



Ruth Owens, Jesse Owens' widow, lights a replica of the 1936 Olympic torch used in Berlin, Germany. (Staff photo by Deangelo McDaniel)

Olympic star wrote notes to his wife in junior high school

By Deangelo McDaniel
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Ruth Owens continues to smile like a teenager in love when she talks about her husband, Olympic great Jesse Owens.

They met at Fairmont Junior High School in Cleveland, Ohio. She was 13 and he was 15.

Although he's not known for shyness, Jesse didn't muster the energy to directly approach his bride to be.

Instead, he sent letters to Mrs.

Owens by her sister, Alma Solomon.

"He was in the class with my sister and their seats were close to each other," she said. "Jesse would send notes by her. I was glad to get them. All the girls had an eye for him. When I got the notes, I knew I had a chance."

Mrs. Owens was in Lawrence County for the first time ever last week for the dedication of a park in her husband's memory.

Jesse, who was born in the tiny

hamlet of Oakville, died of lung cancer in 1980. He was 66.

"He was the love of my life," Mrs. Owens said. "He would be so proud of this park because it's for the kids. Jesse loved children."

The couple married on July 5, 1930. Mrs. Owens said there was no proposal.

"We were just happy to be together," she said with a smile. "Jesse was very outgoing. He wasn't shy at all. I'm not sure why he sent the notes. But, I enjoyed them."

The Owens have three children, Gloria Hemphill, Beverly Prather and Marlene Rankin.

Although life got a little easier for the family after Owens won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics, Mrs. Owens said there were some tough times to follow.

The humble beginnings, howev-

er, enabled the family to endure. Jesse and his wife were from large, poor families. Jesse's children said he never forgot about the hard times in the cotton fields of Alabama.

Mrs. Owens said her husband never talked much about Oakville. Since her visit to his birthplace, however, she said she now understands why he was so humble and appreciative of everything he accomplished.

Jesse and his wife visited Alabama shortly after the Birmingham church bombings in the 1960s. She said some relatives visited them at their motel and talked about Oakville.

Mrs. Owens said Jesse was aware that it was still a small place. She said he left when he was young and couldn't remember much about Oakville.

According to just about everyone who knew him, Jesse didn't change after the Olympics. Mrs. Owens said he was the same old Jesse.

She said a lot of what Jesse was came from the teachings of his parents, Henry and Emma Alexander Owens.

"When Gloria was born, Jesse's parents would come and visit us every Saturday," Mrs. Owens recalled. "Jesse's mother was a talker. She had a lot of her children living with her and she was babysitting a lot. It seems like she always had a baby in her lap. Jesse's father was humble like Jesse. He didn't say much, but we always knew we were going to see him on Saturday."

Mrs. Owens said she'll probably make a trip back to Oakville when the park is complete.

"I'm sure Jesse is up there looking at us now," she said. "He would be proud of this and proud of the good old Southern hospitality people are giving us. In a way, this kind of reminds me of Jesse. He was always giving."