

# Torch sheds light on Jesse Owens' birthplace

**Oakville, Ala.** — It is quiet, as usual, in Oakville, a crossroads that only showed up on the official state highway map this year.

There is only the satisfying hum of a tractor and mower as plodding work continues on a 17-acre tract that — fate willing — soon will begin to look like a memorial park.

Not even Atlanta has worked or hoped as hard for an Olympic moment as has this hamlet of 200 or so people in Lawrence County, 1913 birthplace of the legendary runner Jesse Owens.

On June 29, 1996, the Olympic torch will pass through Oakville, a victory in and of itself. Jesse Owens' widow, Ruth, a Georgia native, and his children will watch as a new, bronze, \$95,000 statue of the athlete is unveiled.

The family will help dedicate the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and preside at the grand opening of a birth-home replica and museum. There will be a temporary Jesse Owens postal station set up to cancel commemorative cards and envelopes. It will be a day of grand celebration.

Meanwhile, there's plenty of



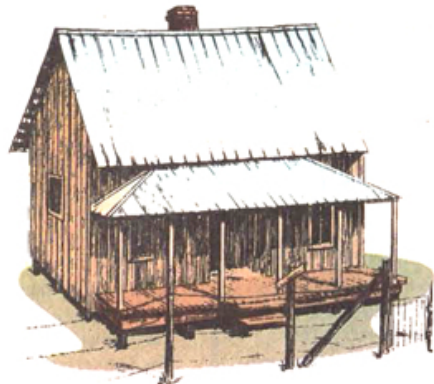
RHETA GRIMSLEY JOHNSON

work to be done and money to be raised, not an unusual situation in Oakville. About \$100,000 is needed soon to match grants that will get the park presentable for the torch stop.

For 14 years the core group has fought — and that's the right word — for a memorial to Owens, whose Alabama connection had been all but forgotten.

It's been an Olympic-style relay, really, with classic handoffs and plenty of bumpy track. In 1983 an all-white Lawrence County Commission unanimously rejected the idea of an Owens statue on the courthouse lawn. It would open a floodgate of "similar requests," they said.

That's when a determined group of black Masons from Oakville spoke up, clearing a place in a half-acre of briar



Sketch of Jesse Owens' home

Courtesy Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board

patch for a small memorial.

Now black and white Lawrence County residents are working together to honor their most famous resident, who at age 9 left Alabama with his family for Cleveland and better opportunities.

An Atlanta public relations whiz, Paula Hovater, read about the struggles at the little park in the region where she was born and reared. It touched her. "Even though Jesse Owens is one of the highly esteemed international sports figures,

fire under indifferent state politicians who had rather spend money buying shackles for prisoners than playgrounds for youth.

Today men in their shirt sleeves bend over the hood of a pickup truck and a set of ambitious plans. Where others see a hill, an old fence row and a field of grass, the volunteers see an awards court, playing fields and grounds landscaped with tulip poplars and oaks. They see youngsters running the same races Jesse Owens ran.

"It won't look the same if you come back in the spring," James Pinion promises. Pinion is the local Auburn University county extension agent. He and co-workers Henry Buchanan and Linda Robinson have used their office's resources to develop a park plan.

A lot can change in 14 years. People can change. County government can change. Roads can be paved, races won.

And the world can find its way to Oakville to honor Jesse Owens.

*Johnson's column runs Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday.*

very few people in the world associate him with Southern roots," she pleaded to anyone and everyone who would listen.

Through her involvement, the U.S. Olympic Committee became interested and its president, LeRoy Walker, made a speech in support of the memorial park last year. Former President Jimmy Carter has agreed to be an honorary adviser for the park.

Now it's official. The Olympic torch will pass through Oakville and maybe even light a