical Reading Room show, Daddy Grobecker's Swiss Alpine Serenaders sang Swiss folk songs and performed "superb" yodeling acts.³² There was no mention of whether echoes of Swiss yodeling might disturb the audience's slumber on the evening of the Alpine Serenaders' performance in Belen.

Crowds for these free weekly events were often so large that Santa Fe Railroad employees and their families were seated first, with all remaining seats open to the general public just before each performance began. Reading Room manager S. E. Busser told railroad workers that "the humblest employee may attend, and you will be just as welcome in your work clothes as in your dress suits."³³ Shows were so popular in Belen during the winter season that while they were at first performed at the old Reading Room, they were later performed at

the local high school and eventually at the American Legion hall on Main Street.³⁴

Despite such success, the Reading Room in Belen, like the town's Harvey House, fell on hard times in the 1930s. The Santa Fe could no longer afford Reading Rooms for its employees; not even Reading Room entertainment was provided by 1938. The old building was closed in 1939, the same year as the Harvey House's closure.³⁵

A NEW READING ROOM

Renewed business activity in the pre-World War II period led to a new demand for a Reading Room in Belen. Offering far more room than its predecessor, the old Harvey House became Belen's new Reading Room in May 1941. For the first time in its history, Belen's Harvey House was about to become the "hotel" it was prematurely identified as in its original building contract of 1910.

Like most Reading Rooms, Belen's was often managed by long-time railroad employees who were nearing retirement, but had suffered a debilitating injury on the job. Managers, known as "librarians," included Curtis Sylvester Bell, probably Belen's first Reading Room supervisor once the operation had been transferred to the old Harvey House. Bell had worked for the Santa Fe for about twenty years when he suffered a hand injury while working as the manager of the railroad's freight department in Roswell. He and his wife Mattie worked at Belen's Reading Room through World War II, or until his retirement in 1946.³⁶

The Bells' grandson, Al Herron, recalls the troop trains that stopped at Belen's train station during World War II. Herron says that as soon as a troop train pulled in, its soldiers would dash off to line up at the old Harvey House's newsstand window. Working from inside the newsstand, Bell and his wife (and their daughter and grandson, when they were in town) served the men snacks and drinks. Most items cost a nickel, although Cokes cost a dime (with a refundable nickel bottle).³⁷ Young Charles Seery and his pals made extra money if troop trains arrived and soldiers were not allowed to debark. Soldiers paid the boys to buy them snacks from the Bells in the Reading Room. Boys often had to run down the tracks to make their deliveries as the trains gradually built up speed and headed out of town.³⁸

Other Harvey Houses, including the Alvarado,

served as "sandwich factories" during World War II. Former Harvey Girls came out of retirement to help new Harvey Girls like Mari Smiley prepare and serve as many as three thousand sandwiches—mostly peanut butter and jelly or bologna—for the troops heading east or west on the Santa Fe.³⁹

Belenites often encouraged the troops who passed through town. Some local residents gave small gifts to the soldiers, while some girls shared their names and addresses with soldiers they met in the few moments the troop trains stopped for fuel and water. Margaret Glasebrook remembers that her music teacher, Ruth May Peterson, brought Margaret and her fellow members of the Belen High School choir to the train depot to serenade troop trains during the Christmas season.⁴⁰

Starting in September 1954 and retiring in November 1971, Chalmer E. Martin probably served as librarian longer than any other manager in Belen's Reading Room history. Martin suffered from extremely poor eyesight, perhaps the result of a railroad accident experienced earlier in his career when he had held various jobs, including brakeman, switchman, conductor and trainmaster. Martin, his wife Helen and their daughter Nancy lived in a first-floor apartment. Helen Martin cleaned the rooms and kept the books. Martin once told a reporter that he enjoyed his days at the Reading Room better than any other part of his railroad career, "even though it didn't pay as much."⁴¹

