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Joel Coleman/SDN

A sign at the entrance of East Oktibbeha High School serves as a constant reminder of what former football player Jerry Rice means to the community.



Joel Coleman/SDN

Tonneche Brown, a first cousin of Jerry Rice, looks at the photos recognizing the Pro Football Hall of Famer in the hall of East Oktibbeha High School.

It all started at B.L. Moor

Rice's football career traced to Oktibbeha County school

(Editor's Note: This is the second story in a series previewing the induction of Jerry Rice into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. On Saturday, the story will deal with Rice's professional football experience.)

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A small Oktibbeha County school is where it all began for Jerry Rice.

From B.L. Moor High School in the southeast part of the county to the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Rice is proud of the path the sport of football has taken him.

Rice was born in Starkville on October 13, 1962, and was raised in the Crawford community.

His first experience with football came at B.L. Moor, which has since consolidated with Alexander High School to form East Oktibbeha

High School.

Even though the school has gone through the name change since Rice left, he has never forgotten B.L. Moor and the individuals who encouraged him as a youth.

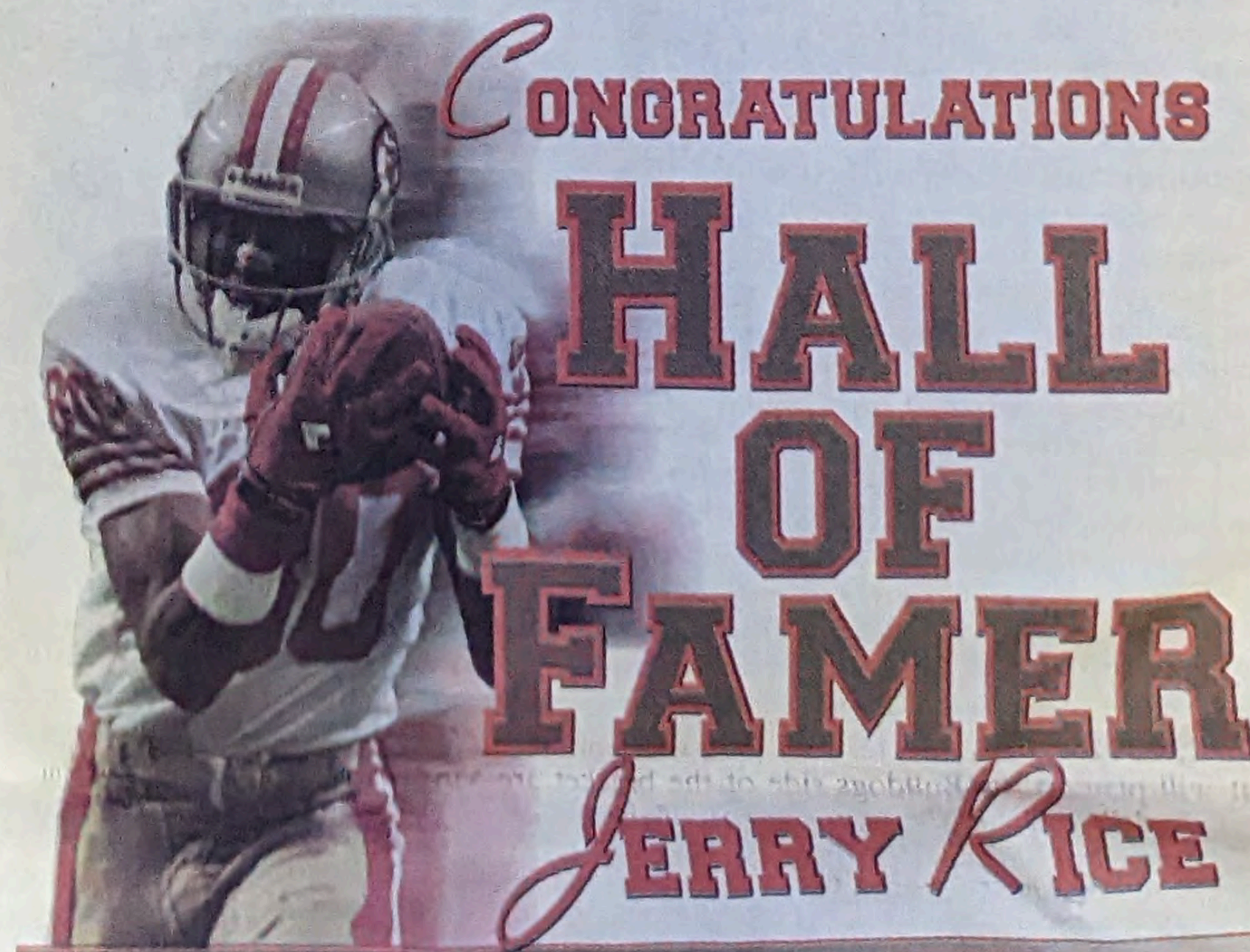
Rice pointed to all of his teachers, principal Ezell Wicks and football coach Charles Davis as those who were most instrumental.

