

Jesse Owens' hometown readying for torch

Owens Park has struggled for 13 years

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DAILY Photo by Lesley Farrey Pacey

Franklin McDaniel at the Jesse Owens monument in Oakville.

THE DECATUR DAILY, Sunday morning, September 17, 1995

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OAKVILLE — Seventeen-year-old Franklin McDaniel spent his childhood waiting for a Jesse Owens Memorial Park that never came.

"I was about this big when they started talking about it," he said, holding his hand out near his thigh. "All these years, I haven't seen nothing yet."

McDaniel — who lives across the street from the future site of the park and a cow pasture away from the Jesse Owens memorial — said tourists who visit Oakville usually share his disappointment.

Nearly 60 years after the son of a black Lawrence County sharecropper won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics, shattering Adolf Hitler's dream of Aryan su-

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premacy, the only marker of Owens' birthplace is a brick display case filled with memorabilia and two chest-high granite monuments that mark the former site of his boyhood house.

"They say, 'This is it?'" McDaniel said. "It's embarrassing to say the park hasn't gotten started yet."

But an elaborate change is on the way. A 17.5-acre memorial park for Owens — which will include a sculpture, a replica house, a museum, ball fields and other recreation facilities — is set to open June 29 for the Olympic torch run.

Some people say the county has come along way in 13 years since a Lawrence County Commission in 1983 voted 3-0-1 against putting a Jesse Owens monument on the courthouse lawn.

The decision led to the monument's placement in Oakville.

Beck said he is opposed to honoring individuals — white or black — with markers on the lawn.

But even with the progress, things haven't changed that much, said McDaniel.

"It is quiet here at night — there's no trouble — but when things like this start or there's an article about Jesse Owens, there's prejudice."

McDaniel said residents at a recent community meeting were concerned white racists would vandalize or tear down a new bronze sculpture of Owens, which

will be unveiled at the park opening.

"They think it is going to get pulled down by the prejudice people," said McDaniel, an easy-going Speake High School football player.

McDaniel said chips in the memorial left by vandals and tire tracks in the grass nearby prove racism still exists.

He said fights between blacks and whites at a basketball court near the monument forced the community to move two basketball goals inside the empty, gated park.

When the Owens monument went up here in 1983, Oakville residents had to chase away vandals who wrapped a chain around the granite monument before its dedication, trying to rip it from the ground. The incident left chips still visible today.

But ask the chairman of the Jesse Owens Park Committee if racism is still a problem and he tries to dismiss the question.

"Negative talk isn't good for the state. It's not good for anyone," said Therman White, a community leader. "That is something we don't bother to discuss. This is brand new day and time and I don't look back or talk about it."

White, who is black, was speaking for the rest of the community when he said, "We speak with one voice — everything else has been said

before." Some residents in the community referred questions about the park to White.

Owens' cousin Marvin Fitzgerald also did not want to talk about past struggles, saying he's said too much in the past. But the Oakville resident did say, "I'm proud that the park is happening because it is long overdue. It should have happened 10 years ago."

What the men did not want to address was the County Commission vote and the vandalism attack on the monument.

Since then the community has come together, buying the 17.5-acre tract for \$17,200 in 1990 and donating it to the county for the Jesse Owens Park. It was in 1990 that park committee members asked the Auburn Extension Service for help.

Now, an 11-member committee made up of blacks and whites from the extension service and the Oakville community, is working to get the park ready to open next summer for the torch run. Members say they have full cooperation from the County Commission and state legislators.

Owens' daughter Marlene O. Rankin, who is executive director of the Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago, said she admires the local group for overcoming racial and fi-

nancial barriers and doing something meaningful for the community.

She plans to attend the park opening with her mother, Ruth Owens, her sisters and other family members.

"We think the people of Lawrence County are to be commended for a 14 year struggle and for demonstrating perseverance in the face of such adversity and really coming close to their goal. They've really come a long way and we admire them for having undergone such a struggle."

"It's a wonderful story of a very small community pulling together with a mutual dream, bringing to bear what they had to make it happen. The fact that it is an integrated group doing it is also exciting."

Lawrence County Agent James Pinion, spokesman for the Park Committee, said the park project has put Oakville on the state map this year. He said Lawrence County is proud to claim Owens as its own.

Pinion, who is white, said he hasn't seen the racist element McDaniel is talking about. "I hope it's not out there." But he added

any vandalism would be prevented by hiring a museum curator and a night watchman for the new park.

"The past 14 years don't have a thing to do with what we're doing ... The only negative thing I've heard is 'Why haven't you done this sooner?' That's from blacks, whites, all races."

Owens' only living sibling, 86-year-old Sylvester Owens of Euclid, Ohio, is looking forward to being here for the torch run and the park dedication. His first trip back to Alabama in 72 years was in October and he said he found no more prejudice here than in Ohio.

"I think it's a long time coming, under the circumstances, but I don't have any bad feelings about it," he said of the park. "There was prejudice and so on at that time. But things have changed for the better."

If they haven't, McDaniel said Oakville residents will protect the park and the memory of their most famous citizen.

"This is our community, we're not going to let anyone ruin it," he said. "Jesse Owens made something out of himself, there's no use in ruining it."