

Tribute to Owens overdue

BIRMINGHAM — About 100 of us sit atop Red Mountain in what may well be the city's most exclusive meeting room. Heavy rain clouds hamper the spectacular



Rheta Grimsley Johnson

trademark view from The Club, its chalk-colored, private walls a familiar landmark in the shadow of the statue Vulcan. But no matter.

Alabama Gov. Jim Folsom is here. Dr. LeRoy Walker, president of the U.S. Olympic Committee, is the keynote. U.S. Rep. Tom Beville is here. Business leaders and public relations specialists are here. Blacks and whites, high-profile and regular folk, all here, eating orange rolls and chicken with a fancy menu name.

It's a little hard to comprehend. We are gathered together in a pre-fund-raising luncheon for a 17.5-acre Jesse Owens Memorial Park in his hometown of Oakville. The dignitaries are outdoing one another in expressing support for the park project.

Beville says he's "proud to tell people I represent the county (Lawrence) where Jesse Owens was born."

Folsom says he's real excited the Olympic torch may pass through Oakville, population 200, on its way to Atlanta in 1996.

Nobody dares mention the real birth of this Owens' tribute more than a decade ago. It began as a sadly typical racial dispute when white Lawrence County officials refused a request to allow a monument honoring Owens on the courthouse lawn. They said they feared "a flood of similar requests." Of course that wasn't it.

(As if they worried about running out of grass if every Lawrence County Olympic legend who had won four gold medals and single-handedly made a fool of Hitler wanted to stake a spot.)

No congressmen took Jesse's part then. No governor. But a small group of black Masons in Oakville said they'd make a home for the monument. They cleared the briars from a corner of cow pasture and poured homemade walks. Before the little obelisk could be unveiled, hoodlums in a pickup truck tried to pull it down. But the ceremony came off on schedule, with singing and rejoicing. There was much joy in Oakville.

I realize all this is ancient history. Communities and leaders can mellow, see the light. It's never too late to do the right thing. The support for a first-rate park now appears solid and biracial.

Even cautious white politicians sense that it's all right in 1994 to recognize the greatness of Alabama's own international star Jesse Owens.

Beville might have stumbled on part of the truth. "You know, we've got some really livewire citizens there," he said, meaning Oakville and the nearby county seat, Moulton. They have "seized upon the tourism value."

There are some \$1 million plans. There will be a statue, a playground area, a nice running track. It must sound good to a rural county that could use visitors. And any Alabama business or individual should be honored to contribute. Real heroes like Jesse Owens are rare, maybe even obsolete.

But I hope that somehow in the stampede to unveil Jesse in time for the 1996 Olympics that everyone remembers how this thing stumbled off the blocks. That someone gives credit to the Oakville Masons in the humble cinderblock meeting hall who didn't have money, only vision and determination.

From an Oakville cow pasture to Birmingham's The Club is 80 miles or a million. Depending on the measure you use.