

They Can Still Cut It

By Jeff Girod, published April 5, 2008

Nestled in the shade of Highway 60 in Moreno Valley, underneath a dilapidated “Costal Plaza” sign with peeling facsimiles of palm trees, between a medical-supply store, Caley’s Rubber Stamps and a food bank, is a one-room barbershop and a welcoming old face named Ed.

How old?

“Oh, let’s just tell them I’m 67,” he laughed.

Ed Spruell, proprietor of Mr. Ed’s Barber Studio, has been cutting hair for the better part of 40 years, most of it in the Inland region since he arrived on a bus from New Jersey in 1969, first at March Air Force Base for about seven years, and later in his own shops in Riverside and later in Moreno Valley.

Spruell is one of the old-school barbers, whose shops still dot the Inland area and offer the kind of one-on-one service that many thought had gone the way of Brylcreem and fins on Cadillacs.

A haircut costs \$12, a shave \$8, and if you’re lucky, Spruell might throw in a free cup of coffee and a story.

There’s the time he used to be a gofer in a joint owned by boxing great Sugar Ray Robinson.

Or the 2 1/2 years he was homeless in 1987-1989, spending nights tucked in a sleeping bag in Riverside’s Evergreen Cemetery, one hand around the straight razor from his barber’s kit.

“Best place to sleep,” he said,



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Ed Spruell, left, has a laugh with one customer Larry Sears. Spruell has been cutting hair in the Inland area for almost 40 years.

“because nobody messes with you in a cemetery.”

There’s the inspirational account of how he turned his life around as a Riverside corrections officer, or way back, as a 22-year-old middleweight, when he boxed Rubin “Hurricane” Carter.

(Just don’t ask Spruell if he won.)

“Let’s talk about something else,” he said, grinning.

Longtime resident Bobby Hill started going to Ed’s five years ago after he noticed someone at his church, Moreno Valley First Apostolic Faith Church, with what he called a “high and neat

edge.”

“If you don’t get the right kind of barber, you end up with holes,” Hill said. “When I go, I want it to look like I’ve been to a barber.”

Ed’s is an old-fashioned, one-chair shop, but there’s rarely a wait, according to Hill.

“He’s down to earth, from the old school,” said Hill, 67.

“When you go in there, you see all the posters of Muhammad Ali and he loves to talk about the Lakers. It’s a good setting.”

Conversation is what separates Mr. Ed’s from a big-chain hair salon, Spruell said.

Well that, and a big ol' stack of magazines — everything from Jet and Vibe to Blender and Motor Trend.

"I've got a magazine for everybody and anybody," Spruell said. "I also play some gospel music and that hits the spot with some guys."

Spruell used to serve up to 23 customers a day, "heads" he calls them. Recently he's down to less than a dozen daily regulars — doctors, policemen and church deacons mostly — but he has no intentions of throwing in his barber's towel.

Neither does Orville Buche, 88, of Yucaipa. He's been cutting hair since 1938, in the Inland region since 1956.

"I can do it with my eyes closed," he said, "but I better hadn't."

Buche has owned several local places, including one in Ontario and, most recently, at Orv's Barber Shop for 13 years on Yucaipa Boulevard.

Buche still cuts hair by appointment, just around the corner in his mobile home, where he said he has "the full setup," complete with barber chair.

"I'm still going full blast, like I was 18," he said.

Buche charges \$10 for a haircut or a shave, a far cry from the prices when he started.

"Back then, it was 25 cents for a shave and 50 cents for a haircut," he said. "And there were only two styles: sideburns on or sideburns off."

"We're the last of the regular haircut barbers. All the others are doing style-by-numbers," said Joe Alcala, 72, who has been giving buzz cuts and flat tops for the past 43 years in the same lo-

cation, Joe's Barber Shop on Sixth Street in Corona.

As Alcala talked, he tidied around the neck of Steve Thompson, of Corona, a faithful customer for the past three years. Thompson said he tried a big-chain haircut once, but there was nothing "Fantastic" or "Super" about it.

"Luckily it grew back," Thompson joked.

Thompson explained that he and customers like him keep coming back to Joe's for one simple reason: experience.

At the other place, he said, "They asked me 'What number do you use?' I had no idea," he said. "I'm used to having a barber who knows how to use a pair of clippers."

Just off to the right is Mark Trumbull, 60, of Riverside, who saw an ad for a barber in 1979 and has been standing next to Alcala ever since.

"They said this business was going to die 10 to 15 years ago," Alcala said, "and we're still cutting hair, man."