

Oakville tenant house will be replica of Olympic legend's childhood home

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OAKVILLE — The worn wooden walls of the ramshackle house bear the scribbles of former tenants.

Faded phone numbers, math problems and names marked with crayon and markers tell a story no one knows. But the dirty, three-room house soon will tell another tale.

It will tell the humble beginnings of 1936 Olympic track and field star Jesse Owens, who was born to a Lawrence County sharecropper in 1913.

The building will tell how the four-time gold medalist grew up with almost nothing. It will show how he slept on the floor with his older brother, Sylvester, because they had no bed.

The house that sits in Jesse Owens Park in Oakville will serve as a replica of Owens' childhood home. He was born and reared near here until he was 9 and he moved to Cleveland, Ohio.

The Jesse Owens Park Committee, headed by County Agent James Pinion, picked the house from another location in Lawrence County. It was just as described by Sylvester Owens, Jesse Owens' only living sibling.

The two-bedroom tenant house with a kitchen and rusted tin roof was purchased by the committee and moved last week to the distant end of 17.5-acre park. It seems as though it belongs there, surrounded by farm land and crops.

The park's first structures, the house and a welcome center, should be open June 29 when the Olympic torch run blazes through here. Also on the way are a museum, a bronze statue of Owens, ball fields and much more.

Until that day comes, two Moulton couples have accepted the task of restoring the houses into their new roles.

"Do you think we have our job cut out for us?" asked Nancy Shelton, an antique dealer who has also restored a Moulton log cabin. "It's going to take some elbow grease."

"We need to go in and rip everything out," said Curtis Cole, a foreman at Monsanto who was clad in a Jesse Owens run T-shirt and hat. "The hardest part is going to be the cleanup."

The ceiling is enclosed by slabs of cardboard and pressboard coated with a layer of plastic. The plastic is torn and dangling in some places.

Nails protrude from the walls — some that are painted lime green. The walls not only have been used as permanent note pads, but as punching bags, perhaps. They are marred by dents and holes.

A license plate in the main bedroom is nailed over a hole in the floor to keep rats from getting in. Dirty flowered curtains hang from bent curtain rods. Two Chevrolet hubcaps lay on the floor in a bed of discarded objects and dried leaves.

Wood panels and cardboard flaps drop from the kitchen ceiling like curtains. The back door of the house lays on a littered kitchen floor.

After the cleanup, Cole and his wife Joyce, who works at the Moulton post office, and Mrs. Shelton's husband, Billy Warren Shelton, will give the house a facelift. They will patch holes, fix doors, add boards and a coat of fresh paint.

But Mrs. Cole said not too much will be done to fix up the house. "We don't anticipate doing too much because the conditions were rough. Owens' father was a sharecropper and a poor black sharecropper, which made it worse."

"You can imagine why he never came back," Cole added.

The house will be furnished with antiques from the early 1900s: an iron bed, a pot-bellied stove and other period items such as a corn shuck mop, Mrs. Shelton said.

But it's too early to know all the specifics, she said.

Will they get the house done on time? Mrs. Shelton is confident. "No doubt about it. We will have it done before the deadline."

But the group hopes to get some help. They need a lot of volunteer help and donations of lumber and post-1913 furniture. They also need an outhouse and windows.

The Coles and the Sheltons got involved because Pinion knew they had the experience restoring old homes and "he knew we don't turn down a lot that we are asked to do," Mrs. Shelton said.

"But seriously, when James Pinion asked for my help, I really count it an honor," she said.

"I think we'll have a lot of fun out here," said Cole, who served with his wife for about 10 years on the Jesse Owens Memorial Run Committee.

This is the house that built Jesse

