

# THE DECATUR DAILY

"Our country... may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong." — COMEDIC STEVEN DEACAL

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## Owens park 'marvelous,' says daughter of legend

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MOULTON — Jesse Owens' oldest daughter admits 60 years is a long time to wait for hometown recognition of her Olympic hero father.

But joy replaced any disappointment Gloria Owens Hemphill felt when she and four generations of Owens' relatives arrived here.

"It's absolutely marvelous," Mrs. Hemphill, 62, of Chicago, said of Lawrence County's effort to build the \$1.5 million, 17.5-acre memorial park for her father, the son of a Lawrence County sharecropper who won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, shattering Adolf Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy.

"It is so beautiful and the community spirit behind this just floored me. From the moment we hit Birmingham, I just felt so engulfed in love. I feel so much a part of this community and I've never been here."

Mrs. Hemphill, her family and friends were at home Friday morning at a back-yard breakfast at park project coordinator James Pinion's home. They sat under willow trees, autographed programs and talked about their first glimpse of Alabama and the park.

Relatives are guests of honor at today's ceremony where Owens' widow Ruth Owens will light a 1936 torch replica that will burn eternally. A 14-foot bronze statue of

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DAILY Photo by John Goobey

The family of Olympic medalist Jesse Owens posed for this portrait. Family members include, front row, Sylvester Owens, brother; Gloria Owens Hemphill, daughter; Beverly Owens Prather, daughter; Ruth Owens, widow; Marlene O. Rankin, daughter, and behind her Stuart Owen Rankin, grandson.

## Owens

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Owens breaking through Olympic rings will be unveiled and the family will walk through a replica of Owens' childhood home.

"It will make beautiful, beautiful memories I'm sure," said Ruth Owens, 81, who came to Birmingham in 1970 when her husband was inducted into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame but visited Oakville for the first time Thursday. "And for the grandchildren it will be wonderful. It will be something for me to completely retire on."

Stuart Owen Rankin, 29, who resembles his famous grandfather, will run the torch into the park today. The Harvard Law School employee from Boston was impressed by the park's 14-foot bronze statue of his grandfather and the replica house.

"It's a far cry from what was across the road," said Rankin, referring to two granite monuments and a basketball court erected in 1983 to mark Owens' birthplace.

Most of the family has never been in Alabama and this is a time to replace old images with new ones.

"We've been talking for awhile about coming to the (Owens Memorial) 10K Run," said Stuart Owen Rankin Sr. of Chicago. "Probably after this experience we will come down. Everyone has been so wonderful I feel we owe it to them — and ourselves — to come back."

Mrs. Hemphill says the park effort is a testimonial to her father's faith in humankind.

"It speaks to my dad's philosophy that we are all one race — the human race — and if we all work together what a wonderful, wonderful place this would be."

Pinion, who is white, and Oakville resident Therman White, who is black, have headed an interracial park committee the past five years to make the park a reality.

Mrs. Hemphill said her father, who died in 1980, wouldn't have

expected the cotton fields of his youth to be transformed into a tribute to his life. She said he would have believed it possible, however, because he had faith in "the people of this country."

"He would say, 'I know it takes time for something like this to happen, but I had faith that it would happen,'" she said. "He never looked for anything to happen or for people to honor him — that wasn't him. He would not have tried to initiate this in Alabama. But now that this has happened he would be very pleased."

Owens' youngest of three daughters, 57-year-old Marlene Rankin said she doesn't have any feelings about the recognition being so late.

"It is not something you walk around expecting," said the executive director of the Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago. "If it happens it's wonderful, but it is not something you expect people to do for you. I think it is great it is happening and I admire the people who have really given it their all to make this happen."

Owens' middle daughter, Beverly Owens Prather, 58, said, "Living in this world as long as I have, you realize what people are and you accept people for what they are and as they say, everything comes in its own time. And it's just sad that it had to take this long, but thank God it has happened."

Mrs. Hemphill said the park is special because it honors her father and provides recreation, education and hope for young people. Children who see the sharecropper's house alongside the Owens' sculpture will realize "they can rise to this."

"It is very important to see life is not hopeless. That the world is their oyster. We have to give them hope. I want them to see that my father did this. That he had this in his gut and he succeeded."

She said there's also a message in the park being built. "It is more than just a park and more than just a statue. It gives meaning to one's life and one's life work. It shows

people that although it took 60 years for this to happen. It happened."

While Owens got worldwide recognition for his athletic and humanitarian achievements, he was largely forgotten in his hometown.

"I didn't realize Owens was from Oakville — not until the controversy came up," said Lawrence County Commissioner Jim Corum whose district includes Oakville.

The late state Rep. Roger Dutton in 1983 attempted to get a monument to Owens on the courthouse lawn, but an all-white Lawrence County Commission blocked it.

That decision led to its placement in Oakville. A chest-high granite monument was erected on a half-acre plot. The only other markers of Owens' birthplace were a small granite monument bearing the wrong birth date and a brick display case filled with faded Owens memorabilia.

Other struggles followed. Residents of this predominantly black town chased away vandals who wrapped a chain around the new granite monument, trying to rip it from the ground. The incident left chips still visible today.

The biggest struggle was money. The park site was acquired in 1990 when White matched a \$15,000 grant with \$2,500 from his pocket, and asked Pinion for his help.

The Olympics, and the torch coming through here, were the catalyst for corporate and government funds to complete the park.

Owens' only living sibling among nine children, 87-year-old Sylvester Owens, has memories here, among them working fields and sleeping on the floor. Sylvester Owens also remembers prejudice.

"There was so much animosity between the races," he said. "... And now today, you can go anywhere you like and you can do what you like..."

Surrounded by family here, Sylvester Owens said his brother "would be one of the most proud fellows in the world that people thought enough of him to do this."