

Riverfront

SUNDAY, MAY 10, 1998

Owens opening in Oakville

Museum of late
Olympic great
to be dedicated

The race seems to be over in no time at all and to last an eternity.— Jesse Owens

By **Ronnie Thomas**
DAILY Staff Writer

OAKVILLE — The sign on Alabama 157 pointing the way to Jesse Owens Memorial Park caught the attention of four women travelers from New Mexico in early 1996.

They drove to Lawrence County 187 at Lawrence County 203. There, on a one-tenth-acre corner lot, was the park, the only tribute in the county to the native son who left a sharecropper son's existence to become America's most celebrated track and field star.

Near the tiny playground stood the Owens monument secured from the state in 1983 through the efforts of the late state Rep. Roger D. Dutton of Moulton. He wanted it erected on the Lawrence County Courthouse lawn but was rebuffed by the County Commission. So the little park was opened to house it.

That day more than two years ago, James Pinion and several other volunteers worked on property across from the park as the visitors stood reading the inscription on the monument.

They crossed the road to say hello. "Is this it?" one asked. "We drove here for this? We were expecting more to honor someone like Jesse Owens."

Ceremony schedule

Rip Proctor, Lawrence County probate judge, will be master of ceremonies at the dedication of the Jesse Owens Museum on Saturday, which begins at 1 p.m. in Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

The dedication ceremony:

► **Welcome:** Don Letson, chairman, Lawrence County Commission

► **Invocation:** The Rev. Kenneth Owens of Saint Mark Primitive Baptist Church, Athens, who is a native of Lawrence County

► **Introduction of Jesse Owens' family:** Henry Buchanan, Lawrence County Extension Agent

and chairman of Jesse Owens Park board

► **Visitor recognition:** Rip Proctor

► **Recognition of retired U.S. Rep. Tom Bevill, who helped secure funding for statue and museum:** Steve Oden of Wheeler Basin Natural Gas Co.

► **Ribbon cutting:** Mrs. Gloria Hemphill, oldest daughter of Jesse Owens, and family members

► **Planting of white oak tree:** James Pinion, Lawrence County Extension coordinator and event coordinator, Curtis Cole, park volunteer, and the Owens family

Pinion assured them there would be more but that it would take time.

He pointed to the then-20-acre plot, where he and the other men were working. Ten more acres have since been added.

"That will eventually be our real tribute to Jesse Owens," he said. "It will be the new park and will feature a museum, a baseball and softball field, track and soccer field, basketball court, playground, picnic pavilions and walking trail."

He explained that the humble, late-19th-century house at the front of the property, moved from another location, would be renovated to become the visitors' center, and that the old house on the hill at the back would be shaped into a replica of the shanty in which Jesse was born nearby, where he lived until the family moved to Cleveland when he was 9.

"Well, that sounds more like it," another visitor said. "We'll be back when it's completed."

Pinion concedes he was probably semi-fantasizing as he sold the visitors on what might be.

He recalled reading that Henry Owens, Jesse's illiterate father and the son of former slaves, resigned himself to a life of poverty.

"But his mother, Mary Emma, urged her 10 children to dream of greater things and to work hard to

attain them," he said. "When the family boarded the train here to leave for Cleveland in 1922, one of the youngsters asked, 'Where's the train gonna take us, Momma?' She answered, 'It's gonna take us to a better life.'"

More often than not, as the work and the struggles at the park continued, Pinion relied on words from the Owens family, and from Jesse himself, for encouragement.

"He once said of sprint races, 'It all goes so fast, and character makes the difference when it's close.' When things got tight out here, I'd think of the character thing, and I'd ask myself if we had enough. I believe we do."

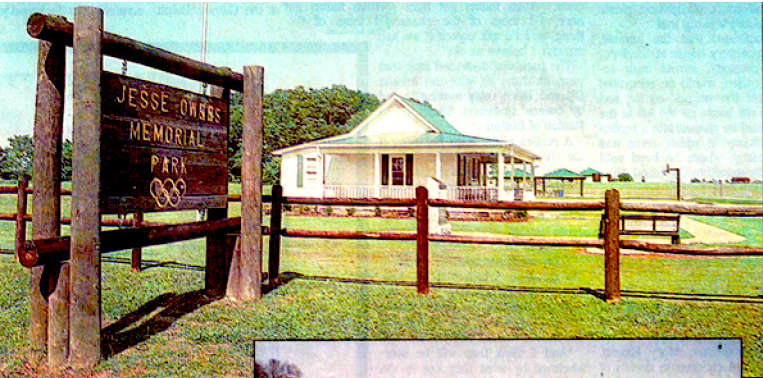
The park was dedicated later that year, on June 29, with the Atlanta Olympic torch relay moving in, led by Owens' grandson, Stuart Owen Rankin of Boston.

A replica of the huge fire bowl of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where Owens won four gold medals and singlehandedly destroyed Nazi Germany's racist propaganda, was lit by his widow, Minnie Ruth. The Jesse Owens Statue was unveiled by sculptor Branko Medenica.

Then work resumed to complete the museum, which will be dedicated Saturday.

Pinion believes the Owens family will be amazed at the changes in the park in the last two years.

"And I think they will be overwhelmed by what they see in the museum," he said.

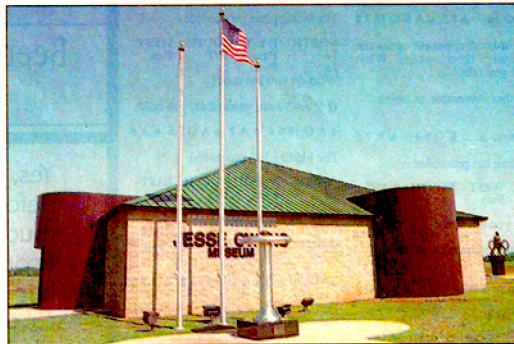
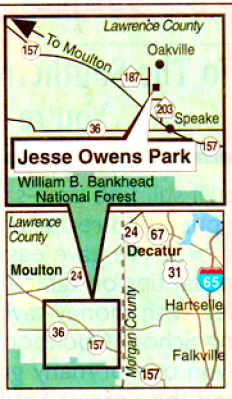


DAILY Photo by Gary Cosby Jr.

Above, this is an overview of Jesse Owens Memorial Park as it appears now.

Courtesy Photo

Right, Jesse Owens Park in early stage of construction.



DAILY Photo by Gary Cosby Jr.

Exterior view of the Jesse Owens Museum to be dedicated Saturday.