

*Étienne Cabet (1788-1856) was a French radical whose utopian visions led him to write a book "Voyage to Icarie" and then founded a community called Icaria in the United States.*

*There is no evidence that Cabet actually visited Icaria though some of the practices he describes in his book were in use in Icaria, Greece at the time. In Barcelona there is both an "Icaria Square" and an "Icaria Road" both named in honour of Étienne Cabet's Utopian "Icaria"*

Étienne Cabet was born in 1788, a year before the fall of the Bastille. For the first forty years of his life he was the typical radical Jacobin of the post-revolutionary generation, untouched by the disillusionment of older men whose youth and young manhood was lived under the Terror, the Directory, and the Napoleonic Empire. In 1820 he gave up a law practice in Dijon and became a director of the French conspiratorial revolutionary organization, the Carbonari. In the Revolution of 1830 he was a member of the Insurrection Committee. Louis Philippe appointed him Attorney General of Corsica, but he was dismissed for his attacks on the government in his book *Histoire de la révolution de 1830*, and in his journal *Le Populaire*. He returned to Dijon and was elected Deputy, whereupon he was arraigned on a charge of *lèse-majesté* and was condemned to two years' imprisonment and five years' exile. He went to Brussels, was expelled, and emigrated to England, where he became a disciple of Robert Owen.

In the amnesty of 1839, Cabet returned to France and in the next year published a history of the French Revolution, and *Voyage en Icarie*, a semi-fictional account of a communist society, which he considered a modern version of Thomas More's *Utopia*, as improved by the economic theories of Robert Owen. There is nothing particularly original or exciting about Cabet's plans for a new society, but like More's *Utopia*, *Voyage en Icarie* includes a devastating criticism of the contemporary social order — which was probably, for Cabet, its most important part. Its success must have amazed him. It became a bestseller, read or at least talked about by every radical working man and intellectual. For the next seven years in *Le Populaire* and a new journal, *L'Almanach Icarienne*, he built up a following which he claimed to number about half a million. At first, like Edward Bellamy, author of *Looking Backward* at the end of the century, it did not occur to him that people would wish to put his utopian ideas to

practical application, but the great success of his movement finally persuaded him. His followers were demanding that he lead them into the commonwealth of the future, and he had already started a number of ill-conceived and abortive "Icaries" in France.

In 1847 Cabet issued a call, "Forward to Icarie." France was crowded, worn-out with a despotic government, and would never permit the establishment of modern communities, which soon would, by their example, revolutionize the society. In America it would be possible to build a communist colony of ten or twenty thousand people on the frontier, and in a few years millions would be converted. The response was tremendous. He was deluged with gifts, pledges, and recruits.

Since Cabet had neither picked a site nor made any definite plans for settlement, he must have been a little frightened, and went to London to consult with Robert Owen. At the moment, Owen was enthusiastic about Texas, which had just been admitted to the Union and was anxious for settlers. A short time later, a Texas land agent in London persuaded Cabet to contract for a million acres on the Red River, "easily accessible by boat."

On February 3, 1848, the advance party sailed for Texas. In New Orleans they discovered that they had bought a hundred thousand, not a million, acres in the wilderness, two hundred and fifty miles from the river, allotted in checkerboard fashion, the alternate squares still in possession of the state; and by the terms of the agreement, they were obliged to build a log house on each of their sections before July. Furthermore, the Red River was not navigable beyond Shreveport, Louisiana, where it was blocked by an immense, permanent log jam.

Undaunted, sixty-nine enthusiastic Frenchmen, totally inexperienced in coping with the wilderness, stored most of their goods and set off overland with one wagon drawn by oxen. They did not even know how to manage the wagon and oxen. They broke down and became stuck in marshes. People began to get malaria. They ran out of food, but at last they reached the site of Icaria, and met the land agents of the Peters Land Company, who informed them that any land which was not occupied by a cabin and resident in each half-square mile would revert to the company, which would be glad to resell it at a dollar an acre. There was no possibility of fulfilling the contract, but the sixty-nine pioneers wrote a desperate letter to Cabet and set to work. Although many of them were skilled mechanics, almost none was a farmer or, curiously, a builder. They

did not know how to plough, and the thirty-two cabins they were able to build were hovels. More and more people became sick, probably with malaria. Their doctor said it was yellow fever, but all of his diagnoses were for fatal diseases, and it soon turned out that he was insane. Most of the members became ill — the water was undrinkable, but few died. In the spring, ten more settlers arrived out of the five hundred Cabet had promised.

