

Saturday,
May 9, 1998

GETTING THERE

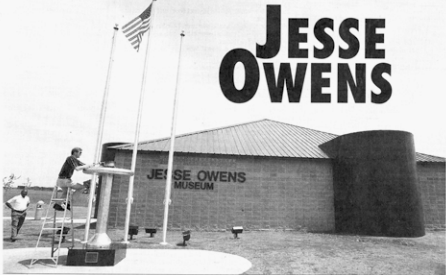
Take I-59 toward Birmingham
to I-65.

Take I-65 North toward Cullman.

Take the Highway 157 toward Cullman and Oakville.

The Jesse Owens Museum is about 30 miles from the Interstate off Highway 157.

A statue of Olympic champion Jesse Owens, left, greets visitors to the Jesse Owens Museum and the Jesse Owen Memorial Park.



Henry Buchanan looks on as James Pinion lights a replica of the 1936 Olympic torch at the Jesse Owens Museum in Oakville. Staff photo by

New museum is long-awaited honor for Alabama Olympian

By KATHERINE LEE

Staff Writer

OAKVILLE —

It was a little more than 60 years ago that African-American athlete Jesse Owens thumbed his nose at Adolf Hitler's theory of Aryan superiority in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, winning gold medals in four track and field events and the hearts of the German people in the process.

Most of the world knows that much and little else about Jesse Owens. Now a museum on the grounds of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Owens' north Alabama birthplace of Oakville is poised to bring the rest of his life story into focus.

The dedication of the museum will take place next Saturday, May 16, after the annual Jesse Owens Memorial Run. Both events are being held in conjunction with the annual Jesse Owens Memorial Park Festival, now in its third year.

Several members of the Owens family, including his widow Ruth, their three daughters and his brother Sylvester, will be on hand for the culmination of a nearly decade-long effort to pay tribute to one of Alabama's most famous sons.

The project began in 1990 with efforts to memorialize Owens in Oakville, where he lived until moving with his family to Cleveland, Ohio, at the age of 9.

Oakville resident Thurman White purchased and plowed the land where the park is located, for the sole purpose of creating a memorial to Owens. He approached the Alabama Cooperative Extension office for help in developing his tribute.

The park itself was dedicated in June 1996, in time to host the Olympic torch, which passed through on its way to the Atlanta games. The flame was carried into the park by Stuart Owens Rankin, Owens' grandson, in a ceremony attended by Gov. Fob James.

The 30-acre park includes a baseball field and basketball court as well as the visitor's center, museum, a replica of Owens' first home and a sculpture of Owens created by Birmingham artist Branko Medenica. A track is also in the works.

"We took a community survey, and asked people what they wanted to see in the park," said project coordinator James Pinion. "They wanted something that kids would be able to use, too."

Owens would have approved of that, said his daughter, Marlene Rankin, who heads the non-profit Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago.

"He was a humanitarian," she said. "He spent his entire adult life encouraging others."

Owens used his fame to provide opportunities for disadvantaged young people, an effort that his family carries on today through the Foundation, which provides scholarships to academically and athletically talented youth.

"I think he'd have been a little embarrassed by all this," Rankin said. "He was a very modest man. He didn't necessarily like an awful lot of hoopla. He enjoyed attention, but I'm not sure a big monument was what he wanted."

Rise from poverty

Owens' rise from abject poverty as the youngest of nine children plays a large role in his memorial. A replica of the family's three-room home sits a few yards from the museum. According to his family, it's accurate, right down to the thin quilts on the floor that the family used during the cold winters.

"When the Owens family saw the house, they started to cry,"

Pinion recalled. "Sylvester (Owens' brother) remembered a lot more cracks in the floor, though."

Plans are in the works to add a sound system so visitors can listen to an audio track of Sylvester Owens narrating his family's sharecropping life in Alabama.

Inside the museum, Owens' life story continues, from his family's relocation to Cleveland to his athletic career as a student at Ohio State University to his triumphant Olympic wins and his life after the Olympics.

"Back then, athletes didn't have big endorsements and a lot of money waiting for them when they got back," said Pinion. Owens returned to Ohio State to finish his degree and supported his family in part by becoming something of an athletic curiosity, running races against horses to earn money, as well as working with disadvantaged youth.

Owens' worldwide humanitarian work culminated in the Medal of Freedom, which was awarded to him in 1976.

Plaques mounted in front of park benches scattered throughout the park honor several of the park's donors, including the Louise Pinion Wilson Art Gallery in Tuscaloosa.

Worthwhile struggle

The long fight to create the museum has already done much toward bringing people together, said Rankin. "On the positive side, the people who made this happen learned a lot about each other. They developed a mutual respect. It was their persistence and just hanging in there that made it happen."

Rankin plans to attend a private

museum ceremony for the family and major donors May 13, as well as the public dedication the next day. She has seen artist's renderings of the exhibits, but hasn't yet seen the finished product.

"I'm looking forward to it," she said. "It's a tribute to my father's life and memory."

To those who charged that racism played a role in not bringing about the museum earlier, she said, "If racism and bigotry is based on ignorance, then education is the best way to combat it."

"People will be aware of his contribution to the world, how much he helped others, and that will make them tolerant of people's differences."

Eric Deason, art director for Design Display Inc., the Birmingham display company commissioned to create the exhibits, said he hopes people will leave the museum knowing more about a man who led more by example than by speeches.

"I think anyone coming to the museum will find Jesse Owens was an inspiring man who brought the issue of civil rights to people's attention through his work," he said.

"Any athlete coming to the museum would find inspiration, that even under the worst conditions, people can triumph."

"We've had visitors from Russia, from New Zealand, all over the world, who admired Jesse Owens," said Pinion. "He's known everywhere."

"We had a German visitor once who said, 'We don't like to talk about Hitler in Germany, but we still love to talk about Jesse Owens.'"

