

**Icaria: An Aborted Utopia
on the Texas Frontier**
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Few eras in the histories of the young American and French Republics were as pregnant with conflicting seminal ideas as the decade of the 1840s. The fledgling, American experiment had outgrown its revolutionary naïveté and had seen many of colonial certainties undermined by inexorable movement into a frontier of boundless possibilities.¹ Straddling vast panoramas of unsettled land and a litoral rapidly transforming itself into an industrial future, the new state desperately sought out unity in the individual lives of its citizens. Riparian Americans, far less worried about their physical futures than their country cousins who still lived among Amerindian “primitives,” tried to make their world a better place by founding groups that militated against slavery and capital punishment or even suggested a primal change in lifestyle and diet.² The only force that routinely tied together these desperate communities was the fear and loathing of European immigration, a force which had ironically fashioned them in the first place. The hordes of Irish and German immigrants, fleeing the frightening political morass of revolutionary Europe, were viewed by alarmed “old Americans” as “priest-controlled machines” who would surely topple America’s shaky, Protestant dominance.³

On the other side of the Atlantic, similar disintegrations of political and social unity fed the flood of immigrants who helped shape the Americas of the 1840s. The ideals of the

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French Revolution paled before the democratic imperialism of Napoleon and the threadbare autocracy of the Bourbon Restoration. Even with the accession of the “bourgeois king” Louis Philippe in 1830, the chasm between rich and poor in France was not bridged. With the passage of the Le Chapelier law in 1791, the unfettered right to acquire property became a core principle of both rightist and leftist governments for the next half-century. The ultimate victims of this victory of *laissez faire* were French skilled workers who saw their guilds and brotherhoods outlawed as institutions contrary to the society’s “general interest.”⁴ A new line was drawn between the *nouveau riche* and the growing army of the laboring poor. The line would also stand as a political barricade in 1848 when disgruntled workers rose in rebellion against their timid sovereign and his aloof minister François Guizot.⁵ It would also extend as a largely-impermeable barrier against the ascendant liberalism of the day while providing rich soil for the growth of the many varieties of socialism.

The ultimate host for a world view contrary to the entrepreneurial spirit which naturally followed the spread of the factory system into the Continent was the army of workers who became, in many ways, subject to the machines they operated.⁶ With the guild and brotherhood safety net removed by the Revolution, workers adapted old means to new ends of production and marketing with the formation of cooperatives. Despite these small successes, workers across Europe saw once stable and protected industries overwhelmed by a flood of unskilled immigrants from the countryside into the large industrial centers. Unemployment, recession, malnutrition and an increase in crime forced European laborers

to abandon their frantic, almost millenarian, hopes for a new life through revolution. When the light of immediate political action was extinguished, there was nothing to take its place but a bitter frustration. The people had, indeed, given everything for the Revolution and now it had forgotten them. They had overthrown the thousand-year-old reign of the nobility only to be crushed under the unfeeling dominance of the new monied classes.⁷ A new vision was desperately needed and this view of the world as it might be would be provided by a heterogeneous group of agitators and writers known as socialists.

The trends of socialist thought that sought to form a post-industrial society were as varied as those of the liberalism which had ridden industrialization to power. Sharing with the Enlightenment the belief in a perfect, but non-involved deity, hatred of organized religion and confidence in the perfectible and educatable nature of man, early nineteenth-century socialist thought all insisted that real change could only be effected with the establishment of a new society.⁸ Since the greedy moguls of factory wealth were not likely to surrender dominance except with the threat of revolution, a growing number of socialist authors except with the threat of revolution, a growing number of socialist authors counseled non-violent change, since political upheavals, no matter for what purpose, could create nothing that “lives and lasts.”⁹ Evolution, it seemed, was the ultimate answer, but how it was to be shaped would give rise to two schools of socialist thought: the classist and colonial.

The first of these solutions, as encapsulated in the works of Louis Blanqui, Claude de

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Saint Simon, Louis Blanc, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, saw the industrial system, in one way or another, as the means by which a classless society would be created. Some, like Saint Simon, argued that this perfect world would hatch from the technological chrysalis of the factory which would make poverty irrelevant by the steady spread of wealth to all classes.¹⁰ Others, like Blanc, feared that true economic emancipation could never be an automatic process, but would only be accomplished if the worker, under the auspices of a transparent and benevolent state, controlled his own laboring environment. With such autonomy, it was hoped that “democracy...like the sun [would] shine for us all.”¹¹ Still others, most especially Marx and Engels, rejected the terms of bourgeois freedom of enrichment, even if workers were granted grudging access to this dream. Instead, they claimed for this very same oppressed class of laborers—the proletariat—the birthright of giving their lives to form a new society where all men and women would indeed be created equal since this “brave new world” would contain no classes. To come into this paradise of equality, Marx and Engels called out to working men across the world to throw off the oppression of the propertied middle class and form a supra-national state in which duty would far outweigh wealth.¹²

