

Which came first, the chicken or the . . . twine ball?

By Ryan Gueningsman, Managing Editor

It's a question that has plagued mankind since the beginning of time; which came first – the chicken, or the . . . twine ball?

Maybe it hasn't been a riddle that long, but it is something this reporter wondered about since starting to work in Delano.

In "National Lampoon" tradition, this reporter decided to do a road trip on Christmas Day, determined to find out which came first – the chicken, or the twine ball.

Of course, the chicken referred to is the popular 13-foot-tall bird that greets people coming into Delano's east side on Highway 12, perched above the road in the parking lot of Flippin' Bill's.

Checking the web site, roadsideamerica.com, which features offbeat tourist attractions, the big chicken is listed as being in "Twine ball country."

The largest ball of twine made by one man is located in Darwin, west on Highway 12 about 36 miles.

In true Lampoon style, and for lack of anything better to do on Christmas afternoon, having finished all the gift-giving and family activities the night before, this reporter decided to make the trek from Delano to Darwin.

In the movie "National Lampoon's Family Vacation," Clark Griswold (Chevy Chase) said "Everybody in the car . . . or perhaps you don't want to see the second largest ball of twine on Earth, which is only four hours away!"

Those from the Delano area are luckier than the Griswold family; the twine ball is only about a half-hour from town. However, there are plenty of things to see, and places to stop, along the

way.

Starting at the large chicken at Flippin' Bill's in Delano (see sidebar on the legacy of the large chicken), this reporter headed west on Highway 12, and made the first stop in Montrose on my trek to the twine ball.

Montrose

If you're thinking about a snack, or even a full meal, before getting into the heart of the road trip, Montrose would be a great bet – plus, it's only about seven miles down Highway 12 from Delano.

Right on the highway is the always-reliable Red's Cafe, along with the Bayrischer Hof German restaurant. The unique stop features many authentic German dishes.

Off the beaten path a bit is the Great Northern Bar and Grill, which also offers fine steak and other delicacies.

Montrose is also headquarters of the Montrose Area Fisheries Office of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, which serves a tri-county area.

Waverly

A history lesson can be found several miles down the road from Montrose in the City of Waverly, which is the hometown of former United States Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. Humphrey was the vice president of the United States from 1965 to 1969, a United States senator from 1949 to 1964 and 1971 to 1978, and the mayor of Minneapolis from 1945 to 1948.

A quick trip off Highway 12 north to downtown Waverly finds you in front of village hall, where Humphrey conducted several political rallies in the 1960s.

Other Humphrey remembrances include Railroad Park, just west of village hall, where visitors can find a bust of the former vice president, as well as Humphrey-Arends County Park, located north of Waverly on Wright County Road 9, which features a marker where Humphrey voted in Middleville Township.

Another interesting tidbit about Waverly is that it is also the hometown of Miss Minnesota 2004, Tiffany Ogle.

Plenty of ice fishing can also be done on Waverly area lakes.

Onward down Highway 12 to the next city – Howard Lake; and ultimately, the twine ball.

Howard Lake

Home of the Wright County Fair, Howard Lake is a common summer destination for many Delano residents.

But, in the wintertime, there is also good ice fishing to be found, as well as several shops on Highway 12 featuring a variety of antiques and collectibles. There are also plenty of good fishing lakes just south of Howard Lake.

If you have time for a game or three of bowling, and want to keep score the old-fashioned way (by hand – no electronic scoring here), stop in at the Lake Bowl, which offers open bowling Sunday afternoons from noon to 6 p.m. for \$1.50 a game.

After bowling that perfect, or maybe not-so-perfect game, bundle back up and head west a short distance on Highway 12 to the site of the Dustin Massacre.

“A state of terror prevailed on the Minnesota western frontier for many months after the Sioux uprising of 1862,” reads a plaque at the site. “Roving bands of Sioux continued to elude pursuers and attack settlers. The Dustin massacre occurred June 29, 1863, one-third mile northwest of this spot.

“Amos Dustin was moving his family here to a new claim in the southwestern part of Wright County. There were six in the party: Amos Dustin, his wife Kate, their three children, Alma, 6, Robert, 4, and Albert, 2, and Dustin’s widowed mother, Mrs. Jeanette Dustin. Their wagon was drawn by an ox team.

“A party of Indians fell upon them from ambush, shot three to death with arrows, and mortally wounded a fourth. Alma and Albert were left unharmed. The victims are buried in a cemetery in Waverly.

