

Riverfront

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Jesse Owens' family to plant white oak tree

By Ronnie Thomas
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OAKVILLE — James Pinion says he hasn't seen a poem as lovely as a tree, either, but for the past few days a particular tree — lovely as it is, has caused a headache.

When the family of Jesse Owens plants a tree May 16 to conclude dedication ceremonies at the Jesse Owens Museum, Pinion, event coordinator, was determined that it would be an English oak, although that required a ride to either Carthage, Mo., or Lone Oak, Ga., to get one.

As the tree plot played out, Pinion settled for a white oak from Muscle Shoals.

The idea of the planting began when Pinion learned that during the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, Owens, the Alabama sharecropper's son born here, received an English oak along with all other gold medal winners. He picked up one for each of his four medals.

The year-old seedlings were a "gift from the German people" as Chancellor Adolf Hitler hoped to camouflage the evil intentions of his Third Reich to visitors from 52 countries.

A Berlin gardening firm, which supplied oak wreaths for the gold medalists, proposed awarding the trees. Wreaths for the victors' heads are no longer a part of the Olympic presentation.



Quarantine state

According to an article several years ago in *The Olympian*, most of the young trees were in a sorry state when they were released from quarantine in the United States after the winners returned to homes and schools around the country.

Owens planted one of his trees in his mother's back yard in Cleveland, and one at James Ford Rhodes High School, where he used the track to practice. The third was planted on Varsity Row at alma mater Ohio State University. The fourth one died in the nursery.

That's the tree Pinion wanted to symbolically replace at the museum, and he didn't envision the problem he would have.

The nursery in Missouri had dug up the English oak and prepared it for sale. Curtis Cole, a park volunteer and contributor, and a Solutia retiree, and his wife, Joyce, planned to drive up and get it.

Then Pinion found one closer to home, at Lone Oak, Ga. But that's when disappointment set in.

"They told me they had several, but that they wouldn't sell us one," Pinion said. "They weren't having any luck with them surviving in this region. Sadly, when I phoned, they were in the process of destroying their supply."

Pinion, Lawrence County extension agent, wouldn't give up until he got the same bad news from Harry Ponder, a horticulturist and professor at Auburn University.

Problem with mildew

He said that mildew makes the English oak unadvisable to plant here, and recommended the white oak because "it's a kissin' cousin' to the English."

So Pinion canceled the order in Missouri and secured the white oak in Muscle Shoals from his ol' Auburn classmate, Jerry Sibley at Grassland Nursery.

The stately English oak will reach a height and spread of 50 feet. The white oak is the noblest of all American oaks and grows to about 80 to 100 feet tall.

"I think it will be a good substitute," said Pinion. "Certainly our intentions are good."

The trees from the 1936 Olympics were presented to gold medal winners in specially prepared pots adorned with the Olympic flag and the inscription "Grow to the honour of victory! Summon to further achievement!"

"That says it all as to what we're trying to do here," Pinion said.

Today only a few Olympic trees remain, including two of Owens' trees in Cleveland — at his mother's home and Ohio State. His widow, Minnie Ruth Owens, said the tree at the high school was removed several years ago during an expansion, but not before Owens had his photo taken with it in 1972.