

Ermisch Cleaners

Founded: 1886

Location: 656 Wabash Avenue, Terre Haute (1886–); 652 Wabash Avenue (–1906); 106 North Seventh Street (1906–ca. 1922); 206 North Third Street (ca. 1922–41); 1528 Poplar Street (1941–)

In 1886 Julius F. Ermisch purchased the Terre Haute cleaning and dyeing business in which he had been working for a year. In the nineteenth century, dirty suits and dresses were often dyed in order to cover up the soil; cleaners prided themselves on the secret formulas for their dyes. Ermisch learned the cleaning and dyeing trade in Germany, where he came from a distinguished family. A stepbrother had been a high-ranking soldier in the German army, and a cousin owned one of the largest wool-dyeing plants in Germany, employing more than 3,000 workers and cleaning and dyeing for the royal family and high-ranking government officials.

Ermisch worked in dyeing mills in Italy, England, and Russia, suffering an injury in the latter country that prompted him to immigrate to the United States in 1879. He joined his brother in Cincinnati, Ohio. There he worked as a dyer for five years, establishing a partnership in a dyeing business for at least part of the time. He spent a year working in Cleveland before moving to Terre Haute in the spring of 1885. There exist differing accounts of his move to Indiana. One story suggests that Ermisch stopped in Terre Haute on his way to open a dry-cleaning business in Milwaukee and was charmed with the city. Another says that Ermisch moved to Terre Haute in response to a newspaper advertisement. In any event, Ermisch went to work in the cleaning and dyeing business of John H. Nelgen in 1885. One year later he purchased it for \$1,000.

Ermisch's fancy dyeing, scouring, and chemical-cleaning establishment was located at 656 Wabash Avenue. The firm delivered the dyed or scoured clothing, originally employing a variety of transportation means for this purpose, including pushcarts, bicycles, and, later, horse-drawn Cadillac wagons. Ermisch built his own dry-cleaning machine using an old cradle, which he lined with zinc, and a keg in which he bored holes and then turned with a crank. Over the years, dry cleaning became the predominant element of the company's business. Ermisch was active in the profession nationally and was instrumental in establishing the National Institute of Dry Cleaners in Milwaukee in August 1907. He served as the organization's first president and was secretary-treasurer until his death.

In August 1906 the Ermisch Dyeing Company moved to 106 North Seventh Street. Within the next six years, Ermisch built new plants, first at 635 Chestnut Street and then at 206–208 North Third Street (although the company continued to operate out of the Seventh Street address until at least 1922). Between 1910 and 1914, George A. Schaal was a partner in the cleaning business, which became known as the Ermisch Dyeing & Cleaning Company. In 1914 Julius's son Robert A. Ermisch became a partner in the firm. Julius remained as president and general manager until his death in 1922. He left the business in equal shares to his two sons: Robert, who succeeded him as president, and Herman J., who became vice president. By the 1930s the company had incorporated as Ermisch Brothers and, at some point in that decade, became known as Ermisch My Cleaner. In the late 1930s the family seems to have divided its assets. Robert sold his interest in Ermisch Brothers and moved to California, where he remained active in the dry-cleaning business. Herman, in turn, disposed of his interests in the firm but continued

in dry cleaning, building a new cleaning plant at 1528 Poplar Street in 1941 and establishing Herm Ermisch Cleaners. Robert's ex-wife, Zora J. Ermisch, however, continued to operate Ermisch Brothers, or Ermisch My Cleaner, through the 1950s as a separate company.

Herman Ermisch and his foreman built a steam-air finishing machine to press coats and suits. By 1945 Herm Ermisch Cleaners employed fifty workers. After Herman died in 1954, his widow, Mildred, and son, John B. Ermisch, assumed control of the firm, which operated five branch locations in addition to its main plant. They operated it as Ermisch Cleaners. With an emphasis on quality service and advertising, the dry-cleaning establishment adapted to changing times, managing to survive the polyester revolution of the 1960s, which forced many dry cleaners out of business. By the early 1980s Ermisch Cleaners was cleaning clothing, pillows, rugs, curtains, furniture, shoes, and leather goods as well as selling custom draperies. It employed twenty-two full-time and ten part-time workers at six locations. The company also owned two coin-operated Laundromats. The city of Terre Haute declared 24 October through 12 November 1983 as Ermisch Days in honor of the company's long history in the city. By the early 1990s the company managed coin-operated facilities and began computerizing its financial operations.