

Sunday fans

Jesse Owens Museum dedicated in Oakville

Museum long time coming, says family

By John Zenor
MONTGOMERY ADVERTISER

OAKVILLE — Jesse Owens won again. Even if this time his family accepted the prize in his stead. Eighteen years postmortem, this little North Alabama town, the kind of place that seems to have as many churches as homes, officially opened the Jesse Owens Museum Saturday afternoon.

"We're finally giving Jesse the recognition the rest of the world has given already," noted Terry Frederick, a Lawrence County native who drove five hours to be part of the festivities.

Owens, who seemed to break as many racial barriers as he did finish-line tapes before his death in 1980, crossed another on a steamy Saturday afternoon. His widow, Ruth, brother Sylvester and three daughters and their husbands were at the Jesse Owens Memorial Park, along with several hundred others.

"It's special — special, special, special," said Sylvester Owens, 89, who flew in from Cleveland, Ohio.

"It means an awful lot. When we were coming up, I didn't think anything like this would happen.

"At that time, blacks weren't recognized in Alabama. For something like this to happen is truly, truly wonderful. I wish (Jesse) could be here. I wish my mother and father would be able to see this."

Jesse Owens, of course, won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, proving Hitler's Aryan race wasn't in fact superior when the playing surface was level. Owens established three world records in one 45-minute span on May 25 1935, while at Ohio State. His long jump mark set that day stood for 25 years.

The museum wasn't just about his ath-

letic feats. Owens was bigger than that. He went on to become a champion of youth programs in Cleveland and nationwide, even if some Southern whites didn't embrace him or his legacy.

"He was an even better humanitarian than he was an athlete," said daughter Gloria Hemphill, who spoke to the gathering for the family before the ribbon-cutting ceremony. "He had a big heart.

"I think he's a perfect example of, if you have something in your hand and you don't open it up to others, you'll always have that, but you'll never have anything else. But when you open up that hand, the gifts you receive back are manifold."

Saturday's gifts were many. Owens would no doubt have relished the sight of whites and blacks mingling freely and gathering in his honor. His family reveled in the whole scene of children playing and a band playing old-time rock 'n roll. Despite the oppressive heat.

"You cannot complain about this day," Hemphill said. "It's unbelievable. Everything positive is a sign of progress. You have to take little steps before you can take the giant steps."

The park includes a replica of the tiny cottage where Jesse Owens and his eight siblings shared one bedroom. The museum included a film biography of Owens, photo montages and memorabilia.

"It was a lot of history," said 9-year-old Elenita Coffey. "It's cool."

Huntsville's Eric Tippitt eagerly stressed life lessons to his son Jordan and his wife's nephew Joel Thomas while viewing displays.

"It's amazing. They didn't come out of (starting) blocks. They didn't have the equipment, the spikes, the aerodynamic uniforms, and still his records stood for so long and aren't more than a second off today's records," said Tippitt, a high school

football coach.

Hemphill would have glowed had she witnessed Tippitt's unbridled enthusiasm. "We wanted it to be an educational building as well as a memorial," she said.

"There is a lot to be learned, and a lot can be taught here. The more we learn about each other the more we can live together."

We're still learning, of course.

"Back in the 1980s, some people wanted to erect a statue in his honor and the county leaders said no," said a white Hartselle woman, who didn't want her name used. She added sarcastically, "But of course (they said) it wasn't race."

"There was a little friction, but we overcame it and came together," said Richard Coffey, a Park Board member. "If they've got any kind of morals or good nature, (museum opponents) will see they made a mistake."

J.D. McDaniel, 74, lived in Oakville as a child and knew the family. "They're beautiful people," he said.

But McDaniel, too, feels the museum was long overdue. "When you do that much — I declare," he exclaimed, sporting a T-shirt with Martin Luther King's picture and the words "Drum Major For Justice."

Alonzo Griffin observed the festivities from across the street, perched in the shade on an upturned brick.

"I can't go over there because the heat's just too much for me," said Griffin, who lives next door to the park and married Owens' first cousin. "I think this is good for the community and for the county."

Park Board Chairman James Pinion borrowed from the words of King Jr. in his opening speech.

"We are proud we can all finally say home at last, home at last," Pinion said. "Thank God Almighty, Jesse Owens is home at last."

Another homestate hero who changed the world

In the distant past — way back there — it was a long time from June until August. Especially if you were black. And if the year was 1936, well, time passed like a small eternity in the summer of '36. At least for African-Americans.

