

# Wood River park supervisor Otto Rice dies suddenly



## Otto Rice

**September 20, 2008 - 9:59PM**

Otto William Rice, 49, died at 10:50 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 18, 2008, at Saint Anthony's Hospital in Alton.

He was born April 11, 1959, in Granite City, the son of Oden M. Rice and Betty Ann (Knipping) Rice Hill.

He was employed with Wood River Parks and Recreation for 30 years, serving as director for the past four years. An avid sports enthusiast, he also loved working with children.

Surviving are two sisters, Winona Gossett and husband, Tim, of Rosewood Heights and Helen and Bill Smith of Alton; a brother, Oden Rice and wife, Kim, of Collinsville; two aunts, Nelda Vinson and Jean Tackett; four nieces, Sarah Gossett and Ashley Rice, Stacy Campana and Amy Mendez; two nephews, Nathan and Matthew Rice; and several cousins.

He was preceded in death by his parents; a brother, Nathan Rice; and stepfather, George Hill.

Visitation will be from 3 to 8 p.m. Monday, Sept. 22, at the Wood River Roundhouse, where funeral service will be held at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Sept. 23. Father James Flach will officiate. Burial will be at Calvary Cemetery in Edwardsville.

Marks Mortuary in Wood River is in charge of arrangements.

## **REMARKS DELIVERED ON BEHALF OF SIPRA**

**BY MARK BADASCH**

**AT THE FUNERAL OF OTTO RICE**

**SEPTEMBER 23, 2008**

My friendship with Otto goes back to the fall of 1979, when I was hired as the Park & Recreation Director in Roxana. I was the first person hired by the Village from outside of the Village. Shortly after starting work, I got a call from Leroy Emerick welcoming me to the area and inviting me to join SIPRA. From that point on Leroy and Otto sort of took me under their wings and we have been friends and colleagues for the past 30 years.

Over the years, there was never a time when Otto wouldn't take on coaching a kids team when we couldn't line up a parent-coach, officiate a game when needed, help with special events or the Annual SIPRA Basketball Tournament as a coach, official or time-keeper...whatever was needed at the time. Everybody knew that Otto could be counted on.

Thinking back over the 30 years since then, I remember a very young Otto with a big crooked smile that never went away. Over those 30 years and many meetings about baseball, softball, soccer and other areas that smile never did go away. I'm sure, as I look back, there were frustrating times but the smile and those sparkling eyes were always there!

I have been asked to speak on behalf of the Southern Illinois Park & Recreation Association, SIPRA, of which Otto was a long-time valued professional member. SIPRA is an association of park & recreation professionals and vendors to our industry who come together from all across Central and Southern Illinois.

We have lost a highly respected, well-liked, hard-working member of our group. Otto was a member whose quick smile and good-natured personality stood out in this group of admittedly diverse personalities. Otto was an individual with character, integrity and professional commitment that exemplified a true park & recreation professional who was widely known and respected across Illinois and Missouri. As one of the previous speakers noted, wherever you went, someone new Otto Rice.

During his more than 30 years of service to our profession Otto served as SIPRA President, Chair of the SIPRA Social Committee and, most recently, as our SIPRA Fund Raising Committee Co-Chair. It was in this last role that he may have made his greatest impact.

For at least 5 years, SIPRA has annually awarded 2 or 3, \$1,000 individual scholarships to university students studying public parks and recreation management. Funding these scholarships had been done through SIPRA's Annual 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Basketball Tournament which some of you may have played in, in Highland or Salem. However, as with many activities, the Annual Tournament was losing popularity and another scholarship funding source was needed.

Otto and Debbie Hunt suggested holding a Trivia Night to raise money for our scholarship program. Otto took responsibility for organizing the night, getting the Trivia expert and lining-up all of us as volunteers in various duties while Debbie focused on collecting and organizing the silent auction and door prizes.

