

Owens museum drawing crowds

By Deangelo McDaniel
dmcdaniel@decaturdaily.com 340-2469

OAKVILLE — In the almost 30 years since his death, Jesse Owens has brought thousands of visitors to Lawrence County. His international fame inspired volunteers to create a road race in his honor and provided the foundation for one of the most unique museums in the state.

There are those, however, who think his name has more to offer his birth county.

"You tell me how many more people from this county have won four gold medals," said James Pinion, who is secretary of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

To answer his question: None.

"We've got a gold mine with his name," Pinion said. "We just have to mine it."

Owens was born in Oakville on Sept. 12, 1913, the 11th of 12 children to Henry Cleveland Owens and Mary Emma Alexander Fitzgerald Owens.

He was a sickly child who almost died before his family left the sharecropping lifestyle for Cleveland, Ohio.

The family sharecropped between 40 and 50 acres, but the Owensens never seemed to make a crop large enough to break ties with Jim Cannon.

Emma Owens persuaded her husband to leave the family shanty in Oakville for the North in 1919.

Jesse Owens wrote that after 30 years of sharecropping his father "had no more earthly possession than a mule and the shredded clothes he wore to shield him from the sun."

National fame

Almost 16 years after leaving Oakville's red clay, Jesse Owens gained national fame when he set three world track and field records and tied a fourth at the Big Ten Championship in Ann Arbor, Mich., on May 25, 1935.

International fame was less than 18

The Decatur Daily

Sunday, May 23, 2010 ■ www.decaturdaily.com



Jesse Owens Museum in Oakville.

Daily file photo by Gary Cosby Jr.

Owens

From page 5

months away at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany.

Jesse Owens shattered Adolf Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy by winning four gold medals.

Before his death from lung cancer on March 31, 1980, Owens visited his birthplace only once.

This didn't stop Lawrence County, however, from honoring his memory.

A marker was placed near his birthplace in the summer of 1980.

Almost two years later, volunteers organized a 10K event in his name. The road race is held annually in Moulton and has grown to include a two-mile event and one-mile run for students.

Runners from at least 35 states have competed in the event, which attracts almost 800 applicants annually.

The school system also has the Jesse Owens Cross Country Classic. This event began in 1999 with 450 participants. Last year, more than 4,000 high school runners registered for the event.

No symbol honors Owens more, howev-

er, than the Jesse Owens Museum.

The museum is in the Jesse Owens Park and attracts on average 300 visitors monthly. In 2009, tourists from 18 foreign countries and 38 states came to the museum.

One group was from Germany. "When they watched a film of Jesse in Germany during the Olympics, half of them were crying," Pinion said.

Pinion said one of the ladies in the group was a little girl when Hitler was in power. The woman recalled how every family had to put up a swastika at their home.

"She said the family across the street from her didn't put up a swastika and they disappeared," Pinion said.

The museum has huge murals and replicas of the gold medals Owens won in Germany.

There are some of his personal items the family donated.

The museum has other items from visitors such as a 1936 Olympic souvenir pennant Paul Goehler of Decatur gave and the official report of the Olympics Curtis and Joyce Cole of Moulton donated.

The museum, which has a gift shop, is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. and Saturday from 1 p.m. until 4:30 p.m. Admission is free.