"(Davis) had this thing about him and was very similar to a Bill Walsh (former San Francisco 49ers head coach)," Rice said. "(Davis) knew how to motivate you and was going to get everything out of you."

It was actually Wicks who discovered that Rice might have the ability to play football.

"When I was playing hooky one day, (Wicks) walked up behind me and scared me," Rice said. "He noticed I could run fast so he thought

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Joel Coleman/SDN

A view of Davis-Witherspoon Titan Field where Jerry Rice played his high school football while he attended B.L. Moor High School. The field is partly named after Charles Davis who coached Rice at B.L. Moor.

Rice

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maybe this guy needs to go out for the football team and that's how I started playing football.

"I was a nerd in high school and off to myself. Once I started playing football and realizing it's something I could get better at, all of a sudden I came out of my shell a little bit and I owe a lot of that to Ezell Wicks and Charles Davis."

Just as Rice hasn't forgotten his high school, those who now call East Oktibbeha home remember the impact he had because of his success.

"We're very proud of him because the kids look up to him," East Oktibbeha principal Broderick Cochran said. "We try to make sure they know the tradition of Moor and how he comes from such a small school and small area and went as far as he did."

As his high school career began winding down, it was time for Rice to start considering what college to attend.

Rice received letters from

many major schools, but very few of those came to watch him play in person.

A personal contact from Mississippi Valley State made an impression.

"Mississippi Valley sent a coach to visit me and watch me play football," Rice said. "I had a chance to sit down with this coach, talk to him and shake his hand."

Rice also wanted to be a part of a program that would best utilize his receiving skills. He didn't feel that was best at nearby Mississippi State or Jackson State, where his brother played, as both places ran the wishbone offense at that time.

"I needed to go somewhere they threw the ball 90 percent of the time and that's why I decided to go to Mississippi Valley State University," Rice said. "They had a coach named Archie Cooley who wore a cowboy hat and always wanted to go for the jugular so I knew it would be exciting there."

When Rice went to Mississippi Valley, football came second because he was just happy for a chance to attend college

and further his education.

Rice still loved the game of football and competing for the Delta Devils.

"Once I got the opportunity and got into that system, I felt like maybe we could open some doors," Rice said. "Because of the system we had, we got so much publicity because it was the run and shoot so I think people were curious as to why this school was putting up so many numbers and scoring so many points."

Rice became a Division I-AA All-American at Mississippi Valley State and finished his career with 18 Division I-AA records. He once caught 24 passes in a game and acquired the nickname "World."

After achieving the Most Valuable Player award in the Blue-Gray Game, Rice realized he could successfully get into the mix of talent from other major schools.

"There were some great players there so that gave me an opportunity to prove to everyone that I can compete," Rice said. "I always felt like I had something to prove and I just worked a little bit harder."