Chalmer Martin and all other managers checked men into the Reading Room from behind the counter of the Harvey House's former newsstand. As each man signed in, he received clean sheets, pillowcases and towels. Woolen blankets with the Santa Fe logo were available in each sleeping room. Despite keeping a strict inventory, blankets were sometimes known to "disappear." By 1954 Santa Fe employees paid 50 cents a night to stay at the Reading Room. By 1971 they paid \$1.50. Eventually, there was no charge, thanks to union negotiations. Pop, candy and toiletries sold at the old newsstand were extra.⁴²

The demand for sleeping rooms was so great that 16,327 men slept at the Reading Room in 1956 alone. To provide more sleeping quarters and facilities, the Santa Fe divided the Harvey House's old dining room and partitioned the south end of the old lunchroom to create a sunroom and two downstairs bathrooms. Even with this additional space, employees often had to wait for hours

to get a bed. Men often slept in the big room's (former lunchroom's) overstuffed chairs and, on some occasions, on a large table while they waited for a room to become available. A sign reminded men that they could "Put your feet where you want to but keep your shoes off the chairs." The Reading Room was so busy that men could not reserve a room for more than one night at a time. Instead, they had to check in and out each day, hoping that the daily wait for a room would not be excessively long.⁴³

Although furnishings were sparse and not much like home, most men simply appreciated a quiet place to sleep after long hours on the job. Few complained, although at least one union leader noted that the only fire escape from the second floor was a rope with knots. Fortunately, the Reading Room never suffered a major fire, despite its many smoking guests.⁴⁴

The Santa Fe hired "callboys" to locate railroad employees when crews were organized for departing trains. Long before cell phones were invented, callboys searched through town to find workers. The boys enjoyed their most success in finding men who stayed at the Reading Room. Callboys like Leo Gabaldon and Ross Lovato remember looking at the Reading Room's register to find each crewman's name and room number. Going to a worker's room, a callboy would knock, open the door (they were seldom locked), turn on the light, say the man's name and notify him of the train he had been assigned. Railroad workers had about forty-five minutes to wake up, dress and get to their trains—providing they were awake enough to remember what the callboys had told them.

Callboys found some men in rather compromising positions. Whether finding men at the Reading Room or in odd places in town, callboys were said to know more gossip than anyone else on the Santa Fe line.⁴⁵ (When young women began to serve in similar roles, the railroad realized that they should not be referred to as "call girls." Instead, they were given a less controversial name: "crew alerters.")⁴⁶

As a small Reading Room, Belen's facility lacked many forms of entertainment found in Reading Rooms in larger towns or cities. Belen never boasted bowling alleys, "plunge baths" (swimming pools), a gymnasium or pool tables, as found in places like Albuquerque, Winslow, Arizona, and Needles, California.⁴⁷ But most men did not seem to mind their no-frills operation in

Belen. While some men played checkers or dominoes, most played cards "round the clock," according to veteran railroad man Hal Cox. Librarian Chalmer Martin recalled that although poker and gambling were officially banned, there were times when men lost their entire paychecks in a night of card playing. Most men also smoked, leading brakeman Hampton Hurt to call Belen's Reading Room "the smokiest place in the world." Whether playing games or smoking, most railroad men respected the message on a large sign that read: "Quiet, Men Sleeping."⁴⁸

Belen's Reading Room remained busy until the 1970s when its age began to show and it was apparent that major remodeling would be needed if it was to remain open—and safe. Meanwhile, railroad crews were reduced in numbers, especially with the use of modern equipment and diesel engines. Rather than bear the high cost of remodeling a facility that was less needed, the Santa Fe Railway made the business decision to close the Belen Reading Room as of September 2, 1980.⁴⁹ From then on railroad employees would stay at motels in town that made special arrangements with the Santa Fe. The now-defunct Freeway Inn on South Main Street served this purpose for many years. Other motels serve the same purpose today.

