

THE DECATUR DAILY

Opinion

Owens honor

Recognition is long overdue

In the 1920s when Jesse Owens was growing up in rural Lawrence County, any ceremony designed to commemorate a black person would have been unheard of. About the only ceremony a black person might see in those days and, sadly, even into the 1960s, was a visit from the Ku Klux Klan or other white supremacist organization.

The fact that Mr. Owens, the American hero of the 1936 Olympics in Germany with four gold medals, was born in this rural county, had little to do with his status as a human being. That speaks poorly of the South and the attitude of most who were raised during those times.

Had Mr. Owens not moved from Alabama as a child, it's doubtful he would have been seen on that track in Berlin, despite his athletic prowess.

Thankfully, those times have changed greatly.

That's not to say that there still aren't bigots around who still use the 'N' word and look on blacks as less than equal. There still are hate groups who are trying to pit race against race. But much has changed in the South and most decent people have a different perception of right and wrong than did earlier generations.

Perhaps that's why the celebration commemorating the Jesse Owens' Museum in Oakville is appropriately named The Harmony Festival. It is the coming together of a community to honor one of its own, and color is no longer a barrier to that honor.

Today, Mr. Owens' widow, Minnie Ruth Owens, his three daughters, Gloria Hemphill, Marlene Rankin, and Beverly Prather, and his brother, Sylvester Owens, were to be in Oakville to be among the first to see the Owens' Museum. That museum is filled with artifacts and photographs commemorating his life and his achievements on the sports fields of the worlds.

Saturday will see runners starting a 10K run in Mr. Owens honor at 8 a.m. with another 2-mile run following. A 1-mile fun run is scheduled for anyone who wants to participate. Other activities are planned for children and their parents.

The museum will be dedicated at noon and the last event of the day will be the planting of a white oak by the Owens family.

James Pinion deserves a lot of credit for putting this together in his position as event coordinator. Therman White, a director, has been there working since the idea of a park was germinated. Others, too lengthy a list to mention, also deserve praise for the effort that has gone into making the Jesse Owens Memorial Park a reality and a place of pride for Lawrence County and all of Alabama.

Mr. Owens will be at the dedication, if only in spirit. It would be nice to think that he is somewhere, looking down, and beaming with pride that he is finally being recognized in his home town and state, recognition that should have come more than 60 years ago.