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Contributor

The black and white picture set tucked away at Bethel Springs Elementary School. For years, it was moved from storage spaces to the electrical room, collecting dust.

No one could figure out who was in it.

The picture is of a man, his face looking straight ahead, his light colored eyes staring, almost as if he is peering beyond the viewer. His light hair is combed up and parted to the left. He wears a light colored suit with a striped tie. His body is angled, his left hand gathered in a loose fist by his side, his right hand, arched, resting on a piece of flat marble. His smile is slight.

"I never knew who it was," Bethel Springs Principal Terry Moore. "It was just shuffled around from room to room. I always wondered who it was."

The picture originated from the Bethel Springs Alumni Association, who in the late 1960s contacted one of their own in recognition of his accomplishments.

The man, then-Alabama Governor Albert Brewer, responded with a letter and the framed picture. Brewer was born in the McNairy County town on Oct. 26, 1928.

Brewer died Jan. 2 in Montgomery, Ala.

"I understand the family was of meager circumstances," Bethel Springs native Sammy Henry said. "Many families were at that time. But I understand that (Brewer) did some janitorial-type work at the school, maybe helped keep up the heaters."

Bobbie Randolph, a longtime resident of Bethel Springs, remembers the Brewers.

"I know where he was born," Randolph said. "His father worked for the railroad. Their house was one of the oldest in Bethel Springs when it burned a few years ago."

According to the Encyclopedia of Alabama, the Brewers left McNairy County in 1935, when his father, Daniel, took a job with the Tennessee Valley Authority in Decatur, Ala. Brewer graduated from the University of Alabama Law School in 1952.

In 1955, at the encouragement of local business leaders, Brewer ran for and won a seat as a state representative for his home area of Decatur and in 1962, became the youngest speaker of the house in the state's history.

Brewer ran for lieutenant governor in 1966, supporting gubernatorial candidate Lurleen Wallace. Brewer was elected and officially took office on Jan. 16, 1967. But Wallace died on May 7, 1968, making Brewer governor until Jan. 18, 1971, when George Wallace was re-elected to the post.

While serving as governor, Brewer worked to bring more funding to education, including an increase in teacher pay; form an ethics commission; established the University of Alabama System, combining campuses in Tuscaloosa, Huntsville and Birmingham and attempted to revise parts of the state's 1901 constitution that disenfranchised black and poor white voters.

Brewer narrowly lost his bid for reelection to Wallace in hotly contested primary before Wallace won the general election in a landslide.

After leaving public life, Brewer practiced private law and taught law at Samford University in Birmingham. Until his death, he was a part of Alabama Citizens for Constitutional Reform.