Thanks to Otto and Debbie, SIPRA Trivia Night has helped to fund more than 9 thousand dollars that have been awarded in annual scholarships of one thousand dollars per student and, currently, our plans are to award four thousand dollars in scholarships this school year.

As part of our efforts to recognize Otto and his contribution to his profession and to each of us, personally, SIPRA has established an additional special scholarship to be known as the SIPRA Otto Rice Memorial Scholarship. Contributions are currently being accepted and the Annual SIPRA Trivia Night, on Saturday, February 7, 2009, will raise additional funds toward this goal in memory of our dear friend and colleague. The Otto Rice Memorial Scholarship will be awarded annually to a student pursuing studies in the area of public parks and recreation, only.

Speaking on behalf of the members of the Southern Illinois Park & Recreation Association, and with a heart full of sorrow, I am honored to speak for SIPRA members and to share with you that it has been our real pleasure, honor and privilege to have worked with and to have known Otto these many years. Truly to have been touched by this very special person is an honor that has changed us and enhanced all of our lives and the community he served.

**September 19, 2008 - 7:44AM**

[By CYNTHIA M. ELLIS](#)

The Telegraph

WOOD RIVER - A man who spent decades helping shape the direction of young lives throughout the city died suddenly Thursday night.

Otto Rice, 49, superintendent of the Wood River Parks and Recreation Department, was stricken while visiting the Argosy Casino in Alton. Rice started complaining of chest pains about 10:08 p.m., but by the time paramedics with the Alton Fire Department arrived, he had no pulse or respiration.

A physician at Saint Anthony's Hospital pronounced him dead.

Rice leaves behind a legacy of public service and an unrivaled dedication within the city and the parks and recreation community.

"I'm devastated by his death," said Debbie Hunt, the director of the Roxana Parks and Recreation District.

Hunt said she first met Rice when she moved to Roxana 14 years ago, and the two became the best of friends. The two dated for eight years, and although they no longer were a couple, Hunt said she and Rice remained the best of friends.

"I really don't have words to express how I'm feeling right now," Hunt said. "I loved him so much. Not only did I lose my truest and best friend, but the community lost someone who is extremely valuable."

Hunt said that she was reminded of Rice the moment she walked into her office.

"I have a flower arrangement on my desk he sent me a few days ago," she said. "I can't believe he's gone."

Rice greeted everyone with his infectious smile.

"He always had a smile and never hesitated to shake your hand or give you a hug," said Leroy Emerick, retired Wood River director of parks and recreation.

Emerick said Rice was kind man who loved his work.

"Otto was a devoted, sincere, recreational person and an engineer of fun," Emerick said. "He fit into his job perfectly. He loved what he did."

His relentless work ethic earned him the respect of everyone who knew him. It was not uncommon for Rice to put in a seven-day workweek.

Rice spent more than 20 years working for the city. Recently, Rice put a lot of time into preparing the celebration for today's Wood River Centennial picnic and fireworks show at Belk Park, which is scheduled to go on.

Rice began his parks career while he was a teenager; it was the only full-time job he ever held.

"When Otto was in high school, he started working for me," Emerick said.

Emerick said that Rice, who took part in a work program at Civic Memorial High School in Bethalto, would run from Bethalto to Wood River to work.

"I mean, he ran to work," Emerick said.

Rice's life revolved around sports as a youth. He played football, wrestled and ran track. After graduating from CMHS, Rice attended Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where he was on the college's track team.

Rice continued to work part-time for the city while in college and, after graduating with a bachelor's degree in secondary education, Emerick hired him as his assistant. Rice got the job after the death of his brother, Nathan Rice, who also worked in the parks department.

Nathan Rice died in a traffic crash.

Otto Rice's work ethic and pleasant way made him a favorite among residents. He never married and had no children, but it didn't stop him from impacting the lives of so many youth.

"His whole life was dedicated to his job, the city and the youth," said Jeff Stassi, former Wood River director of parks and recreation. "You couldn't find a more dedicated person, and he never complained about anything."

