

# Pioneer preacher



Clockwise from top photo, the North Sidney Church, the Rev. Ole Amble and Amble with the Ladies Society. — Submitted photos

## Reverend Ole Amble ministered for 53 years to area Danish and Norwegian congregations

GARY L. HAUCK

When Scandinavian settlers arrived in Montcalm County during the mid-1800s, they also brought their faith, appreciation for life and spirit of encouragement. Perhaps no one embodied these qualities more than the Rev. Ole Amble, Montcalm's circuit-riding preacher.

During his 53-year ministry to the Danish and Norwegian congregations of Michigan's heartland, Ole Amble pastored as many as seven churches at the same time. His 1,000+ parishioners made him the preacher of one of America's largest protestant mega-churches in the 19th century. As such, he served as the region's spiritual leader, confidant, adviser and friend. Amble retired in the Fall of 1897, after performing 808 marriage ceremonies, 2,850 baptisms, 1,300 confirmations and more than 2,000 funerals. In the words of his successor, A.C. Hildegaard, "He has been present to greet the arrival of the stork, christened the little babe, guided him along the byroads of childhood, married him and repeated the same sequence with this children and grandchildren."

### EARLY YEARS

Ole Amble was born in Sogndal Midtre Sogn, Norway, on July 28, 1847, to Endre Olsen Amble and his wife, Britta (Pedersdatter). As the oldest of 16 children, Ole's leadership qualities were forged at home during his growing-up years.

After the family moved to Northland, Ole attended the teachers' college at Vefsn, and following graduation became a tutor in the home of H. I. B. Stub and other homes throughout the community. He quickly won the admiration and respect of students and parents alike.

Sensing a "call of God" to enter the ministry, Ole entered the "missions school" at Stavanger but soon made a decision to cross the Atlantic and attend the Augsburg Theological Seminary in Marshall, Wisconsin. He was ordained on July 11, 1872, and accepted a call from a small church in Allamakee County, Iowa, where he served for two years.

Danish pioneers in Montcalm County, Michigan, learned of Amble's unique spiritual leadership and Scandinavian roots and contacted him about the prospect of relocating to the

Gowen-Sidney area to serve and plant new churches.

### HIS MONTCALM COUNTY CHURCHES

The first congregation of the Gowen-Sidney area had been organized in April of 1873 by Rev. J.H. Wald of Whitehall, who knew of Amble's qualities and strongly recommended him. This church was known as the Little Denmark Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was this church to which the young Reverend Ole arrived on May 20, 1874, and which remained his anchor congregation for the next 53 years.

Amble loved his flock. He never married but called all the people of Montcalm County his children. And he embraced both the American culture and Scandinavian culture. Although congregants preferred that Sunday morning sermons be preached in the Danish language (which he did), he happily maintained a multi-lingual ministry throughout the week.

People were drawn to his simple preaching of God's grace, conciliatory manner and spiritual warmth. It wasn't long before the congregation grew significantly. The church was soon divided into districts. "On September 3, 1878, three such districts were agreed. They were designated as "Little Denmark District," (The Big Settlement) north of Gowen; "St. Petri District," (The Little Settlement) south of Gowen; and "Dannebrog District" (South Sidney). Later the districts of North Sidney and Trufant were added."

From the new parsonage in Gowen, the circuit-riding preacher made his rounds from church to church, either on horseback or by carriage or wagon. Another congregation emerged in a schoolhouse at Kendallville, and finally a Norwegian congregation started in Winfield Township and a church was built in the little village that today is named in the pastor's honor, "Amble, Michigan."

Pastor Ole Amble became the people's pastor. He always served the churches with positive enthusiasm, even in the face of disaster. When the church of "St. Johannes" (North Sidney District) was destroyed by a tornado that ripped through Montcalm County on June 12, 1902, the faithful and optimistic preacher rallied the congregation to rebuild and

start afresh. The new church house was finished and dedicated on July 12, 1903, just one year later.

