

Darwin residents refuse to become entangled in 'twine ball' wars

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Let Texas claim the record. The people of Darwin have no intention of allowing the reputation of the late Francis Johnson to be compromised by an ever escalating "twine war." The Darwin ball of twine once rolled by Francis Johnson will remain just as it is: A solid 17,400 pounds and 40 feet round, and no more.

That's despite a recent pronouncement by "Ripley's Believe It or Not!" that a ball of twine rolled by J.C. Payne of Valley View, Texas, is now the biggest.

Until now, Cawker City, Kan., and Darwin have held claim to the same title.

Cawker City is ready to fight for the title, but the folks in Darwin have no such intentions.

"We will never change it," vowed Thea Underhill of the

DARWIN
Continued on Page A-8

Darwin Twine Ball Museum

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Local/State

Darwin

Continued from Page A-1

Darwin Community Club.

The club is the sponsoring organization for the community of Darwin, which has on public display the large globe of twine rolled by Johnson before his death in 1989.

Ripley's called it the biggest as far back as 1979.

While most folks were satisfied that Darwin's ball of twine was big enough, J.C. Payne of Valley View, Texas, decided it was a record that needed to be broken. He visited the Darwin ball of twine in 1992, and has been busy making his own ever since.

Ripley's declared Payne's ball to be the biggest at 10 feet high, 41.5 feet around and 13,000 pounds. Ripley's will display it in its new museum in Branson, Mo.

Edward L. Meyer of Ripley's has seen the Cawker City ball, the Darwin ball, and Payne's.

"He (Payne) literally stopped just when he got big enough to be the biggest," Meyer told the Associated Press. "He was motivated purely by a competitive urge to be the biggest."

It can stay that way, according to Harlan Johnson, nephew of the late Francis Johnson. He's decided the best policy is to "let a sleeping dog lie."

That's not to say the efforts by Payne haven't rankled him some. He has known of them for well over a year now, and at one time approached the Community Club in Darwin with the idea of adding to his late uncle's ball of twine.

"I was shot down fast," he said.

He's sure his late uncle would agree to keep it that way. "He used to say records are made to be broken," explained Harlan.



Tribune file photo by Bill Zimmer

Darwin residents watch in June 1991 as the ball of twine is moved to its current display location in downtown Darwin, where it is now covered and protected from the elements.

Regardless of which is the biggest, Harlan still feels that the ball of twine in Darwin is the better accomplishment. It was completed by only one person, his late uncle.

In contrast, J.C. Payne had help from some 70 people in making his ball. Literally hundreds of people have contributed to the ball in Cawker City, Kan. It's a community project faithfully added to during an annual celebration.

The Darwin and Cawker City balls are made of authentic twine, while the Payne ball is made with a plastic material.

Not only is the Darwin ball the real thing, and heavier than the Payne ball, but it also has more style, noted Harlan.

It is round.

The ball made by Payne is described as almost bell or mushroom shaped, said Harlan.

Yet what really matters, said Underhill, is what the ball in Darwin represents. The late Francis Johnson was known for much more than the ball of twine that once stood on his front yard along Highway 12.

Francis Johnson had been taught never to waste, and so began his practice of picking up baler twine. He was also a collector of antiques and a respected wood worker. He whittled wooden pliers, some eight feet in length, as well as other items.

Underhill said it is the legacy of Johnson that matters most to the people of Darwin. "The

things he did and his accomplishments are going to speak for themselves," she said.

That's just fine with his nephew. No pun intended, but Harlan said that he is having a ball with all of the publicity surrounding the "twine wars." The Wall Street Journal, even the Jay Leno show, have made inquiries about it.

Biggest or not, the twine ball has certainly put Darwin on the map. Harlan likened it to the well known commercial for batteries. "I never cease to be amazed at the fact that this old twine ball keeps going and going and going," he said. "It's been going for 35 years."

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