

# Cotton no longer king in tiny Oakville

## Factories displace agricultural lifestyle

By Bob Johnson

Post-Herald Reporter

OAKVILLE — Jesse Owens' parents once picked cotton on the same ridge where a memorial to the hero of the 1936 Olympics is being constructed.

In fact, when Owens was growing up in Oakville in the early 1900s, most of the land was used to grow cotton and other crops.

**Summary:** Tiny Oakville in southeast Lawrence County looks today much like it did when Olympian Jesse Owens moved from the area about 80 years ago. But life has changed for residents who now work in factories rather than the cotton fields where Owens' parents toiled. A Jesse Owens Memorial Park is being built.

And the only source of income for the mostly black residents of Oakville came from farm work, often in exchange for a small wooden shack to call home on property owned by a white landowner.

Then industries started coming to Decatur and Huntsville and other parts of the Tennessee Valley, bringing jobs that involved making everything from fertilizer to automobiles to spaceships. Those jobs pretty much killed the farming.

Thursday, April 18, 1996

Birmingham Post-Herald

Today, along the mostly paved roads in southeastern Lawrence County, it's possible to drive for miles without seeing the first crop in the fields.

Weather-beaten wooden houses with tin roofs, similar to the one Owens lived in 80 years ago, still dot the area, but now in most cases the black residents own the home and the surrounding land.

In some cases, the old shacks have been replaced by attractive brick homes. And in some places, the old shack still stands next to the newer home as a vivid reminder of the not-too-distant past.

And Oakville basically has become another sleepy bedroom community, a place to come home to after a hard day in the factories 20 or 30 miles away.

"It's changed a lot from when Jesse Owens was here," said Owens' first cousin, 65-year-old Elsie Fitzgerald, who has lived in the same small house across the street from the new Jesse Owens Memorial Park for more than 55 years. "Back then, everybody was sharecroppers. Nobody's working in the fields anymore."

"The farmers all went to town and started working," said Thurman White, chairman of the board of directors for the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and an Oakville native who returned home after serving 20 years in the U.S. Navy.

"There are no black farmers here anymore. Most people now own their own land and they work in the city. When the state became industrialized, it killed the farm. There was no point working in the fields for a couple of dollars a day when you could make \$60 or \$70 a week working in town," White said.

Helping the residents of Oakville adjust to their changing community is James Pinion, Alabama Cooperative Extension System agent for Lawrence County.

Part of that help is overseeing construction of the new memorial park. The park is expected to bring tourists and development to Oakville, which wasn't even listed on state maps until a couple of years ago.

"The residents here are proud of Jesse Owens and proud of this park and they should be proud. This will benefit them," Pinion said. Along with the tourists, grocery stores, gas stations and other private development should come to Oakville, he said.

The Jesse Owens Memorial Park will include a museum, a replica of Owens' childhood home and a large statue of Owens. The park is expected to be mostly complete by June 29 when a torchbearer for the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta will bring the Olympic Torch through Oakville and stop for a ceremony at the park.

Mrs. Fitzgerald said she hopes the development will bring a grocery store to Oakville. Residents now must drive to Moulton or Hartselle for groceries unless they want to wait for a "rolling store" that comes through occasionally selling items from the back of a truck.

"This is just a country place," Mrs. Fitzgerald said.

Mrs. Fitzgerald said she only met Owens a couple of times, but she knows he was proud of his Oakville roots.

"Anytime he talked, he always mentioned that this was where he came from," Mrs. Fitzgerald said.

Looking across the road at the replica of Owens' childhood home being moved into the park, Mrs. Fitzgerald said the structure looks a lot like the small wooden shack the Owens family moved away from when he was about 10. The family left Alabama in search of jobs in the North.

White said he also hopes development will come to Oakville.

"As of right now, when people come here to look at the park, we don't have anything to sell them," White said.

The park is not the only new attraction that will draw visitors to the Oakville area.

Less than a mile down County 187 from the Jesse Owens Memorial Park is the Oakville Indian Mounds



A new basketball court at the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Oakville attracts school kids for an after school basketball game. Although the tiny town of Oakville looks much the same it did when Owens lived there, factories are replacing agriculture as the town's main industry.

**"It's changed a lot from when Jesse Owens was here. Back then, everybody was sharecroppers. Nobody's working in the fields anymore."**

— Elsie Fitzgerald, Owens' cousin



Jesse Owens' cousin, Elsie Fitzgerald, stands on her porch in Oakville, only 100 from the site of the park honoring the great athlete.

Work is under way on Jesse Owens Park in Oakville. Story, page A1.

The park also includes the remains of the Black Warrior's Path, an old trail used by American Indians and by early settlers. Davy Crockett is believed to have traveled through the area on the trail.

The museum is located in a building built as a replica of a Cherokee Council House, a seven-sided structure that contains Indian relics and a large statue of the Cherokee educator and writer Sequoyah.

"We believe this park will complement the Jesse Owens park. That's the way we both want it. People can go over there and learn about Jesse Owens and then bring their kids here and we'll talk to them about Davy Crockett and the Copena Indians and the early settlers," Walker said.

He said there are also plans to develop a replica Indian village near the park.

Walker said many of the present-day residents of Oakville have not moved far from where their ancestors lived when they were slaves. Some of the black residents of the area have the last names of the early plantation owners, including Mrs. Fitzgerald, he said.

"The blacks in Africa were not a migratory people. They tended to live in one place. So when they were brought to this country, they tended to stay where they were left, even after slavery and after the plantation owners had moved away," Walker said.

And today, most residents of Oakville say they can't imagine living anywhere else.

"The reason I left to join the Navy was economics," White said. "But when I left I meant to come back. I left to do better for myself. Now there are jobs and people don't have to leave."

Mrs. Fitzgerald said she will never leave Oakville.

"It's the only place I want to be. There's trouble everywhere, but at least everything's still all right here."