SAVING THE HARVEY HOUSE

The old Reading Room was boarded up in the fall of 1980. Most Belenites considered it just a matter of time until the Santa Fe demolished the structure as it had destroyed so many of its former Harvey Houses, including those in Deming, Gallup, Lamy, Raton, Rincon and Vaughn. In the most famous demolition of a Harvey House, the Santa Fe Railway ordered the destruction of Albuquerque's famed Alvarado in early 1970. Many admirers of the old hotel protested with picket lines and personal appeals, but nothing could stop the building's execution once its death warrant had been signed. The building was destroyed in a matter of days. Its space remained a parking lot for decades.⁵⁰

Ironically, the Alvarado's destruction might well have saved many other historic buildings, including the Harvey House in Belen. Aghast by what had happened to the Alvarado, civic leaders in Belen vowed not to see their Harvey House suffer the same fate. Organized as the Save the Harvey House Committee, leaders like Marion Herlihy, Zed Park, Randy Dooley, B.G. Burr, state

representative Ron Gentry and Mayor Boleslo Lovato fought an impassioned campaign to save the Belen Harvey House. Gentry and others argued that it was important to save the building not only in the interest of historic preservation, but also in the interest of attracting tourists to the famous old restaurant, thereby helping to stimulate the local economy. The committee compiled such an impressive collection of facts, letters, and petitions (with nearly five thousand names) that the railroad felt compelled to listen. Although the railroad seldom changed its mind once a decision to level a building was made, Joe Menapace, representing the Santa Fe, called the committee's effort "the most awesome presentation the company ever received."⁵¹

The Valencia County News-Bulletin assisted as well. Reporter Gary Herron wrote a series of articles about the building's history and the efforts to save the structure when it was within days of being destroyed. The newspaper worked so diligently that it received the New Mexico Press Association's Public Service Award for its efforts to forestall demolition.⁵²

These heroic efforts met with great success. On February 3, 1983, the Santa Fe Railway changed its corporate mind, abandoned its plans to destroy the Harvey House and officially signed the building over to the City of Belen. Twenty minimum-security inmates from the Los Lunas honor farm came to help clean the building and paint its walls that summer.⁵³

A COMMUNITY CENTER

The Harvey House began the third major phase in its history when the city decided to make the old structure a much-needed community center with a downstairs museum and upstairs offices available for non-profit organizations like the New Mexico Country Music Association. The former lunchroom was cleared out and made available for public events, from aerobic exercise classes to wedding receptions and high school graduation parties. Ebb Rury served as the center's able part-time manager, as did Shirley and Johnny Olguin, who lived upstairs on the premises. A city-appointed board of directors oversaw the operation under exceptional leaders like Cortez Kibble, who first saw Belen from a troop train during World War II, never thinking that he would someday retire here and become so involved in community affairs.

The Valencia County Historical Society realized

its long-time goal of creating a local museum when it opened such a facility at the Harvey House, just in time for the building's 75th anniversary in 1985. The indefatigable Marion Herlihy organized and ran the museum in what had once been the Harvey House's formal dining room. Herlihy was joined by Susana Baca, Luz Chavez, Ruth Auge, Margaret Espinosa McDonald and others who worked countless hours to make the museum a success from the start. As Ruth Auge put it, "We have a sprout of a museum that we hope will grow."⁵⁴

But serving as a community center proved hard on one of the oldest buildings in Belen. Office occupants, including the local Chamber of Commerce, came and went. And the "big room" experienced considerable wear and tear from all the activity of festive events, especially when alcohol was served. During a private New Year's Eve party in December 1996 party-goers were found "hanging from the rafters," according to police chief Lawrence Romero.⁵⁵ Little had been done to maintain no less repair the aging structure. The pipes leaked, the roof needed repair, cats roamed the basement and pigeons damaged the building's exterior. The entire heating system failed in November 1996.⁵⁶

