

Dyeing isn't dead

Nearly all drycleaning operators harbor a peculiar fear. It's a fear that can be easily tested. Just walk into any cleaners, hand the clerk a garment and say, "Dye this." Then stand back and watch everyone scoot for cover.

Some time ago, this was not the case. Back then, a customer could easily drop off a blue skirt or shirt at the cleaners on a Monday and return to pick these items up in red on Wednesday. But times have changed, and so have fabrics. It has been a long time since the garment market was dominated by 100% cottons, wools, linens and silks, the natural fibers that can "breathe" and easily absorb dyes.

Ever since the man-made fibers and fabrics entered the scene in substantial quantity in the early 1950s, and especially since the polyester boom around 1970, despite the past decade's resurgence of interest in natural fibers, synthetic blends have gradually become the norm. And with their arrival and growth, the drycleaning industry's dyeing business has been all but totally washed away, due to the problems in dyeing many of them.

Even Ken Faig, director of education at the International Fabricare Institute, admits he isn't aware of any cleaners in the nation that are still in the dyeing business. (*Editor's note:* Three wholesale dyers are listed in our April Buyers Guide; they're the only

ones we know of. Until fairly recently, cleaners were listed as "cleaners & dyers" in the Chicago Yellow Pages—and "cleaners' & dyers' equipment and supplies" are still listed—but IFI's predecessor, the National Institute of Drycleaning, dropped the word "Dyeing" from its name in 1953.)

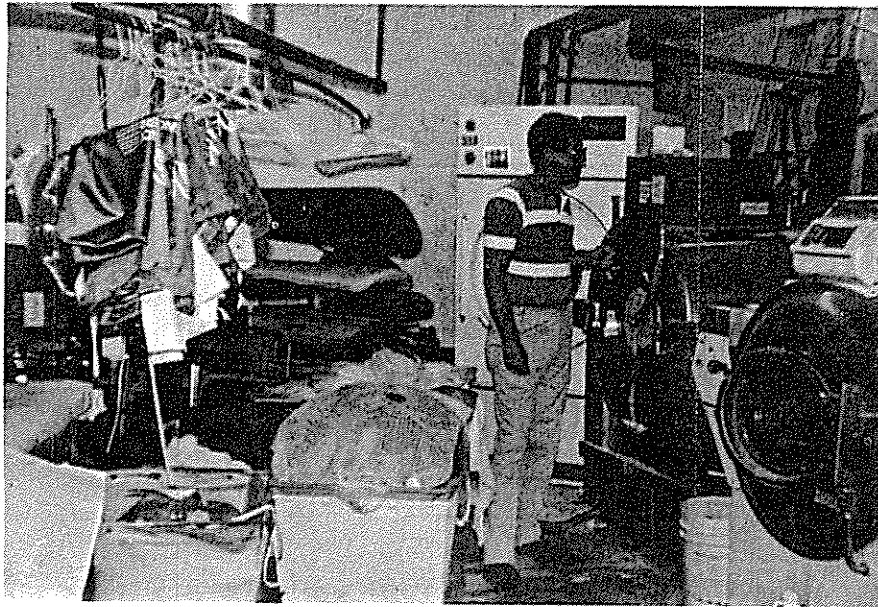
So, case closed? No, not quite. Just when it would appear that the drycleaning dyeing business on the neighborhood retail level had indeed about suffered a total whitewash, a tough little spot creeps up. Eastgate Cleaners in Memphis, Tenn., is still afloat and dyeing!

The cleaners sits in East Memphis' Eastgate Shopping Center, facing Mt. Moriah Road near the intersection at Park Avenue. The area seems to be well trafficked by middle-income professionals who never appear too busy to stop by at Eastgate Cleaners for a drop-off or a pickup.

Owner Raymond Buring has been dyeing clothes at the cleaners ever since taking ownership of it four years ago. He says that about 50% of his dyeing business is for touch-up jobs and that the other 50% is for customers who want to have entire garments dyed. Buring says that he doesn't push the dyeing portion of his business real hard. He admits that it accounts for only a small part of his total business, but a precious one at that. "I don't mind doing it," he says, "because it



Raymond Buring, behind counter, says he plans to keep dyeing as long as people ask for it.



Buring inspects washer used for dyeing at his Eastgate Cleaners in Memphis.

helps to keep my customers happy."

If happiness can be related to costs, Buring's customers must indeed then be a happy bunch. The owner says that he charges between \$3 and \$5 to dye a blouse or shirt and about \$5 to dye a pair of trousers. Buring admits that he isn't trying to make a fortune off the dyeing facet of his business. "No, I don't charge a lot, just a little," he says calmly. "I just do it for the convenience of the customers."

