

Six ex-governors attend ceremony

By Michael McNutt and John Greiner
Capitol Bureau

Former Gov. David Hall said Tuesday night his first public appearance in Oklahoma since his federal trial 32 years ago when he was convicted of extortion and conspiracy was like "coming to heaven."

People gathered around Hall for more than 30 minutes after a ceremony at the Oklahoma History Center to open exhibits on the state's 26 governors and their first ladies. Well-wishers shook his hand and had pictures taken with him. Some had him sign their programs.

The response was overwhelming to Hall, 76, who lives in San Diego.

"It's just like coming to heaven," Hall said. "This is the best place in the world for people."

Hall will announce today he is donating about two dozen boxes of materials from his term as governor to the Oklahoma History Center.

Hall has been in Oklahoma other times for private events. However, he said Tuesday night's ceremony was his first public appearance in the state since his federal trial. He was indicted by a federal grand jury three days after leaving office in 1975. He eventually served 19 months of a three-year sentence.

Six attend ceremony

Hall joined five other former governors and Gov. Brad Henry in Tuesday night's ceremony. Others attending were former Govs. George Nigh, Henry Bellmon, David Boren, David Walters and Frank Keating.

The only other time that many former governors have attended an event together was Hall's inauguration in 1971, said Bob Blackburn, executive director of the Oklahoma History Center.

"This is a blessed time in my life," Hall said. "The four years that I spent here (as governor) were some of the happiest times in my life.

"And I value what the Oklahoma people gave me as much as anything other than my marriage — I've been married 51 years," Hall said.

"Tonight was the more outpouring of love that I've seen that I can remember," said Hall, tears forming in his eyes.

He said he was not surprised by the warm reception he received, but was taken aback by the welcome he received from people he didn't know.

"That stunned me," Hall said.

"There's no rancor. Rancor doesn't do anyone any good."

Many of Hall's family and longtime friends were at the ceremony.

"I'm proud of the things we did," said Joe Carter, a former news reporter who was Hall's press secretary and later executive assistant.

"I regret we were such targets."

The state had problems when Hall took office, Carter said.

"David Hall had the courage to stand up and save the state, and it paid off," Carter said.