

Replica needs a few chickens in the backyard, Sylvester says

By Deangelo McDaniel
Managing Editor

Sylvester Owens almost broke into tears after he entered the replica of the home his family occupied when they lived in Oakville.

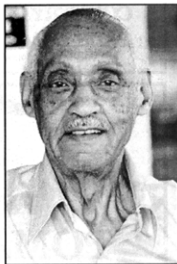
He looked at the ceiling, took a picture of the one bedroom and walked through the kitchen. He tugged at the overalls hanging on the wall and journeyed to the back door.

"Need a few chickens back here," Owens said looking out the rear of the sharecropper's shack. "This is amazing."

Sylvester, now 86, is the only living child of Henry and Emma (Fitzgerald) Owens. The wooden house is one of the attractions in the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

Sylvester and the Owens family were in Lawrence County Saturday for the dedication of the park as the Olympic torch passed through Oakville.

He still remembers what life was like growing up in the red hills of Oakville. The Owens family was just like most other families -- they just wanted to survive from year to



Sylvester Owens

year.

"It was tough," Owens said. "We didn't have a lot. In fact, we didn't have anything. Everybody was in the cotton business. I picked my share of cotton here."

Owens said he was 13 when the family left for Cleveland, Ohio. He said his father and two oldest brothers (Printiss and Quincy) went to Ohio first.

Owens said his mother, Jesse and two sisters were left in Oakville. He was the oldest man and assumed the responsibility as the man in the family.

"This was the first time I picked 100 pounds of cotton," Owens recalled. "Working in the fields was hard. I didn't have to work hard until my father and brothers went to Cleveland. I had to look out for the family."

He said his mother was the disciplinarian. He said Jesse and the two sisters were good children. Jesse, he recalled, was shy and followed instructions to the letter of the law.

Owens said his father went to Ohio looking for a better life for the family. He said there were no jobs for black people in the South.

"There wasn't many jobs and you sure were not going to get one if you were black," he said. "All we could do was farm and hope to make enough money for the next season."

Owens went to Cleveland and for a while life was going well. He was enrolled in public school for the first time. His father had a job with the Otis Steele Company.

Owens isn't sure of the year, but in 1921 or 1922, his father was hit by a taxi one night on his way home from work.

He was forced to drop out of school and go to work to help support the family.

Owens' trip last week was his second to Lawrence County in 72 years. He isn't sure where, but Owens said four of his brothers and sisters are buried in Lawrence County.

"They passed before I was born," he said. "There were 12 children. I have one sister younger than Jesse."

Owens said the siblings buried in Cleveland are sisters Josephine Owens Gibson, Lilian Mae Owens, Laverne Owens Hardey and Pearlina Owens. The brothers are Jesse, Printiss and Quincy.

Owens said his parents are also buried in Cleveland. Before their deaths, he said the children gathered at their parent's home each Sunday.

"It was a ritual," he said. "We never missed a Sunday. I wish they could be here to see this. It would probably mean more to them than anybody."