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Kemphorne reminisces on history

Ex-governor has decided to house gubernatorial papers at the Historical Society.

BOISE -- Forgive former Gov. Dirk Kemphorne if he seems a bit sentimental these days. Kemphorne and his wife, Patricia, visited the state archive in Boise on Monday to observe the cataloguing of his gubernatorial records to prepare them for full public access early next year.

"To pull up and see the Idaho State Historical Society and know that I have things in there -- that's a little bit overwhelming," Kemphorne said. "It defines a period of time when a lot of people worked together on dreams and aspirations that were fulfilled."



Former Idaho Gov. Dirk Kemphorne picks up a couple of photos taken of him with people he met while in Idaho's top office.

Kemphorne reminisced about his 1974 election as student body president at the University of Idaho, the first step on a long journey. Elected Boise mayor in 1985, he went on to serve six years as a U.S. senator, 7 1/2 years as governor and 21 1/2 years as U.S. secretary of the Interior, a post he left in January.

Last fall, Kemphorne, 57, decided to house his gubernatorial papers at the Historical Society rather than the University of Idaho or Boise State.

Receiving almost 300 cubic feet of documents prompted the Historical Society to create a Governor's Room for records from every governor except Cecil Andrus, whose papers are at BSU. Kemphorne's records also have about 110 gigabytes -- equivalent to 7.2 million pages of Microsoft Word files -- of electronic data, including correspondence, photos, audio and other documents.

Kemphorne said he chose the Historical Society for its focus on gubernatorial records and the passion throughout the agency, starting with Director Janet Gallimore and running to volunteers like Julianne Ruby, who helps index his collection. "I love history, and they have made this a priority," Kemphorne said. "It's humbling to know you're a part of this, but it is the story of many Idahoans. It's the story of citizenship and what was accomplished together."

Kemphorne became Interior secretary in May 2006, about seven months before his second term ended, and there was not a normal transition. Patricia Kemphorne met with Historical Society officials to smooth the transfer of the records, which had been hastily stored in space off the tunnels under the Capitol Mall. Mixed in with Kemphorne's stuff was a misplaced box from the Andrus years and 24 boxes from former Gov. Phil Batt.

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"It was wonderful to see what the possibilities are," Patricia Kempthorne said. "Plus, it was fun."

An index of Kempthorne's papers is expected to be available online in January and catalogued in a format consistent with university researchers at the UI, where his Senate papers are kept, Gallimore said. "Our job is to have the collective memory of our culture available," she said. "The success of governors in the past gives people hope that anything is possible."

Kempthorne said he's eager for the collection to be used by students because they often ask him whether a public life is worthwhile. He said he couldn't pinpoint any particular surprise awaiting researchers, but said, "I think the 'wow' may be: How'd they get it done? What were the challenges? They may say, 'My word, I didn't know it was that much heavy lifting.'"