

Ole Gunness and the Rennebu Church Organ

By Ron Stow

While sorting through my mother's estate, I came across a clipping she had saved from the historical column of the Breckenridge MN-Wahpeton ND Globe Gazette newspaper. The clipping showed a **photo of a group of men** from Abercrombie, North Dakota, taken around the year 1900. The caption listed their names and stated that they comprised the Pioneer Men's Association. There, in the back row, I saw my Grandpa, Ole N. Gunness. I also noted that there were other men with the family name of Gunness, in fact there were three named Ole Gunness. I had long ago learned that they were not related and had taken the name from the Gunnes (Norwegian spelling) farm in Rennebu where they all had lived prior to emigrating from Norway.



Rennebu is what we might call a township, and is located in the county of South Trondelag a short distance south of the city of Trondheim. I had always heard that Grandpa Gunness had come from there, but never knew much about his family background. I did know that Grandpa's parents had not been married and my mother's siblings did not talk about it, or perhaps did not know about their grandmother and extended family in Norway. I did know that Grandpa's half-brother, John Aashagen, also lived in Abercrombie but I never knew exactly what the Norway connection was.

It was through my Norwegian relatives in Lillehammer on my Grandma Gunness' side that I found out that one of my mother's sisters had gone to Rennebu years ago and had met relatives from Grandpa's side of the family. My aunt did not relate any information to us about those relatives. It was in 2016 that I first learned much more about what my aunt did not tell.

That year, my wife, Susan, and I planned a month-long trip to Norway in June and July. It did not include a stop in Rennebu. However, an email came by way of my North Dakota cousin, Bonnie Wold, from Rennebu historians and genealogists, Oddbjørn Gorsetbakk and Inger Bjørnaas, who invited us to work a couple days into our itinerary to visit Grandpa Gunness' old stomping grounds. Besides showing us around, Oddbjørn arranged for us to meet several relatives from my great-grandmother's descendants. How exciting to discover "new" relatives, one of whom, Ola Blokkeskar, has now visited us in Minnesota.

One of the sites that we visited was the Rennebu Church. During the church tour, Oddbjørn took me by the arm and led me to a back room where he showed me **a framed photo hanging on the wall**. Much to my surprise, it was an original copy of the Abercrombie Pioneer Men's Association photo. And there was my Grandpa Gunness standing in the back row. What was that photo doing hanging there? What was its significance?



Oddbjørn explained that this group of men had all emigrated from Rennebu and had all ended up in the Abercrombie, Richland County, North Dakota area. Many, like my Grandpa, had first stopped to work in the lumbering of the forests in Wisconsin to earn and save money and then had gone West to homestead in North Dakota.

Oddbjørn went on to say that these men at Abercrombie had taken up a collection to donate money to the Rennebu Church to help pay for a new church organ. Susan and I got to see the organ at the Rennebu History Museum Gammelbua. How wonderful it was to have the mystery solved and that my grandfather was part of this special group.

Outside the church, we toured the cemetery. It was remarkable to see gravestones with the same family names that are on the photo of the Abercrombie/Rennebu men. They were by no means wealthy men, but men who thought enough of their home church and the community of Rennebu to contribute to the organ fund.