The Great Depression contributed to their collective gloom. But there was a larger reason: Joe Louis rose from the cotton fields of Alabama to become the No. 1 heavyweight challenger — but he had just lost to the German Max Schmeling. Twelfth round in Yankee Stadium. On June 19, 1936.

African-Americans would find redemption, yet they would have to wait until mid-August. Then, in the 80,000 seat Olympic stadium in Berlin, right before Der Führer Adolph Hitler, another Alabama athlete would restore their pride.

Jesse Owens was born in Oakville, Ala., up near Danville and Moulton. Owens would triumph bigtime in Berlin, taking four gold medals. The '36 Olympics were supposed to demonstrate Hitler's "Aryan supremacy" to the world. He had said that blacks belonged to "an alien race."

Jesse Owens and several other African-Americans contradicted all that with world-record performances (totalling six gold medals in Berlin).

But first the Joe Louis debacle: The singer Lena Horne, performing with a band in the Middle West, became almost hysterical listening to the Louis loss (the radio was backstage, this was between acts. Miss Horne couldn't finish a song — she was too upset). She admitted that she had no idea why Joe Louis meant so much to her — a man she didn't even know.

"But then I realized that he was the main hope of our race in those days ... he really belonged to all of us." This the great singer said later in her memoirs.

After the unexpected Louis loss, Owens and his fellow U.S. Olympians took center stage.

Owens was named James Cleveland Owens, named for the gospel singer James Cleveland. He was born in 1913. Called by his initials "J.C.," the nickname soon was contracted to simply "Jesse." He moved with his family to Cleveland, Ohio in 1921, the year of the ultimate political power (and decline) of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama.



Bill Robinson

LEGENDS AND LORE

Later, as a tremendous track star at Ohio State, Owens in May of 1935 set four world records in a single day at a Big Ten track meet in Ann Arbor, Mich. — and he established three of those records in 45 minutes. Three years before, at the Olympics in Los Angeles in 1932, a quiet athletic revolution had begun. It was based on color. Eddie Tolan, an African-American, struck gold in the 100- and 200-meters, with another African-American, Ralph Metcalf, finishing second and third in both.

Now it was '36, and Owens was the fastest runner in the world. Eulace Peacock, another African-American, actually might have been equal to Owens. Twice in '36 he bested Owens in the 100-yard dash, but a hurt leg kept Peacock out of the Olympic trials in June.

I had the privilege of interviewing Jesse Owens in Atlanta years ago. He was gracious, a gentleman. He and Joe Louis and Curt Flood (then with the St. Louis Cardinals) were honored at a banquet. Owens and Louis, the two products of Alabama, had been friends for years. And they had helped counsel Jackie Robinson before he broke the color line with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

"It was great fun winning in front of Hitler," Owens said. "We had a feeling — all of us on the Olympic squad that summer — that the man was self-destructive. Everything was too, too perfect. And people didn't talk much. Oh, they cheered all right, because this was the biggest Olympics ever. But, well, there was this feeling ... and it wouldn't go away."

The Olympic flame cast dark shadows. But Owens was magnificent. He qualified for the 100 meters with a 10.2; next day he scorched along at a 10.3 (it wouldn't be bested until — ironically — Germany's Armin Hary broke it in the 1960 Olympics). Owens was 20.3 in the 200 meters (the record lasted till the 1956 Olympics). In the broad jump (now the long jump) Jesse was 8.6 for another gold.

In the 400-meter relay, Owens was on a team that included Mack Robinson, Jackie Robinson's older brother. This team took a gold, too. African-American heroes were everywhere on that Berlin track: Archie Williams, Jimmy LaValle, Cornelius Johnson, Dave Albritton and Johnny Brooks. Six gold medals.

Legend has it that Hitler snubbed the African-Americans. Well, he already had, in fact, in condemning words concerning race. But Hitler welcomed only German winners after each day's performances.

The end is never pretty. Jesse Owens died at 67 in 1980. He had been reduced after the Olympics, in attempting to turn professional, to racing short distances against trains and new model automobiles right off the assembly lines. He tap-danced with Eddie Cantor on a national tour. Various business ventures, and a public relations firm, did little for Jesse, and like Louis, he became embroiled in an IRS struggle that lasted years. Yet of Jesse never lost that magical smile, and that wonderful humor.

Yet, he had once won for America. And most Americans, at least the ones I knew, had a warm spot in their heart for Jesse Owens.

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