Meanwhile, back in France, the Revolution of 1848 had overthrown Louis Philippe, and in the next few months revolutionary leaders like the poet Lamartine, Cabet, his friend Louis Blanc, and others of the left were discredited, partly by their own mistakes, but even more by the organized opposition of the right and the Bonapartists. On December 15, Cabet sailed for America with almost five hundred new colonists to find the shattered remnants of the pioneer settlement back in New Orleans. Cabet wished to return to Texas, but those who remained from the pioneer group rebelled. The winter was spent in bitter conflict, and eventually almost two hundred, mostly members of the group that had just come with Cabet, returned to France, and the others found temporary employment in New Orleans while Cabet shopped for a new site. In the spring he bought all the available property of the town of Nauvoo in Illinois from which the Mormons had recently migrated to Utah. For a down-payment and a large mortgage he got a variety of mills and shops, a distillery, a large community dwelling, numerous family houses, the ruins of the burnt-out temple, and fifteen hundred acres of land. Two hundred and eighty faithful Icarians went up the river with Cabet to their new home. Typical of the fate that dogged them, twenty died of cholera on the way.

Nauvoo would seem to have been ideal. Like Owen at New Harmony, Cabet took over a completely equipped village, or rather, small town, which the Mormon Church had operated until driven out by persecution, not just successfully, but with such prosperity as to arouse the envy of their neighbours. For a while, the Icarians seemed to prosper too. Cabet had a tried-and-tested membership — tried, if not by fire, at least by mud, mosquitoes, disease, and hunger. Most of the people were experienced artisans, and soon the mills and craft shops were back in operation. Strangely enough, there were very few farmers, so much of the fifteen hundred acres remained uncultivated. During the year, new arrivals from France doubled the size of the colony. But the imbalance of craftsmen and farmers increased.

With all the immense amount of propaganda which Cabet put out in France, he never seems to have made the slightest effort to recruit specific kinds of workers to meet the needs of the colony. With fifteen hundred acres of some of the best land in the Mississippi Valley, Icarian Nauvoo did not, as similar unbalanced colonies had often done, hire farm labourers. Instead, they bought most of their food on the market. The work of the shops could not even begin to meet the steadily growing deficit, which was made up by the contributions of cash which Madame Cabet kept flowing from France. It does not seem to have occurred to Cabet that there was anything wrong with that. His letters and reports from the time are uniformly optimistic, in fact euphoric.

As usual, the colonists started a progressive school, with instruction in both French and English for their children and English classes for adults. They printed a newspaper and several pamphlets. They had an orchestra, a band, and a theatrical company, lectures by visitors and residents, and discussion and study groups. Cabet, however, was not content. He still hoped to found a utopian city, not a village, in which the habitations would be palaces, the labours of the people mere pastimes, and their whole lives pleasant dreams.

In 1852 the colonists who had left him at New Orleans sued him for embezzlement and he went back to contest the suit. The French courts acquitted him and he returned to a welcoming banquet in New York, a triumphant journey across country, and another celebration in Nauvoo. By this time, the colony was a modest success. Even the farming problem was on the way to being solved, and the deficit was steadily declining. To Cabet this was just the beginning. He went off to Iowa and purchased three thousand acres on a mortgage for the site of his dream city and communist Garden of Eden.

The government of the colony had been as vaguely conceived as its economics. While in France Cabet had been accepted as dictator for ten years, and this arrangement was renewed in New Orleans and again at Nauvoo. But in 1850, convinced of the success of the colony and its readiness for a pure communist government, Cabet gave up his dictatorship. A constitution was adopted in 1850 with a board of six governors, and a variety of administrative committees to take care of the details of the work and community life. Cabot was elected president each year until 1855. That December he proposed that the constitution be rewritten providing for the election of a president with dictatorial

powers to appoint the members of the board of directors and all committees.

The constitution had provided for annual revision in March, so the community rebelled, and in the election of February 1856 elected J.B. Gerard president. This led to so severe a conflict that Gerard resigned and Cabet was re-elected under the old constitution for another year. For six months the majority of directors supported him, but most of the general assembly of the whole community opposed him. The principal reason for this opposition seems to have been Cabet's increasing eccentricity. He had forbidden alcoholic drinks in the community and insisted that the whole product of the distillery be sold outside. He then proposed to forbid all use of tobacco and began to try to enforce his own notions of diet and his eccentric but puritanical sexual morality. The fact of the matter is that Cabet was becoming an old man, impractical in his visionary schemes, rigid in his attempts at their application, and cranky in temperament — a typical product of a lifetime spent on the fringes of radicalism. At the summer election, he lost his majority on the board of directors and the colony broke down in chaos.

