

## 'Mayor' White will oversee dedication

By Clyde L. Stancil  
DAILY STATE WRITER

OKAUVILLE — Therman White's quest to erect a monument to all-time Olympic great Jesse Owens has been more of an endurance run than the sprints that made Owens world-famous.

Affectionately called the "mayor" of Oakville, White has helped guide the Jesse Owens Memorial Park from an open field to near completion.

The park will be dedicated June 29 and will put the late Olympian in the national spotlight, again, when the Olympic Torch Relay caravan makes Oakville a lunch stop on its way to the Atlanta Olympic games.

A broad-jump could describe the condition of the 17.5-acre park site today compared to 1962, when White was asked to start the project. Although he was happy to oblige, he said he didn't know anything about Owens at the time.

"I had no idea that he was even raised here," said White, a Landerdale native. "I had been in the military and I had heard of the name, but I didn't ring a bell."

White has lived in Oakville since returning from California in 1976. He made the West Coast his home after a 20-year Navy career.

He entered the Navy in 1943 when segregation was the rule in the armed forces and the only positions available to blacks were as cooks and boatswains (petty officer in charge of deck crews, rigging, anchors, etc.) He said he decided boiling pots wasn't his thing, and eventually rose to supervising riggers before retiring as an E-6 in 1968.

Near 70 years old, White also served through the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War. He's lived among people, from fresh recruits and officers, to natives of lands he's visited.

He drew discipline from his military experience and wisdom from his travels to handle the Owens project.

But how was he able to return to Lawrence County after an adult life so different from the one here? "It's hard to live in a small place

after living in the city, because when the sun goes down, you roll up the street and there's nothing going on," White said. "At times I find it difficult, but this just happened to be the place I'm from. When I left here, I never did intend to stay away forever. There was nothing else to do, so I chose the military. I don't regret it at all, because it has been wonderful for me."

Oakville resident Gloria Taylor said White will go out of his way to help members of the community.

"He's so nice we named him the mayor of Oakville," said Ms. Taylor. "No matter what the situation is, he's always there for us. We have our ups and downs, but he's a good man."

Ms. Taylor said White has worked hard on the Owens park project and is an overall leader, which makes it easy to fall in line behind him.

"He's just like a father figure to us," she said. "Anytime a problem arises, he tries to solve it for us. He's a good man and he gives good, sound advice. I'd say he has a lot of wisdom."

Greg Griffin, an Oakville resident and member of the Owens Memorial Park board, said White is respected because he's been outstanding in the community and will share his point of view.

"He knows a lot about things going on in the community, like the park, and he's been a real strong pusher, day in and day out, in getting the Jesse Owens Park accomplished," said Griffin.

Indeed, White has pushed lawn mowers and weed whackers, day in and day out, for years, with the dream of finishing the park. He did it for Oakville as much as Owens memory, he said.

White put \$2,500 of his money toward purchasing the land for the park in 1991, and has been the catalyst in maintaining and nurturing the site since.

He wasn't part of an ill-fated attempt to erect a monument for Owens on the Lawrence County courthouse lawn in 1982.

"Before I knew anything, it was started and over," said White, a father of two sons and grandfather of two. "There was a petition going around, but I never saw it."

The Masonic Lodge was instrumental in getting a small monument to Owens erected in Oakville, but White said he had no part in that either.

Once he became informed, he became involved. Any project of this magnitude would have been important to him, he said, whether it was for Owens or for the community.

"A lot of people forget that this (initially) had nothing to do with the Olympics," said White. "It was going to be, regardless. I think the community deserves it. As a matter of fact, all communities deserve playgrounds and parks."

Although most people will see the Olympic Torch Relay and park dedication ceremony as a climax, it will be another 10 months before the park will be officially completed.

What does White expect as a reward when it's finished?

"I'm not expecting anything," he said. "I've already been given an award by the Alabama Democratic Conference."

With that award, he'll also be generous in a manner befitting the "mayor of Oakville."

"I intend to put it in the Jesse Owens museum," he said.

# Time and effort

THE DECATUR DAILY, Sunday morning, June 23, 1996

## James Pinion's life is taken over by park

By Lesley Farrey Pacey  
DAILY STATE WRITER

OKAUVILLE — It's safe to say James Pinion's life has been consumed by the race to build a fitting memorial to Jesse Owens in recent time.