City leaders eventually made the wise decision to end the Harvey House's role as a community center. As then-city councilor Ronnie Torres put it, "We can't replace history" once it's been compromised or destroyed.⁵⁷ A News-Bulletin editorial agreed.⁵⁸

A HARVEY HOUSE MUSEUM

Now in the fourth stage of its history, the entire structure has become a Harvey House museum, jointly occupied by the Belen Model Railroad Club and the Valencia County Historical Society.⁵⁹

Great labor was required to refurbish and remodel the old building in the late 1990s. Hundreds of volunteers lent a hand, including Elderhostel workers from across the United States, Boy Scouts, Walmart employee volunteers and, especially, Vince Chavez and his many assistants. The floors were redone and no fewer than five layers of paint were removed from over the original wood finish. Nelson Van Valen Ken Gibson grew a native plant garden and other plant life to improve the Harvey House's outside appearance. Eagle Scout Lyle Hanchett erected a flagpole near the southeast corner of the property.⁶⁰

The Harvey House Museum is a great success.

Visitors see displays of Santa Fe china, Harvey House menus, railroad equipment and a bedroom much like a Harvey Girl might have used. Photos of the Harvey House's glory days are everywhere. Western artist Curtis Fort's bronze sculpture, "Roses of the Desert," is a beautiful tribute to all Harvey Girls of the Southwest. Chef Joe Tafoya's uniform is displayed just as proudly as when he wore it during his 13-year career in Belen. A 6'x10' map shows the location of every Harvey House in New Mexico. Even Mr. Martin's old roll-top desk is on display from the building's Reading Room days. Drawing over eight thousand visitors a year, the Harvey House Museum is the number one tourist attraction in Valencia County. The building is listed on both the state and national registers of historic places.

Many visitors are school children and local residents, but many more are travelers from every state in the Union and from countries as far away as Europe and Asia. Senior visitors remember the days when they ate at Harvey Houses or stayed in grand Harvey hotels like the Alvarado. Artists like the late Agnes O'Brien have painted or photographed the building from all angles. Scholars and journalists have written about the Harvey Company's success in non-fictional books, newspapers and magazines.⁶¹ Fictional writers have searched for unique settings for works like Sheila Wood Foard's novel, "Harvey Girl," and Pari Noskin Taichert's contemporary mystery, "The Belen Hitch." Taichert's mystery features a fictional Harvey Girl ghost. Although several people claim to have seen a ghost on the premises, it is not a female and certainly not a Harvey Girl. Usually dressed in a yellow and black checked shirt, the ghost seems harmless enough, despite his occasional pranks.⁶²

Perhaps the most interesting visitors are those who worked for the Fred Harvey Company or had ancestors who did. Even Stewart Harvey, Fred Harvey's last grandson, has come by. Museum docents keep a special notebook and ask these honored guests to record their memories of what life was like in the building's glory years. Most are happy to comply.

Like all good museums, the Harvey House Museum is a work in progress. Special exhibits, including two sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., are shown in the large exhibit room (former lunchroom). Regular events include semiannual railroad shows, quilt shows, art shows by the Belen Art League and the performance of "La Gran Pastorela" by Filomena

Baca and her dedicated troupe each Christmas season since 1999. The Belen Model Railroad Club has designed a room that recreates the Santa Fe Railway's route through Valencia County, from Abo Canyon in the east to Mt. Taylor in the west. There is even a miniature Harvey House beside the depot. All of this is possible with the help of many dedicated docents under the leadership of award winning museum director Maurine McMillan. Often called the ultimate Harvey Girl, McMillan has served as the director, first with Julie Van Valen, and, since 2000, on her own.⁶³

Belen's Harvey House can be compared to an aging celebrity who is celebrating her hundredth birthday in 2010. As with most celebrities, the Harvey House has many admirers who come to linger and recall her bygone days of fame and glamour. With few lapses, constant care has kept this special lady functioning well in all the starring roles she has performed, from her decades as a Harvey House to her years as a Reading Room, a community center and, now, a Harvey House Museum. Fortunately, the good citizens of Belen seem fully committed to the responsibility of caregivers as the Harvey House completes her first century of life and looks forward to whatever useful roles she will play in the foreseeable future and, hopefully, far beyond.