In no other communist community do we have records of such violent conflict. At first factions stopped speaking to each other, withdrew to separate parts of the dining room, and engaged in separate social activities. Work ceased in the mills and fields. The children quarrelled with each other in school, and soon the members were literally fighting in the streets. At this point the anti-Cabet board of directors decided that those who did not work should not eat, and cut off the rations of the strikers on August 13. Cabet and the minority responded by petitioning the state legislature to revoke the charter of the community. The majority answered this move by voting unanimously to expel Cabet and his followers, who boycotted the meeting. Four weeks later, Cabet and a hundred and seventy faithful followers, many of whom had been with him from the beginning in Texas, arrived in St. Louis and, as they had long ago in New Orleans, sought individual jobs as mechanics. A week later, Cabet was dead.

Cabet's death was by no means the end of the Icarians. The majority at Nauvoo reacted with guilt and repentance. In the course of time, the memory of his faults and crankiness and the bitter factionalism of the last few years faded. Cabet became a kind of culture hero, the founder of a new civilization, like Theseus or Romulus in the opening pages of

Plutarch, and selections from his wisdom were read at meetings, like the Gospels and epistles in church.

The St. Louis group established itself in three large cooperative houses and pooled all its resources. The members sent their children to public schools, but organized classes in adult education, especially in English, in which they were still deficient. They had been allotted a share of the large community library, and they added to it to furnish their large recreation and study room. Weeknights they continued to have music and theatrical entertainments, and on Sunday they met for instruction in the principles of Jesus Christ and Étienne Cabet. They also issued their own journal, the *Revue Icarienne*. Faithful to the end, they forswore the consumption of alcoholic drinks and tobacco in any form.

The movement in France recognized the St. Louis group as the legal Icarian community, and so it received steady income of contributions and periodic recruits of new members from abroad. The men found employment at good wages and the community was functioning as a quite successful urban commune, one of the very first of its kind. But they were not content.

They purchased a farm, the Cheltenham estate, a site now well within the city limits of St. Louis, and moved back to the land. Many of the members continued to go to their jobs in St. Louis, but the income from that source dropped considerably. The site was unhealthy — the whole Mississippi Valley seems to have been ridden with malaria in those days; and communist colonies seem fated always to find the most malarial sites. There were still not enough farmers, so that the land did not even feed the community. There were no shops or mills, only a few log huts and one strong house. Within a year, the same faction that had split Nauvoo developed in Cheltenham. The majority wished to perpetuate the dictatorship established by Cabet. A minority insisted on complete democracy. Forty-two of the democrats withdrew, and the colony was unable to recover from their secession, since they comprised the majority of the skilled craftsmen and wage-earners. In 1864 only eight men, seven women, and their children were left. The French movement had withered and no money or recruits came any more from France. The mortgage was foreclosed and Icaria at Cheltenham ceased to exist.

After the secession of the minority, the community of two hundred and fifty at Nauvoo declined rapidly. Profits from the mills, shops, and distillery dried up, probably for lack of skilled workers, most of who had

gone to St. Louis. The Mormons, who still held the very considerable mortgage, threatened them with foreclosure. The plant was simply too large for the members to operate. They decided to migrate to the site in Iowa where Cabet had planned to build the palatial City of Utopia. They took over undeveloped land, far from any settlement, encumbered with a mortgage at ten percent. In 1863 only thirty-five ill-fed, ill-housed, and overworked communists were left.

They were saved only by the outbreak of the Civil War. Settlers flooded into Iowa to save it for the Union. The colony found a ready market for its products at good prices, and they sold two thousand acres which they were unable to cultivate for ten thousand dollars. For twelve years they prospered, so much so that they bought back some of the land. They built decent houses, laid out orchards and vineyards, and began to go in for more intensive farming. Since they had had to learn by doing the art of agriculture, they probably had to work too hard to waste time in quarrelling. At least, considering their past history, their personal relations were remarkably equable.

