

A RIVER TO DYE FOR

The Chicago River is a river to "dye" for every St. Patrick's Day, when Chicago Plumbers Union Local 130 turns it bright green. Some people, such as David Burns of Velocity Sports and Entertainment in Wilton, CT, also think the experience of dyeing the river is to "dye" for as well. Why else would he spend \$7,600 to do so in an e-Bay auction?

Dubbed the Great Chicago Fire Sale (www.thegreatchicagofiresale.org), the December 2004 auction raised more than \$242,000 for the city's arts and cultural programs. The right to dye the Chicago River green on St. Patrick's Day was one of many unique auction items offered by Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs.

Burns' winning package includes a night for four at the Fitzpatrick Hotel, the only Irish-owned hotel in Chicago, a ceremony commencing the dyeing of the river, and marching at the front of the St. Patrick's Day Parade (www.chicagostpatsparade.com) with the Sons and Daughters of St. Patrick behind Mayor Richard Daley. This year marks the 50th anniversary of Chicago's parade.

James T. Sullivan, general manager of the 2005 St. Patrick's Day Parade, who heads up the boat crew for dyeing the river, said that Chicago Plumbers Union Local 130 is

creating a special ceremony for Burns to participate in at the river's edge as insurance regulations will not allow him to ride in the boat. He'll hang with the Shannon Rovers band, the lead bagpipers in the parade, and dump a bucket of green dye into the river as part of the ceremony.

"We have been dyeing the river green since the early 60s," Sullivan said. "But this year, it has been getting a lot more play because of the auction."

Perhaps the "special ceremony" created for Burns will become a new Chicago tradition. The success of last year's Great Chicago Fire Sale may lead to future Chicago River experiences to dye for. Meanwhile, Chicago Plumbers Union Local 130 keeps the dye formula a tightly held trade secret.

"You'd have a better chance of getting the recipe for Coca Cola before learning how the Chicago River is dyed green," Sullivan said. "Chicago is only city in the world that does this and we want to keep it that way."

Rub a dub dub, eight people in a tub. They toss in some formula of dye and the river turns green before Irish eyes.

Fortunately, the dye, which is biodegradable, does not cause any environmental pollution or toxicity to marine life, according to Sullivan.

"Numerous studies have been done, which were approved by the State of Illinois and EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]," he noted. "The river is already green. We're just making it a different shade of green."

Chicago Plumbers Union Local 130 has always been responsible for the transformation. It began with an ingenious plumber, who used green dye to track a city plumbing problem and surmised that enough of it could turn the river green. He was right. The tradition has stuck for more than 40 years. Of course, the magic only lasts for several hours each year.

Chicago Plumbers Union Local 130 will dye the Chicago River on March 12 at 10 am at the junction of Wabash Ave.