

Grand Canyon Grandeur

After 97 years, the El Tovar Hotel still welcomes visitors to the wonder of the West.

BY JILL OSET CAHILL

So inspired was he by his visit to the Grand Canyon in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt upgraded its standing from national forest and game reserve to national monument in 1908. In 1919, it was designated as the 17th national park and became a World Heritage Site in 1979. Today, it is the most heavily visited national park in the Southwest, with five million visitors annually. Two hundred seventy-seven miles long and more than a mile deep in some places, the Paiute Indians referred to this magnificent canyon as "Kaibab," meaning "Mountain Lying Down." Called the "divine abyss" by naturalist John Burroughs, the Grand Canyon was a tourist attraction long before the luxury of lodging and recreational facilities.

After the Santa Fe Railroad extended a rail line link to the Grand Canyon in 1901, transporting even greater numbers of tourists, the first hotel at the South Rim, the El Tovar Hotel, was opened in 1905. The El Tovar Hotel was the inspiration of Fred Harvey, known in his day as the "civilizer of the West." His Harvey Houses were famous across the west as elegant havens of hospitality. During the late 1880s, Harvey Houses were built almost every 100 miles along the Santa Fe Railroad through Kansas, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and California.

He staffed his hotels, in part, with the celebrated "Harvey Girls," young women recruited from across the country with "good moral character, at least an eighth grade education, good manners, clear speech, and a neat appearance." These women, 18 to 30 years of age, worked under a year-long contract, during which time they were to remain unmarried. Many of them later married ranchers and cowboys and gave birth to children named "Fred" or "Harvey." Will Rogers once said of Fred Harvey, "He kept the West in food and wives."

By 1920, Harvey was the largest concessionaire at the South Rim. This relationship continued until 1968, when Amfac

Parks and Resorts purchased the Fred Harvey Company.

Originally to be called Bright Angel Tavern, the name "El Tovar" (meaning "man on the shore") was later selected for the grand hotel in the Santa Fe tradition of naming hotels of the region after Spanish explorers. In keeping with the great vision and spirit of preservation, the El Tovar Hotel was placed on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon as a component of, rather than intrusion on, the natural wonder. Considered the first example of "rustic architecture" in a national park, the El Tovar was constructed using native boulders for the foundation and rockwork and Douglas firs from the Pacific Northwest to blend with the canyon walls. A grand hotel for a grand landscape, the structure measured 325 feet from north to south and 218 feet from east to west. Built at a cost of \$250,000, the 100-room, log cabin-style property provided the rare comforts of steam heat, electric lights, and hot and cold water (an especially precious amenity given the delivery of water by train in the early days, and later via a 2.5-mile pipe from 3,200 feet below the South Rim.)

Originally, the hotel's most famous rooms included the "Rendezvous Room" (today's main lobby), which was decorated as a European hunting lodge with log

slab walls, beams, a stone fireplace, wood floors and custom-made wood sofas and chairs that accented the balustrade pattern of the main stairway. Although the days of the Harvey Girls are a thing of the past, the El Tovar Hotel—now a registered National Historic Landmark—continues to attract travelers visiting the world's grandest canyon. ■

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*"The Grand Canyon, Arizona, has a natural wonder, which so far as I know, is in kind absolutely unparalleled throughout the rest of the world."
—Theodore Roosevelt*

Pictured above: the El Tovar Hotel at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, circa 1905.