Rice took over Stassi's position three years ago, when Stassi left the city to pursue another job.

Stassi said that he had known Rice since they were teenagers. He said he admired the man who mentored and counseled so many youth in the area.

"Otto went out of his way to help kids," Stassi said. "He was someone you could count on. He had a kind heart and was always willing to help."

Stassi said Rice changed the lives of so many young people. He said that he's sure Rice's influence helped mold many into the productive people they are today.

"I'm going to miss him," he said.

Wood River Mayor Fred Ufert said he found out about Rice's death shortly before midnight.

"It's a terrible shock," Ufert said. "At the moment, people don't know what to say."

Funeral arrangements were pending at Marks Mortuary in Wood River.

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## MORE ON THE WEB:

[Read Cynthia's related blog post at Original Cyn](#)

### [Remembering Otto Rice](#)

September 19th, 2008, 11:53 am · [1 Comment](#) · posted by Cynthia

It's not often that I'm at a loss for words, but when I received the call this morning about the death of Wood River's Parks and Recreation superintendent ,Otto Rice, I didn't know what to say.

Otto was a great man. I've known him for the past seven years (since I started working at The Telegraph) and always found him to be a remarkable person. I normally do not work on Friday, but I wanted to be the one who wrote [Otto's life story](#). I liked him. If you knew him then you know Otto was a kind, devoted and sincere person.

I know the community is feeling a loss right now. He touched the lives of so many during his life. He lived and breathed parks and recreation. His gift to the city and its residents was his upbeat personality and how he worked hard in everything he did and never complained.

I last saw Otto on Monday night at the City Council meeting. He arrived a few minutes late, but he made sure to say "hi" to me like he always does.

He's been busy putting together the finishing touches on the Wood River's Centennial celebration on Saturday at Belk Park. Otto was the person in charge of the details.

Although the event will go on the city needs to find someone to run the Wii games event. This summer, with the help of local sponsors, the city purchased a gaming system and televisions so it could provide youth with an activity other than outdoor sports. The city had planned on hosting Wii tournaments for its youth and Otto and I had discussed doing a story once the program got up and running. Otto put a lot of hard work into making the celebration fun for families, and since kids are into gaming these days, especially Wii, it would be a shame not to have someone run it.

I cannot say enough about Otto. Everyone I've spoken to about him is saddened by his death. I know his family and friends are missing him right now and they are in shock. I am too. I offer my condolences to the Rice family and I want you to know that your son, brother, uncle and cousin was a wonderful man. As a reporter we get to meet so many wonderful people and I feel lucky to have known Otto and I will miss him.

1. *Steve Mintert* Says:  
[September 19th, 2008 at 5:40 pm](#)

Otto will be sorely missed. He was in my wedding 24 years ago and was always a great friend and co-worker when I worked for the City of Wood River. The world has lost a truly great guy.

[Leave your memories and messages for the family](#) at The Telegraph's Web forums



[coolchic](#) wrote:

This area has recently lost two of the finest, Otto Rice and Dave Freer. Heaven is sure shining bright this week. RIP guys, Keep Smiling!

9/20/2008 7:17:40 AM



[goekn1](#) wrote:

Many memories of Otto, he was the best of the best! God Bless you Otto!

9/20/2008 6:33:43 AM



[djp1116](#) wrote:

It's hard to believe that this has happened but maybe God decided Otto was truly too good for this Earth! No one can ever replace the kind and gentle man who gave everything to the community he loved. Imagine a world full of Otto's... there would be only peace, love, handshakes and gentle smiles. What a legacy he has left behind..... I'm in agreement that a memorial needs to be planned to honor this community hero.

9/19/2008 9:20:48 PM



[squirrelnuts](#) wrote:

I AM NOT THERE

Do not stand by my grave and weep

For I am not there.

