



The welcome center in the Jesse Owens Memorial Park still has the logs from the original house that was constructed in 1896 near Moulton. (Staff photo by Deangelo McDaniel)

Welcome center has interesting past

By Deangelo McDaniel
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To the many visitors of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Oakville, the welcome center appears to be just another building.

Beneath the white paint and new roof, however, are the walls of a structure that houses the memories of many families.

The house was donated by Carl Warren and moved to Oakville from Coffey Road in Moulton. Moving the house was a delicate task. Restoring it was a miracle.

"I'm sure people thought we were crazy," said James Pinion of the park board. "In the beginning we were concerned that we wouldn't be able to move the house because of the high roof."

The building was moved by Rayburn Alexander. Pinion admits there were times when he second-guessed his decision.

"I kept telling people to wait until we were finished," he said.



James Pinion of the park board stands next to a poster autographed by Jesse Owens. The poster donated to the welcome center. (Staff photo by Deangelo McDaniel)

"People in the community would walk by and just look. I'm sure they were wondering what we were doing. There was so much negative talk, I started to doubt myself."

The house was built in 1896 by William R. and Mary Coffey. The wooden-frame structure had one room, a fireplace and a back porch. There was no running water and no electricity.

The house went through several renovations, especially with the emergence of indoor plumbing and electrical power. Two bedrooms were added to the original structure, but were not moved by park officials.

Peggy Gentry lived in the house as an infant with her parents, Carl and Onie Warren. She said her mother (Onie Coffey Warren) inherited the house from her father, William Albert Coffey.

Gentry said her father purchased 40 acres of land across the road from the Coffey Estate and moved the house.

"I was an infant when we lived in the house," Gentry said. "Daddy built another house and moved the older house on land he purchased across the street. I'm not sure when electricity and plumbing was added. When I got married, the house didn't have either."

According to Carl Warren, some of the families to live in house were William and Mary Coffey, Dafus Flannigan's father, Alf and Eloise Owens, Otha and Lennie Culver, Webb and Edith Alexander, Jim and Bertie Jenkins, Russell Flannigan and his wife, Lawrence and Mable Key, Walt and Sara Brooks, Felton and Anna Joe Hood, Cliff Montgomery and his wife, Stampy and Louise Jones, Andrew Tyler, Mrs. Hagood and her family, Michael and Sandra Warren and Carl and Ruby Warren.

Pinion said the welcome center still has the original floor joists, which are huge logs. He said most of the original walls are still intact.

"We had to replace some of the walls in the back because of deterioration," Pinion said.

Kenneth Lambert was in charge of restoring the house. The wrap-around porch, which was added at the suggestion of Lambert, makes the facility handicap accessible.

The floor in the front room is original. Pinion said paint was sanded off the wood and a protective coat was added.

Although it's not noticed by many visitors, the front steps and hearth in the chimney both contain a rock carved in the shape of a map of Alabama.

Pinion said those rocks were carved by Tip Berryman of Hatton. The inside of the center was designed and decorated by Anette Sanderson of Moulton.

"She selected the paint colors and donated her time," Pinion said. "We had a lot of help with this building. That's what makes it so special."

When Wyman Warren, the son of Carl Warren, called about donating the house, Pinion said the park board was planning to build a new welcome center.

The original plan, he said, looked like the house. In the beginning, Pinion said, people were confusing the welcome center with the replica of Jesse Owens' birth home.

"We didn't want this," he said. "People thought we were crazy in the beginning. I wanted them to see the finished product. I think it looks pretty good."

Souvenirs, including books about the life of Jesse Owens and memorabilia from the Olympic torch's arrival to the park, are sold in the center.

The facility also houses items belonging to Jesse Owens that were donated by his widow, Ruth Owens.

In one corner of the welcome center, there hangs an autographed poster of Jesse Owens when he represented Lincoln-Mercury.

Pinion said a student, who now resides in Decatur, was cleaning a closet in a dorm at the University of Alabama in the 1970s when he found the poster.

"He called and wanted to donate the poster," Pinion said. "I've seen the poster in the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame, but it wasn't autographed."

Pinion said the park board wanted the telephone number in the welcome center to be 1936, the year Owens won four gold medals in the Berlin Olympics and delivered a blow to the belly of Adolf Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy.

However, that telephone number was already taken, and the number in the center is 974-3636.