“It has always been believed, although never proved, that the massacre was perpetrated by members of Little Crow’s party, who were in the vicinity at the time. Four days later, Little Crow was shot and killed near Hutchinson while picking berries with a son.”

While at the site of the marker, glance to the right, and you’ll also see the largest truss manufacturing plant in the nation – Littfin Lumber.

A trip could be made back to Howard Lake in June for its annual Good Neighbor Days celebration.

Heading out again on Highway 12 en route to the ball of twine, one sees a sign for Albright’s

Mill County Park, located four miles north on Wright County Road 5.

The tranquil park features a picnic and recreation area.

Cokato

Westbound again, the drive between Howard Lake and Cokato gives people a chance to regroup and focus on the mission at stake – the twine ball.

But, there are several other things to note when passing through Cokato, including two more parks – Mud Lake County Park, which is located about six miles north of town, and

Collinwood Regional Park, located five miles southwest of Cokato.

The community of Cokato also hosts Corn Carnival every August.

A unique find along Highway 12 in Cokato near Daniel's Restaurant was the "Supervan," a van for sale, painted with Supervan decor.

Cokato and neighboring Dassel can also be a good stop at one of its many antique and speciality shops. For those with other interests, there is a new Tools and More store just west of Cokato heading toward Dassel.

Dassel

Located between Dassel and Cokato at the high school, where Delano residents frequently head for sporting events, is the communities' performing arts center, which has played host to many nationally known musical artists, including country singer John Berry, pianist Lorie Line, the Minnesota Orchestra, and the Lake Wobegon Brass Band.

Crossing the county line into Meeker County, the first city one enters is Dassel.

Just into town, on the north side of Highway 12, one finds the "mushroom building."

The mushroom building is a vintage 1931 White Eagle gas station that has been restored by Dassel Area Historical Society and community volunteers. Last summer, it was home to several musical and social events.

Dassel also lays claim to hosting Minnesota's largest chicken barbecue every fall, along with being the home of a very active historical society, which manages the museum at the Universal Lab Building, located north of town.

The building serves as the headquarters of the area historical society. The community is also home to the Old Depot Museum, located on Highway 12 just before the Highway 15 intersection, and is open seasonally.

Dassel was also a co-host for the state amateur baseball tournament in 2005.

Only five more miles to the twine ball.

Darwin

Along the way, on the north side of Highway 12, the Darwin-Dassel Park catches one's eye. Mountain biking, cross country skiing, and horseback enthusiasts have cleared rustic trails in the park, which make it a perfect final pit stop before seeing the twine ball in all its glory. If there is snow on the ground, it's also a great sledding hill.

After resting up and preparing for the ball of twine, head a few miles west on Highway 12, and you'll enter the small community of Darwin.

The Twine Ball Inn, and Twine Ball Antiques give you a feeling of the pride the community takes in the ball of twine that has put Darwin on the map.

The world's largest twine ball, built by one man, was started in March 1950, when Francis Johnson wound the first piece of baler twine around two fingers. When it was no longer possible to manually wrap the twine, Johnson used a block and tackle.

He stopped work on the twine ball in 1979, when it was then covered by a steel structure and left for people to view.

Johnson lived his entire life in Meeker County, helping on the family farm, working for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, and also was self-employed as a carpenter until his retirement.

When he died in 1989, Johnson willed his twine ball and his vast collection of farm implements to be preserved by a responsible historical group. It was his desire that the twine ball become a part of Meeker County history.

The village of Darwin expressed great interest in having the twine ball as part of its community, and the ball was placed in a small park by the city's water tower, where it still sits today in an enclosed gazebo.

The ball measures nearly 40 feet in circumference, 11 feet tall, and weighs approximately 8.7 tons.

According to the 1991 Guinness Book of Records, it is the largest ball of twine made by one man.

The answer is . . .

So, the answer to the age-old question, is that the twine ball came first.

For those who are keeping track, the twine ball was completed in 1979, and the chicken was brought to Delano in 1988.

In fact, Jon Hanson, who used to own the chicken, said he can remember stopping at the twine ball when he was younger.

“I’ve stopped there a lot of times as a kid,” Hanson said.

Hanson is certainly not the only one who has visited the twine ball. There is a mailbox by the twine ball holding a guestbook, with a note encouraging people who visit to sign it.

While the guestbook was missing from the box, there was a message from Fernando Lima, of São Paulo, Brazil, who left a simple note in the mailbox stating he “was here.”

The twine ball’s legacy lives on.

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