Endnotes

- 1 Richard Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses of the Southwest* (Charleston: Arcadia Press, 2008): 64, 66. Fred Harvey's most famous architect and designer was Mary Colter, whose work included Harvey Houses in Santa Fe, Gallup, Winslow, and the Grand Canyon. Virginia L. Grattan, *Mary Colter: Builder Upon the Red Earth* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1980).
- 2 The contract is archived in the Harvey House Museum, Belen, New Mexico.
- 3 Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 70; Gary Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled," *Valencia-County News-Bulletin*, September 2, 1982.
- 4 Lillian George and Charles Seery interviews reported in Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled."
- 5 Richard Melzer, "Harvey Girls," *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, October 20, 2001; interview, Nellie Berg, August 22, 2001, Harvey House Museum, Belen, New Mexico.
- 6 Melzer, "Harvey Girls." The best two books about the Harvey Girls and the Fred Harvey Company are Lesley Poling-Kempes, *The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West* (New York: Da Capo

- Press, 1989) and Stephen Fried, *Appetite for America: How Visionary Businessman Fred Harvey Built a Railroad Hospitality Empire That Civilized the Wild West* (New York: Random House, 2010).
- 7 Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 14.
 - 8 Interview, Hank McCormick, April 9, 1992, Belen, New Mexico.
 - 9 McCormick interview.
 - 10 Berg interview; Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 13.
 - 11 Berg interview.
 - 12 Berg interview; Leslie Poling-Kempes, "The Harvey Girls: Women Who Opened the West," June 20, 2010, Harvey House Museum, Belen, New Mexico.
 - 13 Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 19; Berg interview; Marion Herlihy interview reported in Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled."
 - 14 McCormick interview; Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 18.
 - 15 Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 17; McCormick interview; Berg interview.
 - 16 Gary Herron, "Man Returns to Birthplace," *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, August 12, 1984. On Harvey House managers, see Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 22.
 - 17 Corra Dils interview in Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled"; McCormick interview; Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 20, 23; Berg interview.
 - 18 Interview, Margaret Glasebrook, May 26, 2010, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Harvey Houses were famous for their Chase and Sanborn coffee. Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 93; George H. Foster and Peter C. Weiglin, *Harvey House Cookbook: Memories of Dining along the Santa Fe Railroad* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1992): 158.
 - 19 Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 67, 78; *Belen News*, March 18, 1937; Hank McCormick interview reported in Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled."
 - 20 McCormick interview; Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled."
 - 21 Berg interview; Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 117.
 - 22 *Belen News*, May 30, 1940; Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 125.
 - 23 Carl R. Graves and Kathryn A. Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment: The Santa Fe Railway and Its Reading Rooms," *Railroad History*, bul. 169 (Autumn 1993): 8.
 - 24 Quoted in Graves and Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment," 28.
 - 25 L.L. Waters, *Steel Trails to Santa Fe* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1950): 296-98.
 - 26 Interview, Warren Vaughn, September 29, 2004, Harvey House Museum, Belen, New Mexico.
 - 27 Quoted in Graves and Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment," 11.
 - 28 Graves and Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment," 9, 25.
 - 29 *Belen News*, January 16, 1913.
 - 30 Graves and Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment," 17-18; McCormick interview. We do not know the exact number of books in the Belen Reading Room collection. Reading Room collections ranged from fifty-three to about three hundred volumes each. The system's total collection equaled twenty thousand by 1923. Also see Tom D. Kilton, "The American Railroad as Publisher, Bookseller, and Librarian," *Journal of Library History*, vol. 17 (Winter 1982): 56.
 - 31 *Belen News*, January 16, 1913. The Santa Fe also offered entertainment at its Reading Room in Albuquerque and Gallup. See, for example, *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, December 4, 1910; *Gallup Herald*, May 4, 1918.
 - 32 *Belen News*, March 26, 1931. For examples of other Reading Room performances in Belen, see the *Belen News*, February 20, 1913, and March 4, 1937.
 - 33 Quoted in the *Belen News*, January 16, 1913. Busser wrote about the value of Reading Rooms in his "Santa Fe Reading Rooms," *Out West*, vol. 25 (August 1906): 126.
 - 34 McCormick interview. On Reading Room performances, see Graves and Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment," 20-23. A weekly performance was far more entertainment than most towns Belen's size ever enjoyed.
 - 35 Graves and Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment," 26; McCormick interview.
 - 36 Graves and Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment," 18-20; Interview, Al Herron.
 - 37 Herron interview.
 - 38 Charles Seery interview reported in Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled."
 - 39 *Albuquerque Journal South*, June 26, 1997.
 - 40 Glasebrook interview.
 - 41 Interview, Ross Lovato, December 29, 2006, Belen, New Mexico; McCormick interview; Vaughn interview.
 - 42 Interview, Larry Dodd, May 19, 2007, Harvey House Museum, Belen, New Mexico; Vaughn interview.
 - 43 Dodd interview; Gary Herron, "Battle Wages for Harvey House," *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, August 30, 1982.
 - 44 Vaughn interview. Fires had been a major problem in early Harvey Houses, including the Montezuma in Las Vegas, which burned twice, and the house in Gallup, which burned down in 1914. Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 36, 75; *Gallup Republican*, January 9, 1914.
 - 45 Vaughn interview.
 - 46 Lovato interview; Dodd interview; Interview, Hampton Hurt, July 25, 2006, Harvey House Museum, Belen, New Mexico.
 - 47 Graves and Graves, "A Bath, a Book, and an Entertainment," 15-16.
 - 48 Hurt interview; C.E. Martin interview reported in Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled."
 - 49 *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, August 21, 1985.
 - 50 Melzer, *Fred Harvey Houses*, 124; *Albuquerque Journal*, August 25,

