

Henry, 6 ex-governors open history exhibit Center director says display lauds leaders' desire to serve their state in its highest office.

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Capitol Bureau

More than 1,000 people showed up Tuesday to witness history as six former governors and a sitting governor appeared together for the first time in 36 years to celebrate the lives of the state's 26 chief executives.

Each governor received a standing ovation, applause and cheers as they and their wives were escorted by an Oklahoma Highway Patrol honor guard during a ceremony at the Oklahoma History Center.

An exhibit focusing on each governor's life and another exhibit on the first ladies opens to the public today at the Oklahoma History Center, 2401 N Laird Ave. The exhibits will run through December.

Gov. Brad Henry was joined by former Govs. George Nigh, Henry Bellmon, David Boren, David Hall, David Walters and Frank Keating.

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

Among the family members attending Tuesday's ceremony was Margaret Haskell Potter of Tulsa, great-granddaughter of Oklahoma's first governor, Charles Haskell.

"It's wonderful," Potter said of the exhibit. "He was an interesting man ... brilliant, clever, intelligent.

"Every one of them has made a contribution to what this state has become in the past 100 years," Potter said.

Although Haskell died before she was born, Potter said her grandmother told her stories of how he left a 23-room house in Ohio to eventually live in hotel rooms while he served as governor in Guthrie, the state's first capital.

Henry said he liked all the governors' exhibits except for his own, which among other things includes his FFA scrapbook and a photo of him as a high school student.

"I would encourage all Oklahomans to come out and see it, it's just a wonderful, wonderful piece of our history," he said.

"It was surrealistic tonight to have all of the living governors in one room, sitting down, visiting, eating dinner together," the governor said. "What a tremendous, historic event — one I'll never forget."

Boren also enjoyed getting to talk with the governors during a dinner at the Oklahoma History Center beforehand.

"You can imagine the fun at dinner swapping old stories, it's really like a fraternity — differences of opinion and parties just go away when you get together in situations like this," Boren said.

Nigh, a former history teacher, also enjoyed spending time with the governors.

"At our private dinner we shot a lot of bull, we had a lot of fun, we reminisced, and we told stories on each other that I won't repeat here for you all," Nigh said.

Family members of former governors attending the ceremony included Dewey Bartlett Jr., son of the late governor and U.S. senator Dewey Bartlett, who brought his son, Dewey Bartlett III; former Lt. Gov. Robert S. Kerr, grandson of former Gov. and U.S. Sen. Robert S. Kerr; and state Attorney General Drew Edmondson, nephew of the late Gov. J. Howard Edmondson.

Former state Sens. Gene Stipe, D-McAlester, and Gilmer Capps, D-Snyder, were among those at the ceremony.

Capps and Stipe said they figured they probably were the only former senators there who had been in the Senate during the administrations of all seven former governors. Stipe actually began his legislative career when Roy J. Turner was governor from 1947 to 1951.

Others at the ceremony included state Auditor and Inspector Jeff McMahan, Higher Education Chancellor Glen Johnson, Corporation Commissioner Denise Bode and Lt. Gov. Jari Askins.

The event also attracted two unsuccessful gubernatorial candidates, Mike Turpen in 1986 and Bob Sullivan in 2006.

About the exhibit

The exhibit focuses on the governors' lives and not their time in office.

"Inspired to Serve," on the center's first floor, focuses on each governor's life before taking office as the state's chief executive. It looks at where each governor was born and the influence of family, friends, school, spouse and profession on their decision to run for the office. It also looks at their campaigns and inaugural ceremonies. In the center part of the exhibit is a simulated tent where visitors may view a 10-minute documentary on the office of the governor.

"Partners in Public Service," on the center's third floor, looks at the first ladies. It includes about 15 inaugural gowns, photos and objects of their lives before their husbands were elected governor.

Visitors to the exhibit should have a better understanding of what role the governor plays in the state's history, Blackburn said.

"Our governors and our first ladies could be our neighbors," he said. "These are people like us who have gone through life and for some reason they said, 'I want to serve the public and I think I could do that best if I am governor.' So they got the fire in their belly and they got enough friends and family to say, 'Yeah, let's do this.'"

Governors reached that decision at different times, Blackburn said.

Some knew early. Hall knew by the time he was in the 7th grade that he wanted to be governor and Nigh knew by the time he was in the 5th grade, Blackburn said.

Some, such as Henry, made the decision later, Blackburn said. Henry decided to run for the post when he was 38 after he had served in the state Senate.

"I've always been fascinated what motivates someone, and what are the circumstances that help them get to the point where they can serve the public," Blackburn said.