

It happened one night—almost—to Evans

by Richard W. Larsen

As Gov. Dan Evans prepares to turn over his office to Dixy Lee Ray on Wednesday, his memory drifts back to the bizarre inauguration he nearly had a dozen years ago this week.

Dan Evans almost was inaugurated in the dead of night, in a darkened gallery of the Legislature, as a surprise countermove to a legislative maneuver.

“This was for real. You bet it was.” Evans says with a grin as he remembers those circumstances.

It was 12 years ago at this exact time of year. The Legislature, heavily controlled by Democrats, and with a Democratic governor, Albert D. Rosellini, was under pressure from the courts to pass a redistricting bill.

And most of the Democrats were in a hurry to pass such a bill, which could ensure election of Democrats to the Legislature.

And if it were passed in time, the friendly Democratic governor could sign it into law.

“They (the Democrats) did everything they could to get a redistricting bill through,” Evans recalls. One “gerrymandered bill,” the governor remembers, passed the Senate and suddenly was pending in the House.

As Republican legislators fought a delaying action, Evans continues, “Slade Gorton (then House G.O.P. leader) figured out that there was no requirement that the governor be inaugurated at noon on Wednesday.”

Gorton’s research of the Constitution concluded only that the new governor be inaugurated on Wednesday. It could be at any hour.

As the Democrats pushed the legislative session into Tuesday’s evening hours, hoping to get their bill through, “we decided that, by George, if they were going to run clear through the night...we’d get set for a midnight inaugural.”

Evans continues with his version of how that plot would work:

“We talked to then Justice (of the Supreme Court) Dick Ott and he entered into the conspiracy with great delight. He took the seal of the Supreme Court with him that night from Supreme Court chambers.

“We had everybody waiting in Seattle—my family. And about 10 o’clock that night, things looked like they might very well happen.

The Legislature was grinding on and they the Democrats) were pushing hard to get this bill through.

“We had a State Patrol man in Seattle, and he started for Olympia with my parents and with Nancy and her mother.”

Meanwhile in Olympia, “we got very close to midnight and we were prepared to have Tom Copeland (then a G.O.P. House leader) stand up and tell the assembled House after midnight, that if they wanted to...push a redistricting bill through, they should know it now was midnight

— it was now Wednesday – and the governor-elect was sitting in the gallery with Supreme Court Justice Ott...prepared to give the oath of office.”

That would have been the fascinating scene: Democrats on the floor of the House, had they pushed through a redistricting bill, would have looked, open-mouthed no doubt toward the gallery where a Republican governor was being sworn in, prepared to veto their bill.

It didn’t quite end that way. The redistricting bill became mired in individual bickering. The House adjourned before midnight without taking action.

“It would really have been fun,” says Evans. “It was almost a disappointment that it didn’t happen.”

The governor has a memento of that almost-event: “The speech that was written out, that Tom Copeland was going to give, was later (engraved) onto a great big plaque. It was given to me...entitled, “The Greatest Speech Never Given.”

Had it happened that way, it might have altered the Dan Evans image, though. In recent years, Evans occasionally criticized the Legislature for passing bills at midnight.

It’s OK to make that criticism if our nickname is “Straight Arrow.” But it wouldn’t work if our nickname had been “The Midnight Governor.”