1982. Albuquerque's modern transportation center, designed in the Alvarado's same California Mission style architecture and opened in 2001, is located where the old Harvey House once stood. *Albuquerque Journal*, September 27, 2001.
- 51 Herron, "Battle Wages for Harvey House"; *Albuquerque Journal*, August 25, 1982.
- 52 Herron, "Battle Wages for Harvey House"; Herron, "Harvey House Days Recalled."
- 53 *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, August 21, 1985; Glasebrook interview. By 2001 the railroad had also sold the land on which the Harvey House sits to the City of Belen. *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, August 22, 2001.
- 54 Quoted in the *Albuquerque Journal*, April 6, 1985.
- 55 Quoted in the *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, November 26, 1997.
- 56 *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, February 24, 1995; September 26, 1996; *Albuquerque Journal*, October 24, 1996.
- 57 Quoted in the *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, February 26, 1997.
- 58 Editorial, *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, February 26, 1997.
- 59 *Albuquerque Journal*, September 16, 1999; *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, November 24, 1999.
- 60 *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, March 19, 1999; June 12, 1999; October 6, 1999; October 23, 1999; November 20, 1999; *Albuquerque Journal*, February 19, 2001.
- 61 See, for example, Lesley S. King, "O, Little Town of Belen: Celebrate the Holiday Season in the Other Bethlehem," *New Mexico Magazine*, vol. 88 (December 2010): 20-01.
- 62 Sheila Wood Foard, *Harvey Girl* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006); Pari Noskin Taichert, *The Belen Hitch: A Sasha Solomon Mystery* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).
- 63 *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, May 20, 1994; Sage Magazine, November 1998.