

Darwin Twine Ball Museum

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Down the Road

Life's a Ball in Darwin

A 13'-diameter twine ball is reviving this small community.

DARWIN, MINN.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the late Francis Johnson's famous ball of twine would become the stuff of caps and T-shirts. Now it is also credited with binding townspeople together and perhaps saving downtown Darwin's economy. Johnson's legacy, a world-record string behemoth nearly 13' in diameter, was moved downtown 16 months ago from the yard beside Hwy. 12, where he spent 29 years winding it.

It has been enshrined in a glassed-in gazebo near an old school bell – no snipping off souvenirs, please. The tourist draw, along with money from the sale of Johnson's home, has helped reopen the only grocery store in the town of 250 and the only cafe, now called (you guessed it) the Twine Ball Inn.

The bachelor carpenter died in 1989, and his vast collection of everything from 7,000 pencils to a ball-and-chain from Stillwater state prison has provided decoration for town businesses and the stuff for at least three auction sales.

One of those sales took place during the first Darwin Twine Ball Days in mid-September. It was a two-day event, including a chicken dinner, a craft sale and children's activities.

"We're taking this ball of twine thing with a tongue-in-cheek attitude," said Harlan Johnson, Francis Johnson's nephew and trustee for his estate.

It's fun, but there's a serious side, too, said the Rev. Beverly Nestingen, pastor of All Saints Lutheran Church. "It has just put life in this town," she said. "It makes us understand who we are more than we did before."

Community organizations and volunteers worked to fix up the restaurant and get the gazebo built.

"Our sense of community has just mushroomed," Nestingen said. "People are proud to be from Darwin. We don't look like we're dying anymore."

Before the reopenings, the bank and post office were about the only



Harlan Johnson said the people of Darwin take "a tongue-in-cheek attitude" toward his late uncle's ball of twine.

downtown businesses in the town 60 miles west of Minneapolis. Now there is talk of a pioneer museum, a bed-and-breakfast inn, a small replica of a blacksmith shop and a gift shop.

There is enough Francis Johnson memorabilia to supply them all.

Johnson, a master carver, made tens of thousands of one-piece wooden pliers, and 27 of them, measuring from 3/8" to 8" long, are nested together behind glass at the cafe. Also on display are such curiosities as bog shoes (like skis, only much heavier), a bear trap, a pogo stick and a beaver-skin smoker.

The store has rug stretchers, stove lid handles and a mallet made of stump wood, along with souvenirs for sale – caps and T-shirts that say, "Have a ball in Darwin." There's plenty to choose from for a blacksmith shop, including 400 horseshoes.

And at a recent sale, a half-dozen farm wagons were loaded with thousands of hammers, jacks, axes and wrenches, along with yokes, crosscut saws, 133 caps, creams cans, about 40 beer cases from small-town breweries, license plates dating to the 1920s and some items that apparently have not been identified.

In his 85 years, Francis Johnson spent a lot of time at auctions, but he

also "was a beggar," his nephew said. "He wasn't bashful. He'd walk in and ask anybody for anything."

Francis said in a 1988 interview, "My mother told me to keep everything." He once sold a bicycle with 5 tires and, until he died, tried to get it back, Harlan Johnson recalled.

Francis started collecting pencils as a child, and he began winding pieces of baling twine in 1950 because he didn't want to throw them away. Eventually, he wound the ball of twine up to 10 tons (it later dried out to 8.7), took it to TV's "I've got a Secret," was interviewed by Charles Kuralt and made the Guinness Book of World Records.

The ball is even the subject of a song by Weird Al Yankovic ("We parked the car and walked with awe-filled reverence toward that glorious, huge, majestic sphere. I was just so overwhelmed by its sheer immensity, I had to pop myself a beer.")

Ripley's Believe It or Not museums wanted Johnson's twine ball, but the town wouldn't give it up, and the museums had to settle for his collection of 1,700 nail aprons, Harlan Johnson said.

A nearby town, Dassel, may get another Johnson legacy – memorabilia from Francis's father, Magnus,

a Swedish immigrant farmer who served in the U.S. House and Senate and was active in the Farmer-Labor party. Francis Johnson often drove him around during campaigns.

The twine ball made Francis Johnson far more famous than his father, although Darwin Mayor Chris Hansen said, "It's surprising. The ball has been in town so many years, and some people who've lived here never saw it" before it was moved downtown.

But at least a half-dozen cars stop at the twine ball every day, even in winter, residents said.

Harlan Johnson jokes that the gazebo still needs some additions, however – a nice sign and a fancy weather vane. "Then maybe people won't look at that ugly twine ball," he said. □ – By Robert Franklin, Star Tribune

Barns in Bismarck

The location of the Midwestern barn exhibit in the Sept. 22 issue (See "Barns Build a Picture of Plains Pioneer," page B14) was listed incorrectly. The exhibit will be at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck. □