

Darwin Twine Ball Museum

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Jeff Payne, left, helps parents J.C. and Elsie Ruth Payne transport the biggest ball of string to Branson, Mo.

Texas farmer's pastime snowballs into world's biggest ball of string

By Michael Precker

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VALLEY VIEW, Texas — This world is blessed with a string of many monuments to the human spirit, eternal testimonies to the ability of men and women to dream, then to build.

That string also reaches Valley View, Texas, 55 miles north of Dallas, where J.C. Payne has grabbed it and rolled it into a ball.

Not just any ball. Payne, a 72-year-old masonry contractor turned gentleman farmer, has rolled the biggest ball of string in recorded history.

Big enough that it is enshrined in the new Guinness Book of Records. Big enough that Ripley's Believe It or Not! paid tens of thousands of dollars for it, then engaged a New York publicity agent to hype it big-time. Big enough that, like Frankenstein, it threatened to kill its creator.

And big enough that nearly a dozen men are laboring mightily with drills and staple guns and 2-by-4s and forklift trucks to haul this 10-foot-high, 13,000-pound creation

off to a museum.

The saga started five years ago, when Payne turned over his Denton masonry business to his four sons and persuaded his wife, Elsie Ruth, to leave the city for a 55-acre spread.

Preparing his herd's first lunch at their new home, Payne cuts off the twine around a bale of hay. Instinctively, he starts rolling it up.

"I just kept rolling," he says. "It got bigger and bigger. Then my boy told me they had the biggest ball of string in the Guinness Book of Records. I said, 'I'll beat that.'"

He started collecting string, mostly hay-baling twine, from neighbors, then neighbors' neighbors, then ranchers and dairy farmers. At about the 2,000-pound mark, things nearly came unstrung.

Payne was fixing to haul the ball into town to weigh it when the metal pipe serving as the spool snapped off the base.

"It started coming over on top of me," he says. "But I caught it just in time."

About a year ago, with a ball 12 feet high and 41 1/2 feet around, he had the even better sense to stop.