in which he addresses them and the amount of attention each receives follow an unpredictable logic. Thus, his opening chapter, “They Were So Lovely They Made Me Cry,” discusses “prairie-hens from Illinois” with an exquisite amalgam of personal narrative, natural history, and social history. In his passionate curiosity to understand Twain’s particularity about prairie hens from Illinois, Beahrs joins an excursion to observe the spring mating ritual—called “booming”—of the roughly three hundred still surviving in Illinois. To explain how a population of countless millions could decline to only three hundred in less than a century, Beahrs describes how the richest and deepest topsoil in the world produced the lush, complexly diverse midwestern prairies, how annual fires sustained that ecosystem, and how the sod-busting steel plows invented by John Deere at first led to an ideal habitat for prairie chickens yet subsequently enabled the total destruction of the prairies and the unique topsoil that nourished them.

Combining cultivated fields and natural prairie fueled an explosion—inevitably temporary—of prairie chicken populations. This, coupled with the technological innovation of refrigerated rail cars, transformed this local delicacy into a national culinary fad. Habitat destruction and excessive harvesting thrust this seemingly inexhaustible species to the brink of extinction. Though he cannot feast upon these threatened hens, Beahrs invokes their culinary appeal by quoting nineteenth-century descriptions and recipes. Here as elsewhere, he effectively evokes via analogy. Most memorably, he explains that Chesapeake canvasback ducks acquire their distinctive flavor because they gorge on wild aquatic celery in Chesapeake Bay. Beahrs similarly describes various subspecies of oysters, terrapins, and other animals that have had the misfortune to become culinary fads. Their inherent appeal is quintessentially local, because they exude the savor of their unique environment. Why they ravish palates is obvious. Regrettably, appreciation mutates into epicurean and commercial voracity, and robust species fade to remnants, spiraling toward the void.

Twain’s Feast makes mutually illuminating the personal culinary narratives of Mark Twain, Andrew Beahrs, and the American people, contextualized with discussions of geography, ecology, natural history, and social history. Explaining the history of foods requires expansiveness. Nonetheless, eclecticism sometimes wanders into self-indulgence. Beahrs’s leaps of association sometimes land in a morass. The lyrical discussion of prairie chickens opens the book vividly, but the next chapter, on opossums and raccoons, inauspiciously mires us in distasteful precincets. Possums do, at least, have their enthusiasts, as Beahrs illustrates with two early twentieth-century recipes and a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem. Raccoon, however, is not suckling pig. Beahrs describes it as worse than muskrat, his previous culinary nadir. He decided to experience America’s only annual coon dinner, an event aptly isolated in an Ozarks backwater called Gillett. Revealingly, even the people who prepare six hundred pounds of coon every year really don’t like eating coon. The fact that Beahrs made the trip hardly justifies devoting a chapter to such woeful fare. A brief anecdote would have sufficed.

Fortunately, Beahrs’ excursions are usually interesting and sometimes unforgettable. He avidly traces Mark Twain’s culinary adventures, from childhood memories of wild game on the Quarles farm, to the famous 1877 debacle of his botched after-dinner speech at Boston’s Brunswick Hotel, to Thanksgivings at his home in Hartford. Numerous recipes, plus menus from the Brunswick dinner, Twain’s holiday feasts, and other occasions are special delights. Twain’s Feast memorably explores other regional specialties, some of which we have not yet managed to decimate, from Vermont maple syrup, Maine lobsters, and Massachusetts cranberries to New Orleans sheep-heads and Lake Tahoe trout. Beahrs takes Twain’s rambling list of personal favorites and brings it to life in this deliciously idiosyncratic book.

