

The Philadelphia Inquirer

The man who humbled Hitler gets a park in his hometown

Tuesday, April 23, 1996



James Pinion (left) and Thurmond White, the driving forces behind the memorial, look over the replica of Jesse Owens' boyhood house, which will be installed in the memorial park. Dedication ceremonies are scheduled for June 29.



Oakville, Ala., will honor Jesse Owens as the Olympic torch passes through this summer.

By Larry Copeland
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

OAKVILLE, Ala. — The statue, capturing the great runner in stride, will grace a hill overlooking a verdant slope with a museum, ball fields and an oval track. When the park is completed and the statue installed, they will make a fine memorial.

For many here, the memorial — which follows years of struggle and news that the Olympic torch will pass through — is long overdue.

Jesse Owens. It might seem an obvious gesture to honor him here. Into this tiny community of stifling poverty and cotton fields was born a boy who would challenge the wind, who would expose as fool's gold the genetic theories of a dictator and in the doing, bring his country an unprecedented haul of Olympic gold.

But this is the South, where nothing is ever that simple, or that obvious, where the past keeps its icy fingers at the throat of the future, where old hatreds die hard.

Because Owens was black, the mostly white north Alabama county of his birth virtually ignored his accomplishments for years, even blunting an effort 13 years ago by a group of African Americans to erect an Owens statue on the courthouse square in Moulton.

Circumstances change. These days, Atlanta is preparing to stage the Olympics, and torchbearers will run across the country to bring the Olympic flame to Georgia. The path will wind through Oakville, to pay homage to Owens.

The idea that the torchbearer is coming has fired the energies of those who have long wanted to honor him.

After their effort to put up a statue was rebuffed, the group that wanted to honor Owens built a small memorial on borrowed land near his birthplace. Situated at a lonesome intersection, it was a starkly humble tribute — a marker and a small stand with faded photographs.

For years, that was how Owens' legend was honored here.

But if this is a place where nearly everything is filtered through the distorting lens of race — and it is — it also is a place where a good number of people guard against the wretchedness that mars the past.

Thus the story of Jesse Owens Memorial Park, and how it came to be, is also a story of triumph — the triumph of vision over zealous ghosts, of unity over ancient hatreds.

For the two driving forces behind the project are Thurmond White, a 69-year-old black man, and James Pinion, 53, who is white.

As the two of them stood one recent afternoon amid the clinging red clay and rolling green hills where the park is taking shape, it was tempting to compare them to the Kevin Costner and James Earl Jones characters in *Field of Dreams*.

White, an Oakville native who is retired from the Navy, is a big, brown man with a ready smile and deep voice. The tall, lean Pinion, also a native Alabamian, collects autographed baseballs and loves Auburn University sports.

Together, they have chased a dream since 1991.

Making plans

On a recent afternoon, workers hammered away on the single-story, wood-frame structure that will house the museum. Backers say the park will include the replica home, softball fields, basketball courts, a picnic area and — they hope — a track.

"We need to raise money for the [\$100,000] track," Pinion says, standing across from the target site, now covered with weeds and wild onion.

The centerpiece of the park will be Gold Medallion Plaza: the statue plus four courts representing the four medals Owens won in Berlin in 1936.

With those medals, Owens smashed Adolf Hitler's theories of an Aryan super race.

As Hitler watched, Owens became the world's fastest human with victories in the 100-meter race (10.3 seconds) and 200-meter race (20.7 seconds). He also won the long jump (26 feet, 5½ inches) and led his country's 400-meter relay team (39.8 seconds) for his fourth gold medal.

He became a national hero, and many historians believe his Olympic victories helped demoralize Hitler's troops and ultimately contributed to the Allied victory in World War II.

Jesse Owens Memorial Park is near Decatur, Ala., in an incorporated community of about 200 residents. It's in a mixed-bag neighborhood of bootleg liquor houses, modest, well-kept homes, battered trailer homes and houses guarded by the rusting carcasses of pick-up trucks.

So the park is generating an air of quiet excitement.

"We think it's wonderful," Marlene O. Rankin, the youngest of Owens' three daughters, says from Chicago.

Rankin says her mother, sisters and "the whole family" plan to attend the June 29 park dedication. "We've never been down there, so this is a new relationship for all of us."

Restoring souls

Indeed, Owens' link to the area might seem tenuous. His sharecropper father moved the family to Cleveland when Owens was 9, and his running career began there. He lived in Chicago from 1949 until he died in 1980.

Yet, tiny Oakville retained a special place in Owens' heart.

It was here that he came at the very lowest point of his life — long after the cheering had

quieted — to restore his soul.

In his autobiography, *Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler*, Owens wrote about returning to Oakville when he was facing the possibility of prison over

\$114,000 in back taxes.

He was contemplating suicide.

But here, he wrote, he stretched out on the ground in the cotton fields he'd raced through as a child. He found God — and the will to live.

Today, near that spot, his boyhood home finally has found its own way to keep him alive.

So, for a moment, the world will turn its attention here this summer, to a place that has endeavored to grow beyond one part of its past, while extolling another part.

Yet, for some, the splendor and glory of the dedication will be marred by a bitter irony. By pure chance — the United Way selected its runners without knowledge of their race — all eight Lawrence County torchbearers are white.

Others, though, have worked so long and hard to secure the Owens legend that they hold out hope that the goodwill engendered by this project will remain beyond June 29.

"You look at the people working together on the board, black and white, and that's the small, special thing that's being overlooked," says Lawrence County Circuit Judge Philip Reich, a board member. "When all this passes, when the torch is gone and the world turns away, all these good people will still be working together."