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President beckons friend Walsh to Washington for inauguration

By Dennis Yohnka
The Daily Journal correspondent

Will County Executive Larry Walsh was a late arrival to the Illinois Senate in 1997. The Elwood farmer was brand new to Springfield's legislative scene when he was appointed in March to fill the seat vacated by the resignation of Joliet lawyer Tom Dunn.

He found some welcome camaraderie among the other first-term Democrats in Springfield — especially a young Chicagoan no one had ever heard of, Barack Obama.

“To this day, I still have the image of this young man coming up to my desk in the Senate,” Walsh said. “He was a young, tall, lanky guy with a toothy smile and he came up to shake my hand and introduce himself.

“And I'm proud to say that Barack ... I mean, the president and I have been friends ever since.”

That relationship was made obvious last Friday when Walsh received an e-mail from the Obama transition team, asking Walsh to attend a special reception before the newly-inaugurated president began his tour of the Tuesday night's galas.

Walsh said there were between 40 to 45 guests brought to a reserved Capital Convention Center meeting room. From his survey of the room, most of the guests were friends of Obama, from his Springfield days.

“Everything was running late, but he came in and spent 20 to 25 minutes in that room with us,” Walsh said. “He greeted each one of us and thanked us for our support. He hugged my wife Irene and he congratulated me on my election.

“I congratulated him and I started to say ‘Great job today, Barack.’ And then I corrected myself and referred to him as ‘Mr. President.’”

Back in Springfield, Obama would have referred to his poker-playing buddy as “Old Uncle Lar,” but on this day there was more to do than reminisce. The president cranked up that trademark smile that Walsh remembered and moved on through the festivities,

leaving his former Illinois Senate-mate with a fresh story to tell at Will County Board meetings and a the little cafe in his hometown.

“I find it truly humbling to have this bond with the 44th President of the United States,” Walsh said. “I met President Clinton two different times, but he wouldn't know me from a load of hay. This is an entirely different scenario. I feel like I really know this man and he knows me.

“And I'll tell you this: He was a pretty fair card player, but he's going to be a great president.”