

Torch quickens work on park

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OAKVILLE

James Pinion and Therman White admit that lately they've been getting a little anxious while watching all the activities take place at the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

But the two have the right to feel that way.

Pinion and White have been two of the driving members of the Owens Park Committee, working for almost five years to make the project become a reality.

And with the opening of the park just over two weeks away, they are counting the days.

"It's been a long time since we first began this project," said Pinion. "But I think all the hard work and effort by everyone involved will be worthwhile in the long run."

"It's getting closer, very close now," said White, who lives only a few hundred yards from the park and the place where Owens was born and reared. "I think everyone is ready for the park to be opened."

For the past few months, work at the park has been at a furious pace. The park is just south of Moulton, at the intersection of Lawrence 187 and Lawrence 203, which is now called Jesse Owens Memorial Parkway.

Torch arrival speeds things up

The park committee wanted to make sure the park was open sometime during the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, and was pushing toward that goal.

Then it was announced that the Olympic Torch would make a visit to the park on June 29 as part of its 84-day trip through the United States on its way to Atlanta.

"That's really speeded things up," White said. "We were trying to open the park because of the Olympics, then we found out the torch would stop. The visit by the torch is something extra that we didn't really expect."

Pinion said he and White, along with other park committee members, are at the park just about every day.

"It's been a busy time for us," Pinion said. "I know it's getting close, but to be honest, I've been so busy I haven't had time to think about just how close it's getting to the day."

"But June 29 is the day the committee has been looking forward to for five years, and now it's almost here."

When the torch stops at the 19-acre park, it will be a major part of the official opening ceremonies of the park.

The park will house a replica of Owens' childhood home, a welcome center, a statue of the Lawrence County native, as well as a medalion court, and an Olympic Torch court.

Owens' family will be on hand

Pinion said the attractions will be completed by the time the torch arrives shortly before 1 p.m. on June 29.

Work also has started on a museum, which will house different items depicting Owens' life, but Pinion said the museum will not be completed in time.

Owens was born and lived with his family in Lawrence County until they moved to Cleveland, Ohio, when he was 7 years old.

Carrying torch Olympic event is special

Relatively few people get to participate in an Olympic game. Not many of us get to see an Olympic event live. Even fewer get to be part of an Olympic-torch run. Thus, it is special.

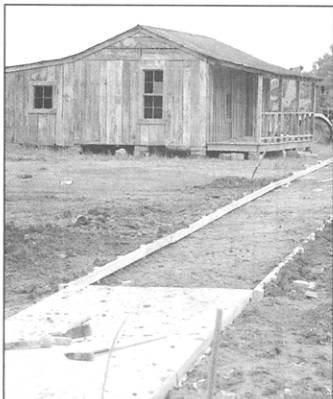
Area individuals were selected last week for the torch run that will wind across the country this summer as the flame makes its way to Atlanta for the Summer Games.

Eighteen runners from Morgan County and eight from Lawrence and Limestone counties have been designated to carry the torch as it

comes to our communities. Each was chosen because he or she is special in some way. They are contributors to their communities.

The torch's pass through this area will be even more meaningful because of the special ceremony planned at Jesse Owens Park in Lawrence County's Oakville.

While we congratulate those selected and readily agree they are the right people to carry the torch, many of us can't help being a bit envious because theirs is surely a once-in-a-lifetime experience.



This sharecropper's cabin at the park is similar to the one lived in by Jesse Owens.

DANIEL GILES/Staff

Olympic torch speeding up park work

Owens' grandson, Stuart Owen Rankin, will run the Olympic Torch into the park for its 30-minute visit, according to Olympic Torch Committee officials.

Pinion said the 8½-foot bronze sculpture of Owens will be unveiled during the ceremony. A 5-foot-tall stainless steel replica of the 1936 Olympic Torch also will be ignited.

Owens became an international hero by winning four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany. "(Owens') wife, Ruth, will unveil the statue and we'll have a flyover by the Alabama Air National Guard," Pinion said.

He said other members of the Owens' family, including his three daughters, their children, and his

brother, Sylvester Owens, will be at the ceremony.

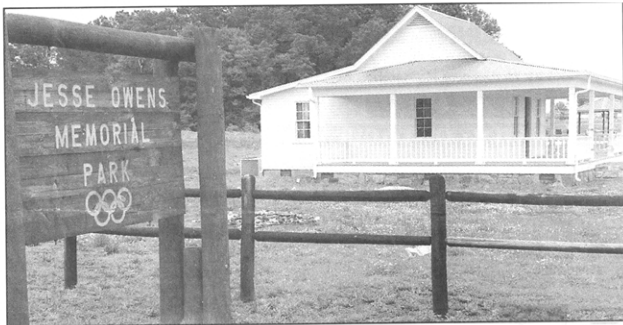
"Also, one of (Owens') teammates and roommate at Ohio State, Melvin Walker, will be here to share his experiences with Jesse Owens," Pinion said.

The statue of Owens will be unveiled while the torch is at the park, Pinion said. "Then, once it

leaves, Mrs. Owens will light the replica of the Olympic Torch, which will continually burn, and then the family will officially open the park."

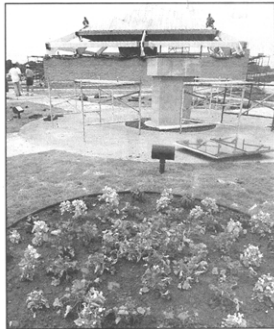
White expects the ceremony to be part of a "great day" for Lawrence County and the entire area.

"It's going to be a fitting tribute to one of our great county natives and a great American."



DANIEL GILES/Staff

The welcome center at the entrance of the park has been home to more than 12 families since 1896.



DANIEL GILES/Staff

Construction work continues on the Jesse Owens Museum at the park in Oakville.