

# Darwin Twine Ball Museum

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## The days of twine and roses wind to a close

### Darwin's famed twine ball record unraveled by Texas family

By JANET MEIER  
Staff Writer

Darwin's famous twine ball hasn't lost a bit of respect in Darwin.

It's still the original.

It's still made by just one man.

It's still made of genuine used manila twine.

It still belongs to Darwin.

For 24 years, the 29-year project of frugality has held the world's record for largest twine ball ever, made solely by the late Francis Johnson of Darwin.

The ball was 22,000 pounds before it dried out and now weighs in at 17,400 pounds with a diameter of 12 feet 9 inches. In length, it would have stretched from Darwin to Buzzard Bay, Mass., or the Gulf of Mexico.

Recently, however, the record for largest twine ball went to a J.C. Payne of Mountain Springs, Texas. The new nylon string ball made the record and is 13 feet, 2 1/2 inches in diameter and 13,000 pounds.

The phones have been ringing like crazy in Darwin.

"Ours is still the oldest twine ball that's made by one person,"

"There can be as many (twine balls) as they want. Anybody can make peanuts, but they can't take it away from Fischer."

Terri Riebe  
Darwin

said Johnson's nephew, Harlan Johnson, also of Darwin.

Local residents see many differences in the accomplishments of the ball makers.

"As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't make any difference to us," said Thea Underhill said of the community.

Underhill is the vice president of the Darwin Community Club and volunteer in promoting the ball. "Sure, it's an accomplishment as far as a record being broken, but it's not what it's all about."

Underhill described Johnson as a "saving-type person." He saved items from used twine strands to the hundreds of items displayed at



Darwin's claim to fame as having the world's largest twine ball remains strong among townspeople. The piece of work was made solely by the late Francis Johnson. His nephew offered to add to the ball, but townspeople want it the way it was. Staff photo by Janet Meier

Darwin's Twine Ball Inn and Country Store.

"He was taught to be very frugal," she said. He just started saving the used twine on his Darwin farm and rolling it into a ball. To keep it round, he hoisted it from a tree to keep rotating it. It was there that thousands of passersby visited the ball for many years.

"The whole community probably never really realized the number of people that stopped," Underhill said, "until it moved to

town."

In 1991, the twine ball found a new home in downtown Darwin inside a glass gazebo. It was then that the town went crazy with mugs, sweatshirts, refrigerator magnets and other collectibles that boast, "Have a ball in Darwin," and "We're on the ball."

Outside the exhibit is a guest book signed by thousands of visitors — including Payne and his wife in 1992.

Since the mid-1960s, the mak-

ing of Darwin's treasure has been shown in videos throughout the world at Ripley's Believe or Not museums. Harlan Johnson wasn't sure if that would all come to an end now, but he does know that Ripley's now owns the Texas string ball. He's heard they will display it at the Ripley's museum in Branson Mo.

"I'm a little bit disappointed, but I expected it to happen

Twine ball / see page 3A

## Twine ball

continued from page 1A

because all records are made to be broken," he said. His uncle always said that too, Johnson said.

After being approached several times by Ripley's for ownership of the ball, Johnson decided to give it to the City of Darwin, so it moved to the city in 1991.

Johnson said he's known about the attempted record takeover for more than a year. He had read in a paper that someone was after the record.

"When I first got wind of it, I made an all-out effort to find out who," he said. Then he called the Guinness Book of World Records people to clarify criteria that could be used to break the record.

They said it didn't matter how many people made the ball.

Johnson spoke with Payne's wife on the phone about a year ago.

"She said the family was really getting tired of it," Johnson said.

He quoted her as saying she was glad the more than three-project was over because the family had spent time on it six to seven days a week.

Why has it taken this long for Texas to make its claim?

They missed the cut-off for the book last year and had to wait a year.

The family project has not been the first attempt at the record. The community of Caulker, Kan., has a twine ball, but again, that was not made by one dedicated man.

Johnson and townspeople stand firm that their claim to fame is still the tops.

"We're gonna stand by our man, as the song goes," Underhill said.

"There can be as many (twine balls) as they want," said Darwin's Terri Riebe. "Anybody can make peanuts, but they can't take it away from Fischer."