

Around the U.S.A.



Harling Johnson, nephew of twine ball creator Francis Johnson, stands next to World's Largest Ball of Twine in Darwin, Minn.

# Town owes its fame to big ball of twine

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As yet another upstart giant ball of twine prepares for its Midwestern debut, the visionary qualities of Francis Johnson become ever more clear to the people of Darwin.

For 29 years, Johnson, a bachelor farmer and carpenter, wound pieces of twine into what would become an 8.7-ton dreadnought, standing more than 11 feet tall and measuring about 40 feet around. The Guinness Book of Records would pronounce it the world's largest ball of string, and the record would stand for more than two decades.

Now there is a bigger ball of string, or maybe two — although many people here scoff at the origins, character and composition of the two pretenders.

Another world's biggest twine ball is at Cawker City, Kan. The third and newest ball was slated for display this month in Branson, Mo.

Instead of saying, World's Largest Twine Ball, the signs along Highway 12 will have to be reconfigured as World's Largest Twine Ball Made By One Man.

But that's just a niggling detail to the people of Darwin and to the tourists who flock to town — sometimes at the rate of 20 a day — to marvel at Francis Johnson's legacy.

The twine ball:

- Is widely credited with saving Darwin from extinction, even though it may have doomed its creator, who, his nephew says, died with his lungs full of tiny particles of twine.

- Has been to New York City.

- Inspired Weird Al Yankovic, a contemporary musician-satirist, to write a song called "The Biggest Ball of Twine in Minnesota."

The twine ball that Parkhill referred to as the "Texas nylon monstrosity" is listed in the new, 1994 Guinness Book of Records as the largest string ball, taking the spot in the book that the Darwin twine ball held for 24 years.

The Texas twine ball has been purchased to be the centerpiece of a Ripley's Believe It or Not museum at Branson, Mo.

The Texas twine ball that Ripley's bought, reportedly for more than \$20,000, widely is denigrated as a squashed-down pumpkin of a ball made of plastic — as opposed to "real" — string. The competing Kansas twine ball at Cawker City is belittled as a community project, rather than the work of one man.

In fact, at one time there was talk in Darwin of adding some string to Francis Johnson's creation when other world's biggest twine balls threatened.

But the town decided quickly that altering Johnson's work would

be an affront to his achievement — something akin to painting a big, toothy grin on the Mona Lisa.

Harlan Johnson, the nephew of the Darwin twine ball's creator, says his uncle began winding the ball in 1950.

In 1958, Johnson says, his uncle's twine ball got its first big break, even though it was only a shadow of its ultimate self. The twine ball, by then about eight feet across, was loaded into a moving van and taken to New York, where it appeared, along with its maker, on TV's "I've Got a Secret," with the late Garry Moore. The network estimated that if the ball were unwound, 930 miles of string would be the result.

Johnson says the twine ball weighed 6,000 pounds when it went to New York, about one-third the heft it finally would achieve.

Johnson says his uncle used massive jacks — the kind railroads designed to lift boxcars — to move the twine ball around the yard so he could wind it evenly.

But the time came, Johnson said, when his uncle — a determined and often difficult man: "If you didn't do things his way, you could just go fly" — had to give up. He retired from the twine ball in 1979, some 15 years after retiring from work.

"He couldn't handle it any more," Johnson said. "It's almost certain that that twine ball killed him. He had emphysema so bad. His lungs were full of little micro-particles from that sisal (twine). He didn't smoke."

Upon adding the last bit of string to the ball, Francis Johnson bought the top sections of a silo and put it over his accomplishment. Ten years later he died at the age of 84 — having not only wound the world's biggest twine ball but also having acquired an astounding collection of 7,000 wood pencils, 1,700 carpenter's aprons, and a total of 20,000 old irons, toy sewing machines, ancient tools and other items.

The twine ball was moved in 1991 from the edge of Darwin, where Johnson had lived, into the town itself.

It breathed new life into Darwin, which, like many rural communities, was dying on the vine. Pre-twine ball Darwin had lost its grocery store, hardware store, cafe and other businesses.

Darwin now has a new cafe, the Twine Ball Inn, and a community grocery store. The town has new street signs, each with a twine ball imprinted on it, and an annual celebration, Twine Ball Days. The twine ball has been visited by people from around the world, and a Japanese radio station is doing a story about the latest developments in the world's-biggest-twine-ball situation. ■

*Saw this on my way to Florida. You town is famous all over the country — having a good time. Bill & Gloria*

## Darwin Twine Ball Museum

## Article – The Tennessean