For the most part, Buring's customers are quite satisfied with his results. He says that about 70% of them like what they get back. Some of them, he says, may not be so thrilled about the results of their dyed garments. Buring suggests that this is due mostly to customers not being fully aware of the limitations and complications of dyeing itself. On one occasion, he says, a

woman brought a blue blouse in to have it dyed pink. But when she returned to pick it up, to his surprise as well as hers, they discovered that it was green. "I realized the mistake and corrected it," Buring recalls with a smile. Buring says that dye colors and fabric colors sometimes combine to create unexpected colors.

Besides Buring himself, what else is behind his dyeing wonders? "Plain RIT Dye," he affirms. His unabashed statement, however, is not without qualification. Buring, like any other good craftsman who prides his work, can be finicky too. "I prefer using the liquid dye," he says, "because it seems to penetrate the material better." Buring says that he uses the widely sold consumer dye to do jobs right at his cleaners. Sometimes, he says, he may take a job home to do. And his tone of

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voice gives you that reassuring feeling that nothing at all will go wrong. "I just simply follow the instructions on the bottle," he says.

Actually, though, Buring is too knowledgeable about the business of dyeing to be just dabbling in it. He quickly admits that there are complications to be encountered. "Sometimes you have to strip a fabric before you can dye it," he says. "Sometimes a customer brings in something with spots and stains all over it and when you try to dye it, you can have real problems." Buring says that he usually warns his customers about possible problems beforehand. For these reasons, and perhaps others, Buring tries to make his job as simple as possible. "I just do only cotton," he says. "I don't bother with the other stuff."

Competition in the dyeing business is the least of the cleaner owner's problems. Out of 250 cleaners in the Memphis area, his appears to be the only one daring enough to tackle the job of dyeing clothing (even if such clothing is made of cotton only). The owner says that he knows of at least one other cleaners in the area that dyes leather items only. Buring says that sometimes cleaners may reserve dyeing just for special individuals and circumstances. He says that if such a cleaners didn't know you, it would tell you that it didn't dye clothing.

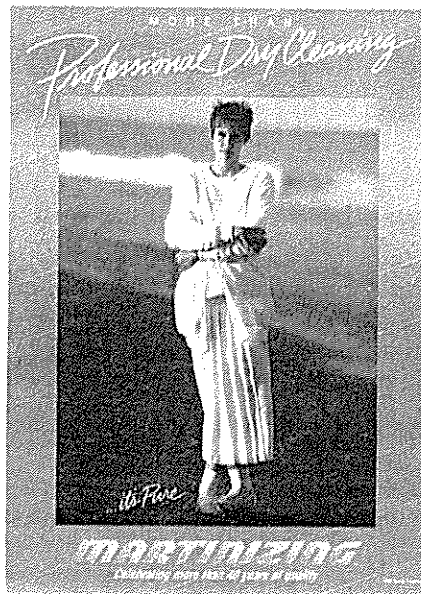
Well, Buring plays no such tricks at Eastgate Cleaners. Perhaps this is why he isn't afraid to admit that his cleaners does dye. If the perfect stranger walked into Buring's cleaners and requested to have something dyed, Buring would probably do it, providing that the garment is all cotton and looked to be in an okay condition. Buring seems to never forget his customers. The "dyehard" owner says that he

plans to continue dyeing as long as they keep bringing things in. "I'll just continue doing it so long as they want it done," he says. "I like to keep them satisfied."

And while satisfying his customers, at the same time, Buring seems to be getting a dose of delight himself from his own work. Asked if he really liked what he was doing, he blurted, "Oh, gosh, Yeal!"

Sometimes it's nice to discover people who are woven from a different cut of material—like Raymond Buring. He's not ducking the business of dyeing. Instead, he's keeping his head high and giving his customers that little something extra. And they seem to be quite pleased for it. □

Story and photos by Frankie Frontis

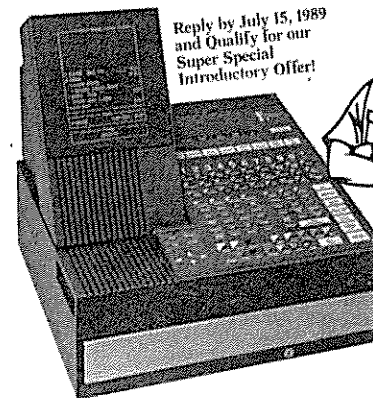


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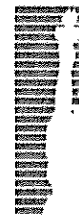
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