### THE MAN

An early 20th century Montcalm County Poet, Clifton A. Youngman mused:

*I would tell to you a story  
Of a man you likely know  
Who not for wealth or glory  
Came here years and years ago.  
Reverent Ole Amble came  
Envy of happiness  
And built here an immortal name  
In Montcalm's wilderness.*

For an article in The Independent on the occasion of Amble's 40th year of ministry, a reporter visited Rev. Amble in his parsonage at Gowen. He reflects, "I will never forget my visit to Reverend Amble's home. I was invited into the den, which consists of an upstairs room devoid of carpets and completely filled with books and newspapers. A desk stood in one corner and there Reverend Amble sat down indicating any one of the three or four chairs in other parts of the room. Papers upon papers and books upon books, pipes, and cigars, tables, chairs, and chests and drawers. It is here that this leader of the Danish people manufactures his sermons. It is here he listens to the tales of troubles told him by the members of his congregation; it is here he thinks and there he reads."

The article included several of Amble's own statements that give a nice glimpse into his personality and perspectives. For example, when asked about dancing he replied, "Am I against the 'dango'? Really, I know nothing about it, I am not [one] to dictate to my people what they should and should not do."

Interestingly, Amble also held the office of county clerk. In that regard he reported, "I have had the occasion to confirm children, later grant them marriage licenses, and marry them, confirm their children and officiate at their funeral."

In his "History of Montcalm County," John W. Dasef rightly states, "To the Danish people, Ole Amble is not only pastor, but teacher, lawyer, doctor, father and general friend."

Most who knew him are quick to state that Amble could have been anything he set his mind to. He was brilliant, focused, industrious, wise,

and humble. When interviewed for local newspapers and media, he was quick to deflect any compliments to fellow church leaders and asked not to be the focus of attention. But it was that humility that continually won for him the hearts of the community.

With the dawning of a new century, many changes occurred within the Montcalm community and Rev. Amble was happy and willing to embrace them. In 1906 the Ladies Aid Society was founded to be a helping hand to the church. In 1917 a new organ was purchased for \$87.35. And the 1920s brought several cultural changes. Men and women began to sit together in the services (rather than having their own side), and more and more services were conducted in English. Ladies continued to wear their hats to the services but took them off during communion. Amble successfully led them into the 20th century.

### RETIREMENT AND PASSING

At the age of 80 years old in 1927, Amble decided it was time for him to retire, and for the congregation of churches to call his replacement. He was very happy with his successor, Rev. A.C. Kildegaard, and the two became good friends and mutual supporters.

A special retirement picnic was held at Bass Lake to honor Rev. Amble and provide opportunity of the community to express their thanks for his long and faithful ministry. With well over 2,000 in attendance, it became the largest gathering in that location's history. There were performances by the Greenville Junior Band and South Sidney Choir, congregational hymns and speeches or poems delivered by visiting ministers and parishioners.

The gatherers contributed more than \$500 to give Rev. Amble toward his retirement. In his inimitable and gracious manner, he spoke a few words of gratitude and love for all and to everyone who made this special day possible.

He happily took part in the installation service of Pastor Kildegaard on the first of November, 1927, and the two continued to enjoy collegial fellowship and friendship.

In 1933 his health began to fail, and he was moved to the Greenville Hospital on Orange Street. On his release, he was welcomed into the home of Rev. Kildegaard and his wife. Here he lived his last, peaceful days until June 26, 1934, when he turned to his pastor host and uttered the words, "You're a good man." Those were his last words.

Rev. Ole Amble was laid to rest in the Little Denmark Cemetery, north of Gowen. Many hundreds of friends mourned his death and there erected a more suitable monument to their spiritual leader in 1936. The special marker gives a brief biography of the man who became Montcalm County's favorite adopted son.

### HIS LEGACY

The memory of Rev. Ole Amble lives on. Amble, Michigan, still bears his name. The South Sidney Church conducts special Memorial Day Services in its Ole Amble auditorium. And the Montcalm Heritage Village displays photos and information about Rev. Amble in its Sidney Town Hall and Heritage Church. During a recent Heritage Festival, students joined the present writer in reenacting scenes from Amble's era and career and paid a visit to his grave. Of course, his most important legacy is the influence his ministry continues to have in the spiritual fiber of Montcalm, Michigan, and beyond.

*Fifty years he served his people,  
Fifty years and set three more;  
But never has he left them,  
And still he serves them more.  
So let's rally to the standard,  
And cheer him all we can,  
All hail our Pastor Amble!  
Montcalm County's Grand Old Man!*

— Mrs. Emma Sorensen

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Article author Gary L. Hauck is shown at the Rev. Ole Amble's memorial. — Submitted photo