

The Jesse Owens Museum, Oakville, Alabama

By J. Brain Carberry

Tucked away in the rural State of Alabama, almost off the beaten path, is the Jesse Owens Museum. Fittingly, it is located in Oakville, the small hamlet that served as Jesse's childhood home. Although the small museum lacks the trove of artifacts and resources for academic research, it serves as a wonderful shrine to the humble beginnings of this legendary Olympian.

The museum is part of a large tract of land originally lived on by the Owens family before it left to settle in Ohio. The land has been developed to include public basketball courts, baseball fields, picnic tables, and walking trails. As a whole, the complex is known as Jesse Owens Park. The Museum itself consists of a small building that houses a historical exhibit about Owens. It includes a life-size replica of a 1936 Berlin Olympics torch, as originally manufactured by Krupps, a bronze statue commemorating Owens (see photo), and an

exact scale model replica model of Owens's childhood home. The home model is arraigned in diorama fashion to be viewed from a walkway along the front windows.

The pastoral setting of Lawrence County, Alabama, that serves as the park's back-drop, envelopes the visitor and serves as a testament to the vast natural setting of the athlete's youth. As one gazes upon the bronze statue, executed by Branko Medenika, one can imagine a youthful Owens running and jumping in these fields.

Gold medallists at the 1936 Summer Olympic Games were awarded oak tree saplings. Legend has it that one of those trees was planted in Oakville. The location of this legendary tree is not verifiable. Naturally, vast numbers of full-grown oak trees dot the Oakville landscape, and with one of Jesse's saplings missing in action, the imagination wonders! Could this one or maybe that one be the tree that was given following his quadruple gold-medal-winning feat?

In viewing the Museum's exhibits, one learns of Jesse's early life in Oakville and beyond. A timeline of his accomplishments and a glass case holding replicas of competition uniforms fill out the exhibit. The official Olympic accreditations for Jesse and Ruth Owens (USOC guests) from the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montréal, which would be the last he would attend before his death in 1980. The exhibit ends with a USOC patch. These items appear to be the only pieces of authentic memorabilia housed here.

Yet visiting the Museum, one



is filled with a sublime feeling. Perhaps because Oakville is the rural South, far from any major city. It is one of those areas of America that feels as if it is there to hold the rest of the land together. Looking upon the replica of the childhood home, there is a sense that Hitler's Germany of 1936 and the Berlin Olympic Games were, indeed, in another world, light years away from this place where Jesse spent the early years of his life. In today's world of e-mail, Concorde jet travel, and worldwide broadcast television news feeds filling one's every waking hour there is still the sense of how far he went in his life and how much he accomplished.

Particulars:

Please be advised that if you are planning to visit the Jesse Owens Museum while touring the Park, that you should call a few days in advance and emphatically make an appointment as operating hours are irregular and subject to change!

Jesse Owens Museum,
7019 County Road 203,
Danville, Alabama 35619
Phone: (1)-256-974-3636, or (1)-256-905-0041.
E-mail: info@jesseowensmuseum.com