

# Owens family views museum

By **Ronnie Thomas**  
DAILY Staff Writer

OAKVILLE — She stepped from the noon haze into the brightly-lit foyer of the Jesse Owens Museum and began a slow stroll across history.

"Beautiful, beautiful," 83-year-old Ruth Owens exclaimed. She carefully studied the huge composite depicting events from the 1936 Berlin Olympics that thrust her husband onto the international scene.

In the left corner, Adolf Hitler walks triumphantly down the steps of the vast stadium he helped design to launch opening day ceremonies. Sweeping across the bottom of the mural is the blur Hitler would catch glimpses of too many times during those Games.

► **Schedule for today's dedication of the museum, A10**

Jesse Owens of Oakville is captured in full stride during one of his Olympic sprints, pumping powerful legs in a graceful surge to dramatically subdue for the time the madman who would rule the world.

Mrs. Owens was followed into the just-completed museum by her three daughters, Mrs. Gloria Hemphill, 65, Mrs. Beverly Prather, 60, and Mrs. Marlene Rankin, 59, her brother-in-law, Sylvester Owens, 89, and their spouses.

Lisa Ciampi of Design Display in Birmingham led the group from section to section, each exhibit relating another chapter in Owens' spectacular career as athlete, world ambassador and humanitarian.

The crisp time-line panels, where the tour begins, take visitors through the highlights by the year, beginning with Owens' birth here on Sept. 12, 1913, and concluding with his death in Chicago on March 31, 1980.

Mrs. Owens, using a walking cane, viewed several video clips, remaining for the longest period before a segment put together by NBC before the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

She is shown reading letters her husband had written 60 years earlier from Germany.

In one letter, written shortly before the Olympics began, he said, "All I want to do is make you, my parents, our daughter and my country proud of me."

Mrs. Owens said that philosophy never wavered throughout her husband's life.

It was underscored by Mrs. Rankin as she looked at a photo of her and her father taken during halftime of the 1960 homecoming football game at Ohio State University. She wears a crown and holds a bouquet of roses, and he stands beside her, smiling broadly.

"I was the school's first black homecoming queen," she said. "Dad had been invited to speak at the half. I'll never forget one particular sentence. He turned to me and said, 'And remember, darling, it could only happen in America.'"

In 1980, after Owens' death, Mrs. Rankin established The Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago and serves as executive director.

Mrs. Hemphill, evaluating the meaning of the museum, said, "For a person who marched during the 1960s in the civil rights movement, to see something like this ... a son of Alabama, born in this community. It is so unique, so different ... so wonderful! It represents what he always felt: pride in this country."

She said her father taught her



DAILY Photo by Gary Cosby Jr.

Ruth Owens stands in wonder at the Jesse Owens Museum honoring her late husband.

## Schedule for dedication

OAKVILLE — The Jesse Owens Museum will be dedicated today at 1 p.m. in Jesse Owens Memorial Park amid a flurry of day-long Harmony Festival activities.

Kicking off the celebration will be the Jesse Owens Memorial Races, starting at Lawrence County High School at 8 a.m. There will be a 10K race, a 2-mile race and a 1-mile fun run.

There will be free tours of the museum, musical entertainment and activities for the children, ending at 5 p.m.

Also, festival food favorites — hotdogs, hamburgers and soft drinks — will be available for purchase. All proceeds go toward maintenance of the museum and park.

The dedication schedule:

- Welcome: Don Letson, chairman, Lawrence County Commission.
- Invocation: The Rev. Kenneth Owens of Saint Mark Primitive Baptist Church of Athens, a Lawrence County native.
- Introduction of Jesse Owens family: Henry Buchanan, Lawrence County Extension Agent and chairman of Jesse Owens Park board.
- Visitor recognition: Master of Ceremonies Rip Proctor, Lawrence County probate judge.
- Recognition of retired U.S. Rep Tom Bevil, who helped secure funding for Owens statue and museum: Steve Oden of Wheeler Basin Natural Gas Co.
- Ribbon cutting: Mrs. Gloria Hemphill, oldest daughter of Jesse Owens, and family members.
- Planting of white oak tree: James Pinion, Lawrence County Extension coordinator and event coordinator, Curtis Cole, park volunteer, and the Owens family.

that people are people, regardless of race and their individual circumstances.

"He felt that while successful people are due respect and admiration, he believed that anyone who has a spirit eventually wins out," Mrs. Hemphill said. "I'm accused of being a dreamer, but there's more good in all of us than we might realize. There's a reason for this museum, this park. It didn't just happen."

Sylvester Owens, who recalls picking cotton on a hill behind the

museum where corn now grows, said his brother was the most unassuming athlete he has ever known.

"Jesse was always just himself, and he never met a stranger. He was one fine guy who had the same temperament at all times. Nothing bothered him."

While having lunch following the tour, Mrs. Owens, an avid Chicago Bulls basketball fan, offered an opinion of the new museum, which will be dedicated today.

"It just knocks me out," she said.