In 1876 there were seventy-five members. They had a dozen family dwellings on three sides of a square, a large central building with a community kitchen and dining room, used also for assemblies and recreation, a bakery and laundry, a dairy house, stables and barns and a large number of log outbuildings, all on a handsome site on a bluff above the valley of the Nodaway River; and behind them were two thousand fertile acres, seven hundred under cultivation with timberland, meadows, and pastures. They had six hundred sheep, a hundred and forty cattle, most of them milch cows, and raised corn, wheat, potatoes, sorghum, vegetables, and small fruits besides vineyards and orchards. All meals were taken in common, and many services like laundry were performed for the community as a whole. In the evening after dinner there was dancing, music, organized or spontaneous recreation, and on Sundays a service which included a lecture, singing of their own songs, and readings from the works of Étienne Cabet.

The disastrous blow dealt to the French radical movement by the Terror which followed the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871 had brought them new recruits and had wrought changes, some obvious, some subtle but profound, in the ideology of the community. France itself has never recovered from the Commune, so it is not surprising that its effects were felt so far away from Paris, amongst a little community of French radicals in the midst of the Iowa prairies.

As the years had gone by, changes had taken place in the production economy of the colony. Except for grains and other large-scale crops, the produce of the individual plots attached to the family dwellings had come to dominate the food supply, produce, vegetables, and milk. Similarly the small craftsmen functioned as almost independent operators and commonly sold their products or took part-time jobs on the outside. The situation was not unlike that on the Russian collective farms before Stalin's wholesale purges. It was the older generation of revolutionaries who had pioneered with Cabet who insisted on this limited private enterprise. The young people, especially the refugees from the Paris Commune, demanded a complete communism of production. Many of them were disciples of Proudhon, Bakunin, Weitling (Weitling's own colony, Communia, had been in northeast Iowa, in Clayton County about fifteen miles from Gutenberg), or Marx, and the massacres and deportations that followed the suppression of the Commune had pushed them even further to the left. Communism had ceased to be a generalized life philosophy, a sentiment or an attitude, and had become an ideology, or rather a number of mutually antagonistic systems.

The older members had learned that ideology was not enough and insisted on keeping the membership strictly limited. The younger members pointed out that the colony was poor and overworked, seriously understaffed with only eighty people, and demanded that as many members be admitted as the colony could support.

During the 1870s conflict became irreconcilable, and at last the younger group went to the courts and sued to revoke the charter, on the technicality that the colony was registered as an agricultural cooperative but engaged in manufacture. The court granted the suit, and the rebels incorporated under a new charter in 1879, while the older members were granted a thousand acres and several houses and other buildings — and no debt. The debts were assumed by the rebels. The older group, which ironically called itself the New Icarians, was modestly successful. The insurgents increased their membership, opened new industries, cultivated more land with improved agricultural methods, and more than doubled their membership. For the first time in the long life of the Icarian communities, women were permitted to vote and hold office. The colony was officially declared non-religious.

The economic expansion entailed an unmanageable debt, and the expansion of the membership soon resulted in the growth of new, irreconcilable factions. By the fall of 1881 the younger community was disintegrating



and unable to satisfy its creditors. Efforts were made to move to California and combine with the Speranza colony at Cloverdale, but in the meantime the Cloverdale project itself collapsed, and the property was sold off to satisfy the creditors — some of it to the New Icarians.

The older party went on in their new community much as they had for many years. They planted orchards and vineyards, worked hard, ate simply, dressed poorly — they wore sabots to the end, and occupied their leisure with music and lectures by their members, and with their library of more than a thousand books, all of them in French. In 1883 they had thirty-four members. Their children left. They grew old. One by one they dropped away. By the end of the century a large proportion of the remaining members were in their eighties and unable to operate the property any longer, so it was sold off, all debts paid, and the very considerable remaining money divided pro rata according to the time of service. Each member got enough money to support him or her modestly to the end of life.

At least New Icaria ended in mutual good will and financial solvency. Cabet's utopia had lasted, in one form or another, from 1848 to 1901, one of the longest lived of all secular communist ventures. Most remarkable, it lasted through incredible difficulties, suffering, and sickness, almost continuous factionalism, hard labor, much of it wasted due to lack of experience, and impractical and naïve financing, loss of money, and accumulation of debts. Life was always poor in the Icarian communities. Life at Brook Farm was sybaritic by comparison. At the end, the handful of survivors were still enthusiastically committed communists, although it is difficult to say what they were committed to. The theories of Cabet, where they were definite, were impracticable. Where they were not, they were vague and sentimental or, as in his position on sexual relations, women's rights, and the use of tobacco, destructive or irrelevant. Its charismatic leader was expelled early in the life of the colony and no one ever took his place. Yet Icaria endured, and even the dissidents and secessionists remained, most of them, convinced communists, and many of them migrated to other communes after Icaria was sold off.