As park project coordinator, Pinion spent the last five years raising money for and orchestrating the development of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park — a 10-year project that was halted when he and another man were able to get the Olympic torch rerouted through here.

And as the June 29 park dedication ceremony draws near, the 54-year-old Lawrence County agent can be found at the park and almost nowhere else.

"I'm working out here on Saturdays now," Pinion told THE DAILY in an interview that also slipped his mind. "I've missed a lot of church. I can't schedule anything. I've worked right through a doctor's appointment. I missed a haircut. I have to have someone tell me where I am supposed to be all the time. ... I'm going in so many different directions."

Because of his hard work, the park is nearly finished and there is money to finish what's not, but Pinion doesn't rest. He will continue finishing touches like landscaping until Wednesday, when he stops everything to tend to about 17 members of the Owens family. He's the only person most Owens relatives know here and he wants to make sure their visit, centered around the park dedication, is a good one.

"We want to show we are friendly people down here," said Pinion, who has arranged travel and an itinerary of activities here and in Birmingham for the family.

But Pinion's wife, Nancy, says her husband's obsession is by choice. "Sometimes I have to remind him we need to talk about something else. It has been all-consuming. It has been a passion with him."

Mrs. Pinion said her husband works nights and weekends at his county agent job for the Auburn Extension Service and seven days a week on the park because he wants to honor Owens.

Owens was born and lived here until he was 9. But he wasn't recognized here until nearly 50 years after becoming an Olympic hero, shattering Adolf Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy. That recognition came after an all-white county commission in 1983 refused to place his monument on the courthouse lawn.

"He gets nothing out of this but the satisfaction of pleasing the Owens family," Mrs. Pinion said. "It was something he chose to do. He chose to put that much into it. He is not required by anyone to put that much into it."

Mrs. Pinion said when her husband got discouraged with the project, he would think of the Owens family and the Oakville man who has been working for a park much longer than Pinion. "He wouldn't abandon Therman," she said.

Therman White and another Oakville resident and Owens' cousin, Marvin Fitzgerald, walked into Pinion's office five years ago and asked him to help him turn a 17.5-acre pasture they helped buy into a park for Owens.

White said he knew Pinion had the connections to the know-how to get things done. He said the park needed the prestige, resources and knowledge Auburn University could bring to the project. "One of the reasons that he was picked is we found out that Auburn would assist us in the park and they were available to do certain tasks."

After Pinion accepted, Auburn University did a survey to determine what the residents wanted in the park. A 10-year park plan followed and a small-scale model was built.

Pinion said he didn't have any money for the park until 1994, after he and fellow county agent Henry Buchanan persuaded Olympic officials to reroute the Olympic torch through here.

That's when the seven remaining years for the plan turned into two and Pinion's life changed. He welcomed the challenge, coordinating every element of the park and spending much of his time on the phone and piloting the park plan to politicians and corporations that allowed him to raise the \$1.5 million needed.

"A lot of work is accomplished on the phone," he said. "I found out it is real tiring. It will drain you."

Pinion said he's proud of the government money he's won for the park, especially a \$250,000 grant from Housing and Urban Development he got for the museum.

"HUD is reluctant to do grants for parks because in five years, they are usually walked away from," Pinion said. "But we were the top one of 50 applicants to get the grant because we showed we had a plan — we showed we wouldn't just build it and forget about it."

Pinion said the most difficult part of the job has been critics who don't like the park being funded largely with public money. Pinion said if they have a problem, they should complain to lawmakers in Washington.

"The park already is laying on the table," he said. "I'll fight for my share, especially when I get hungry. If I don't, someone else will get fat. I don't have anything to be ashamed of."

Pinion said after "playing politics" in getting money for the park, he also learned he doesn't want anything to do with politics ever again.

"I am an impatient person," he said. "You've got to be patient with politics. My disgust is with having to play the system, which takes time."

But White said the project would have been "dead in the water" without Pinion.

"I think he is great," he said. "If it wasn't for him there would be a lot of things that wouldn't go. Once we started working with James, we found out that he is dedicated and he is outstanding and he'll go that extra mile for you. That's very important in this kind of work."

Owens' daughter, Marlene O. Rankin, said Pinion has been able to do something that many didn't think could be done. She said that's because Pinion has "great vision, creativity, and he doesn't take no for an answer."

"He gets things done," she said. "He has always been tenacious about this project to bring it to the point where it is today."

