

Oakville residents not about to give up Owens monument

OAKVILLE (AP) — The residents of this Lawrence County town aren't about to give up their Jesse Owens monument, which created a stir five years ago when officials refused to put it on the courthouse lawn in Moulton.

The track star won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, in the broad jump, 100- and 200-meter dashes and four-by-100 relay. Because he was black, Owens was shunned by Adolf Hitler, Germany's Nazi leader.

Owens' parents, Henry and Emma Owens, were sharecroppers who moved to Cleveland, Ohio, when he was about 9.

The granite monument is alongside Lawrence County 61 in Oakdale, a farming community where Owens was born.

The site was chosen in 1983 after Lawrence County commissioners blocked efforts to put the memorial on the courthouse lawn in Moulton. The commissioners contended they weren't properly consulted about the project, and denied that Owens' being black had anything to do with their actions.

The city of Moulton offered to furnish a site for the memorial, but supporters felt the site wasn't big enough and that it should be at the courthouse, said Owens' first cousin, Marvin Fitzgerald.

The memorial in Oakville is on a half-acre donated by a black Masonic lodge.

Fitzgerald said the house where Owens was born in 1913 sat on the site, and the community still is surrounded by cotton fields.

The annual Jesse Owens Memo-

rial Race, a 10-kilometer event begun in 1982, draws several hundred runners and thousands of spectators to Moulton each year.

The controversy over the monument "tore us all to pieces," said DeWayne Key, county education superintendent.

"We'd just started the race, and we said, 'All that's going to happen is Lawrence County is going to get a bad rap, and a lot of runners won't come to the race,'" Key said.

"I think they ought to name the courthouse after him," he added. "He was a great athlete and we're real proud of him and our race. We have people every year tell us that nobody puts on a race like the Jesse Owens Memorial Race."

Fitzgerald said he thinks that "the county commission should have jumped at the chance to put it in Moulton. The city of Moulton could have drawn a good bit of revenue from it through visitors. But since they gave it to us we're going to keep it. They could get another one and dedicate it in Moulton."