

Owens' widow remembered as remarkable

Ruth Owens dead at 86

By Clyde L. Stancil
DAILY Staff Writer

When Ruth Owens died Wednesday, the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum in Oakville lost one of its staunchest supporters. A park board member credits Owens' widow with helping establish the Oakville museum that bears her husband's name.

Mrs. Owens died of heart failure at her home in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. She was 86.

Born in Oakville, Jesse Owens moved to Ohio before he was 10. He went on to win four Gold Medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, defeating Adolf Hitler's claim of Aryan racial superiority.

Mrs. Owens was married to Owens for 45 years until his death in 1980.

Although she was more than 80 and frail at the time, Mrs. Owens visited North Alabama when the 1996 Olympic Torch came to the park, and again in 1998 when organizers opened the Owens Museum.

Planted trees at museum

"We sure are sorry about that (her death)," Owens Park board member Therman White said. "She really meant so much by coming here those two times. It was really hard for her. Every time I go up by those trees at the museum, I always tell people about her. She helped plant those trees. I hope the (Owens) children will be coming back."

James Pinion, another board member, visited Mrs. Owens and her family in Chicago and went to Owens' alma mater with fellow park board member Henry Buchanan to assemble articles for the museum.

"She was a very remarkable woman," Pinion said. "She got behind us when Henry and I went to Ohio State (University). If it wasn't for her, we wouldn't have gotten a lot of the material. She really thought a lot of the park and was real happy we got it."

At Ohio State, Pinion said Mrs. Owens and her family approved photos and other articles for university officials to



Ruth Owens during the 1996 Olympic Torch Run as the run came through Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

DAILY File Photo by Gary C. Wiley Jr.

Owens

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loan the museum, and worked with the museum board to determine what would be appropriate to display.

"She was happy with the museum and at how happy Jesse would have been with it," Pinion said. "We just owe a lot to her, because if it hadn't been for her, we wouldn't have the museum."

A wonderful time

Mrs. Owens' son-in-law, Malcolm Hemphill, said she and her family had a wonderful time in Alabama. Hemphill is married to Mrs. Owens' daughter, Gloria Hemphill. He said Mrs. Owens loved the park.

"She was a much healthier person (when she visited Alabama) and she walked around the park and took pictures of the monument and the replica (of Owens)," Hemphill said. "She had really planned to come back to see beyond where it was when she left."

Hemphill said the Owens family established relationships with local people who treated them like family, and who have since continued to communicate with the Owens family.

He named James and Nancy Pinion, Therman White and Rosemary Lewey as people who helped make

the park a success.

"It was a different Alabama for us than what we had always heard," Hemphill said. "We had a wonderful time."

Mrs. Owens was chairwoman of the Jesse Owens Foundation and worked for a number of organizations when she lived in Phoenix, Hemphill said.

He credited her with being the backbone of the family.

"She's been the person who's been able to maintain us all during the good times and the bad times," he said. "During the times that my father-in-law was involved athletically, she is the person who was here keeping the family together."

Services

Funeral services will be Tuesday at 11 a.m. at First Unitarian Church, 5650 South Woodlawn Ave., in Chicago. Visitation is at 10 a.m.

Mrs. Owens is survived by three daughters, Gloria Hemphill, Beverly Prather and Marlene Rankin; five grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Memorials may be made to the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum, 7019 Lawrence County 203, Danville, AL 35619, or The Jesse Owens Foundation, 401 North Michigan, Chicago, IL 60611.

Board members will acknowledge memorials to the park by sending cards with donors' names to the Owens family.