I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am diamonds that glint on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awaken in the morning hush

I am the swift uplifting rush of butterflies in joyous flight.

I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry.

I am not there.

I did not die.

The story states that Otto had no children. Otto was like a father to a lot of us growing up as many have stated. No one could have asked for a better role model or friend. We are forever in debt to the man that gave his all to the community. If every city had an Otto the world would be a better place. I feel blessed that my children as well as I had such an opportunity. Every time we hear "play ball", we need to look up and thank Otto. Every time we see the lights come on, we need to thank Otto. Every inning, every hit, every run, every out, we need to look up and thank Otto. And every evening when the lights go out, we need to thank Otto.

You will be deeply and sadly missed. Rest in Peace.

9/19/2008 7:11:37 PM



[dc1515](#) wrote:

What i remember about Otto is no matter who you were Otto would go out of his way to say hi or how you doing shake your hand Otto was AS REAL AS THEY GET! he had bad days like the rest of us but Otto couldnt stay mad at you long that was just him he did so much for everybody and all the youth sports just words

cant express how much the community is going to miss you Otto speaking for all your slowpitch softball friends you were like family to us R.I.P. BROTHER WE LOVED YOU!

9/19/2008 4:11:14 PM



[STREETGLIDE](#) wrote:

OTTO RICE WAS A GENUINE PERSON EVERYONE COULD LOOK UP TOO. HE WAS A TEACHER, ROLE MODEL, FRIEND, LEADER, PUBLIC SERVANT, AND A TRUE GENTLEMAN. WHEN I HEARD THE NEWS THIS MORNING, I FROZE. I THOUGHT ABOUT ALL THE GOOD TIMES WE HAD AND WERE GOING TO HAVE....HE WILL BE GREATLY MISSED BY ME AND MY FAMILY AND FOR ALL THE PEOPLE WHO DID'NT KNOW HIM-I AM SORRY YOU NEVER GOT THE CHANCE..

9/19/2008 3:56:50 PM



[bevtimmins](#) wrote:

We'll never forget that loveable guy with the cockeyed smile, wavy hair and friendly disposition. Otto was the type of guy always willing to do whatever it took to make an event happen for the kids. When I called my son, Jake, at college this morning to relay the sad news, he shouted, "Oh, No!" You see, our kids were Otto's kids. He "fathered" so many that passed through those Roundhouse doors. It's now our job to create a lasting tribute and memorial to this fine gentleman. Prayers to all, especially the Rice family, as we deal with life without Otto. The void will be significant.

9/19/2008 2:39:52 PM



[concrete13](#) wrote:

Otto was working for the city when I was in high school back in 1982. So it's more than the estimated 20 year, it's more like 26!

I knew Nate and I knew Otto. I was real close to Otto and thought of him as a role model when I worked doing the ball diamonds for a few summers.

I am in shock and cannot believe he is gone..

God speed Otto....you were the best!

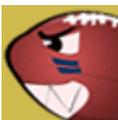
9/19/2008 2:03:21 PM



[radiolady](#) wrote:

I went to school with Otto and he was my neighbor. What a GREAT GUY! I know his family, and my thoughts and prayers go out to all of them!

9/19/2008 12:46:36 PM



[JENHUNT7](#) wrote:

Well Otto,,, you my friend will be missed! Many prayers for your family our hearts go out to them,,,ONCE AGAIN YOU WILL BE SO MISSED!!!

9/19/2008 12:44:59 PM



[heartfan64](#) wrote:

Otto was a really sweet and nice guy. Its a shock to read this. I just seen him a few months ago. He did ALOT for the kids and city of Wood River. He took great pride in his job. He will be deeply missed by all who knew him. My heart goes out to his family and friends. RIP Otto 9/19/2008 11:18:50 AM



[CROCK7](#) wrote:

My prayers go out to his family. I grew up knowing Otto. I made sure that I stopped by his office every time I had to pick up a jersey, a trophy, whatever from the round house. I reffed games for him, I coached teams for him. All because he asked. I liked and respected the guy so much it seemed like I could not tell him no. I am deeply saddened by this news.