—David Lionel Smith, Williams College

Appetite for America: How Visionary Businessman Fred Harvey Built a Railroad Hospitality Empire That Civilized the Wild West
Stephen Fried
New York: Bantam Books, 2010
xix + 432 pp. $27.00

The years since World War II have seen the end of many institutions that once were so large and powerful that they seemed likely to outlast the stars, including Pan American World Airways, the Pennsylvania Railroad, and Anaconda Copper. Fred Harvey—the company was just called “Fred Harvey,” and not “The Fred Harvey Company” or “Fred Harvey Incorporated”—was another that once seemed destined to be a permanent part of American life. It wasn’t as huge as Anaconda or Pan Am, nor was it a true national enterprise, since its restaurants, hotels, and newsstands were located mainly west of the Mississippi, along the tracks of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. But at its peak it had scores of restaurants and lunch counters, and all along the Sante Fe line it managed a dozen hotels and
had newsstands and bookstores in train stations throughout the Southwest. Until the growth of Coca-Cola in the early twentieth century, “Fred Harvey” may have been the best-known brand name in America.

The whole operation not only is gone but now largely forgotten, although Stephen Fried hopes to change that. The Harvey Girls were single women recruited mainly from Kansas who were paid $17.50 a month for working twelve-hour days and six-day weeks. That was considered decent pay at the time, given that they also received food, lodging, and tips. They were outfitted in long-sleeved, floor-length black dresses topped with starched white aprons, a loose-fitting uniform intended to hide buttocks and breasts. They had to sign contracts requiring them to remain on the job and stay single for at least six months, but eventually many of them became the wives of ranchers, cowboys, rail workers, and other pioneers.

Harvey was born in London in 1835. He immigrated to New York City in 1853 and quickly found work at Smith & McNell’s Restaurant, which stayed open twenty-four hours and served thousands of meals every day. He went from pot washer to busboy to waiter to line cook before moving on to St. Louis. He spent a few years in Missouri and Kansas entirely out of the food business, selling newspaper advertising and acting as a freight agent for local railroads.

The long story short is that while riding the rails as a freight agent Harvey became convinced that there were better ways of providing meals for train travelers, and he persuaded the Santa Fe to let him open an “eating house” in its Topeka station. That single lunchroom quickly became three, and then ten, and then more, and within a decade Harvey was both famous and rich. There was something of a Wizard of Oz aspect to Fred Harvey, since much of his empire was built with Santa Fe money and was entirely dependent on his being able to persuade the railroad to keep expanding his franchise and renewing his contracts. But expand and renew he did, and the railroad helped him best competitors by providing him with the freshest possible meat, vegetables, and dairy products in its refrigerated cars. His dining rooms featured expensive linens, carefully polished silver, and spotless crystal. At a time when little in America was standardized (there in fact were fifty different time zones), Harvey also developed a system that guaranteed identical standards and ways of doing things in every restaurant in his chain. Customers traveling westward could be confident that the same “Plantation Beef Stew with Buttermilk Biscuits” they had enjoyed in St. Louis would be waiting for them in Albuquerque and San Diego, with the same quarter teaspoon of black pepper and six chopped green onions in it. Harvey enforced his standards with surprise inspections, showing up unannounced, a slim but intimidating figure in elegant suits and a Van Dyke beard. If he found anything out of place, he would grab a tablecloth and yank it, sending eight place settings shattering on the floor.

“You know better than this,” he would say in his clipped British accent.

The Harvey operation grew and flourished for more than sixty years. But it was, at bottom, built entirely around railroad passenger service, which began to plummet dramatically after World War II. And the Harvey heirs, very wealthy but having what one of the great-grandsons described as “an almost destructive hatred of debt,” refused to invest in roadside franchises.

The movie The Harvey Girls opened in Manhattan in January 1946, with Judy Garland singing the Johnny Mercer song On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe. It was an upbeat movie, but it celebrated a world that already had disappeared. Just a few blocks from the theater where it opened was the first Manhattan restaurant in the chain that would become for auto travelers what the Harvey Houses had been for rail passengers: Howard Johnson’s. And the Johnny Mercer song made more money in 1946 than the railroad itself did. By late 1947 almost every Harvey restaurant on the Santa Fe line was slated to be closed.

—Anthony Marro, Bennington, VT