

Southern Living

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Honoring Oakville's Olympian

Curtis Cole, Therman White, and James Pinion helped create the Jesse Owens Memorial Park & Museum. —page 28

Running Tribute

Volunteers in Jesse Owens's hometown honor the Olympic champion with a community park and museum. By **Wade Kwon**



FAR LEFT: Park volunteers Curtis Cole, Therman White, and James Pinion stand before a sculpture of the Oakville native bursting through the Olympic rings. **LEFT:** Museum visitors learn about Jesse's life on and off the track at the memorial park and museum.



Displays, videos, and a rare film show Jesse's rise as a world-class track-and-field athlete. The museum and park attract thousands of visitors each year to Danville just off State 157.

The Olympian from Oakville lives on, thanks to hometown residents who have gone the distance for him. Jesse Owens dazzled the world by winning four gold medals and ruining Adolf Hitler's dreams of an Aryan-dominated games during the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

For years afterward, few knew about the track star's humble beginnings in Alabama. Even fewer have heard about the park and museum that bear his name or of local residents such as Therman White and James Pinion who created the heartfelt tribute. Together, the hardworking volunteers turned 30 acres of cow pasture south of Moulton into the Jesse Owens Memorial Park & Museum and brought the world to the Olympic champion's hometown.

A Homegrown Tribute Composed of a small museum building and an even smaller replica of the three-room house where Jesse lived as a child, the attraction chronicles his life. Born in 1913, he left with his sharecropper family nine years later for Columbus, Ohio, looking for a brighter future. After becoming a track star at The Ohio State University, he went on to win a record four track-and-field events at the 1936 Olympics—a feat

unmatched until Carl Lewis, another Alabama-born Olympian, did it in 1984.

"The Jesse Owens Park near Oakville is a source of great pride for the Owens family," says Marlene Owens Rankin, Jesse's daughter and board member of the Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago. "We are grateful to Mr. Pinion and Mr. White for their vision, dedication, and ongoing hard work to make the park a place for recreation and learning."

The stone museum building sits at the top of a winding road from the park welcome center. Exhibits include film footage and mementos from Jesse's defining competitions, including track shoes, uniforms, and programs. Just outside, a 14-foot-tall statue by Birmingham sculptor Branko Medenica shows the runner bursting through the five Olympic rings. A replica of the Owens family house, built not far from the site of the original homestead, stands nearby. Inside, visitors see the floor that doubled as a bed for all 10 children, including older brother Sylvester who narrates a recorded greeting.

Discovering Jesse Therman learned about his hometown hero after traveling halfway around the world. Like Jesse, the Alabama native left the state as a young

man in search of a better life. He enlisted in the Navy and spent 20 years touring Europe and the Pacific.

At a Tokyo museum, the Naval veteran made a surprising discovery: Jesse Owens had spent his childhood on the same stretch of land where Therman played as a child. "I'd been all around the world and thought I'd seen it all," he says. "So I started thinking that Danville would be a good spot for people to learn about this famous person."

Building a Dream With \$15,000 in state grants and \$2,500 in retirement savings, Therman purchased farmland near Oakville, hoping to build a lasting legacy to the sports legend. "I believe in doing nice things for the community," he explains.

In 1991, Therman and Marvin Fitzgerald (Jesse's cousin) started making plans for the park. They were soon joined by James Pinion, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System coordinator for Lawrence County.

Together the men and other community members eventually raised more than \$2 million. Much of the money came after James asked organizers of Atlanta's 1996 Olympic torch relay to travel through Jesse's birthplace when heading south from Huntsville to Birmingham.

The relay focused national attention

on the project, and two years later the park opened its museum. Then James and Therman started meeting with local, state, and federal officials to raise money for a twofold mission: attracting tourists to the park while also providing an outdoor facility where residents could play, exercise, and relax.

A decade after the museum opened its doors, the original volunteers are keeping it alive. Like Jesse Owens, Therman and James are both spending their later years giving back to communities and promoting children's sports programs. ●

The Jesse Owens Memorial Park & Museum: 7019 County Road 203, Danville, AL 35619; www.jesseowensmuseum.org or (256) 974-3636.

Tracking the Future

In addition to the museum and Owens's home, the park also features two baseball fields for Little League games and areas where visitors can stroll, try the long jump, picnic, and play a pickup game of basketball. James wants to expand the outdoor offerings by building a regulation eight-lane running track for high school and junior college meets, and he's presently raising \$250,000 for its construction. To make a tax-deductible contribution, contact him at (256) 974-0551 or jesseowens@charter.net

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