9/19/2008 10:53:25 AM



[michelle01](#) wrote:

Otto was a very special person. He was more than just a city worker-he is a legacy in this area. Everyone knew Otto. He was so very dedicated to the City of Wood River, all the children and programs, and most of all his friends and family. You could be having a really bad day and talking to Otto just made you relax and smile. He just had that certain way about him. All of my prayers go out to his family.

Otto, you will be missed but never forgotten! 9/19/2008 10:43:01 AM



[beanbags2](#) wrote:

Otto was a great man. I will always remember his famous line "What's Shakin". It always made me smile. He will be missed by all.

9/19/2008 10:29:53 AM



[stuckntraffic](#) wrote:

Otto was a pillar of this community and a part of the foundation on which it stood. Everyone from my generation and on who grew up in Wood River probably cannot remember not knowing or becoming one of Otto's friends. Today is a dark day for this city, and he will truly be missed.

9/19/2008 9:04:07 AM



[imcyndylou](#) wrote:

otto was 'contagious ... loving ... vibrant' and all those that crossed his path were 'friends for life'. I am one of those that had crossed Otto's path and have known him for 30 plus years. He was the 'parks department' and I know that there will be a 'void' in his absence. My heart goes out to his family, and all those that have had their

lives touched and blessed by his presence. Otto I will miss you ... miss our discussions and just all in all miss your smile, and your laugh.

9/19/2008 8:46:10 AM



[momto2](#) wrote:

Otto will be greatly missed by all. He ALWAYS had such a big heart and his smile was contagious!! My prayers and thoughts go out to Otto's family and all who were blessed enough to know this great man!

9/19/2008 8:37:35 AM



[radar147](#) wrote:

There are not enough great things to say about Otto Rice. "Presley1" said it right, Otto never was in a bad mood and he always had a smile on his face. He was a person who everyone liked. This is a huge loss, not only for the City of Wood River but everyone who knew him or met him. Otto you will be sadly missed. Rest in Peace my friend!

9/19/2008 8:17:40 AM



[presley1](#) wrote:

Otto was the nicest person I have ever met. Never saw the man in a bad mood or without a smile on his face. My sympathies to the family. Rest in Peace, my friend.

9/19/2008 8:02:54 AM



[spam79](#) wrote:

Otto, you will be missed. I'll be praying for your family and friends through this difficult time.

9/19/2008 7:57:04 AM



[saraw1](#) wrote:

Otto will be truly missed. He was a great man and did a great job. He was always helpful, pleasant and smiling. God Bless him and his family.

:-(

9/19/2008 7:42:27 AM



[superdude](#) wrote:

God Bless You, Otto.

9/19/2008 7:30:31 AM



[justsayn1](#) wrote:

Otto was such a nice guy. He will be missed by the kids, parents & coaches of the Wood River Community.  
9/19/2008 7:28:24 AM



[wrmama](#) wrote:

I'm so sad to hear that. I went to school with his nephews. Otto's family and friends are in my prayers.  
9/19/2008 7:00:16 AM



[danielpyle](#) wrote:

Otto will be missed. He was good at what he did....those are going to be some huge holes to fill! This is truly a sad day for Wood River! There will never be enough good things to say about Otto in my opinion.

9/19/2008 6:20:09 AM



[DirkGiggler](#) wrote:

Very sad day. I always enjoyed talking with Otto either at the ball fields, or around town. He did work his tail off to try and keep the parks up and running. He will surely be missed.

9/19/2008 6:05:36 AM



[mtoolen](#) wrote:

This man will be sorely missed; like many in his line of work, Otto was on the clock 24-7 making sure Wood River stayed as good as it did. He will be sorely missed.

9/19/2008 5:48:36 AM