The second form of socialist thought shared with Rousseau disdain for civilization and admiration for “the good constitution” of primitive societies.¹³ Self-seeking individualism, however, was hardly the answer in an age of booming entrepreneurship in which personal enrichment overpowered every other goal. The inequities of the factory state were so widespread that a new society could not be forged *in situ*, but would rather only be accomplished in colonies where “truth was rendered more profitable than falsehood.”¹⁴

Charles Fourier, Victor Considerant, Robert Owen, and Arthur Brisbane all either theorized about or attempted to set up such a post-industrial society. These plans all emulated and adapted Fourier's *phalanx*, a community of under fifteen-hundred members which was to be made self-sufficient from the corruption of industrial society with the creative use of the artisan cooperative.¹⁵ The workers, who lived in communal dormitories and ate in great dining halls, elected their own officials. To soften the drudgery and boredom of industrial existence, a great number of workshops of different types were established and the worker could transfer from one to the other during the day. The end result of such a system, according to Owen, was that "the individual [was] willing to exert his or her for the common good."¹⁶ With the European land mass becoming increasingly saturated with humanity, the experiments of Fourier and Considerant grew increasingly unfeasible.¹⁷ One site, however, did hold out hope for a new start. In America, the utopian socialists encountered a people who "founded associations" on all levels and for many different reasons.¹⁸ This conjunction of great swathes of cheap land with the reality and myth of American social cooperation would ultimately bring Étienne Cabet to Texas.

Though born into a *petit bourgeois* household in Dijon in 1788, Cabet spent most of life as an advocate for the proletariat -- "those beings born for the trouble of society...in the midst of cities."¹⁹ Though earning a law degree, Cabet passed his life as "a veritable political ascetic" who focused all of his energies on preaching socialist solutions for "primordial questions of social and political economy."²⁰ With the Revolution of 1830, he attained a

judicial post in Louis Philippe's government and was elected to the Chamber of Deputies from his home city. Even with these temporary successes, Cabet soon found himself "a moral exile in his own country" for his unpopular views on modern society which he claimed was breaking into two distinct classes: "the rich...numbered in the thousands...and the laboring class numbered in the millions."²¹ Though attaining a law degree, Cabet passed his life as "a veritable political ascetic" who focused all of his energies on disseminating socialist solutions for "primordial questions of social and political economy."²² His noisy insistence that this shameful gap of money and power be filled by legislative means soon antagonized the liberal government which in 1834 charged the troublesome advocate of *lèse majesté* for his many attacks on France's well-placed citizens. Spending a five-year exile mostly in England where he came under the influence of Robert Owen, Cabet returned to France in 1839 and began the dominant phase of his career.²³

In the years after his return to France, Cabet gained wide popularity among France's laboring classes by two strains of thought which often intertwined. In the first, he used the newspaper *Le Populaire* to issue extremely practical directives to workers. He saw class as the prime divider in modern society, but would not tread the path—soon followed by Marx—of class, but rather had confidence that the proletariat could work with the bourgeoisie for a better world. The violent upheavals of the French Revolution and its political children were unnecessary, according to Cabet, and ultimately "works to the advantage of the governing elite."²⁴ Instead, he counseled a political and economic gradualism to be brought about by a "democratic socialism" which would slowly increase the worker's position of societal

dominance, while expanding their educational base while inculcating among their numbers the tenets of “true Christianity,” a kind of primitive socialism based on fraternity and equality.²⁵ This new world would not destroy the family, but it would remove the greatest barrier to the emergence of a classless society: private property.²⁶

The second strain of Cabet’s thought, a view of the world to come, was encapsulated in his extremely popular novel, *Voyage en Icarie* (1839). This work, loosely based on Thomas More’s *Utopia*, followed the journey of a young English nobleman through Icarie, the kind of society Cabet longed to fashion.²⁷ In it, “every man would be his brother’s keeper” and brotherhood “would render all laws useless.”¹ Equality was to be the watchword of this classless paradise where none would be condemned to dehumanizing work and none would profit from the sweat of others. Icarie, however, was by no means libertarian. No one had the license to violate the liberties of others. Rather, by universal education and a judicious historical management of their general heritage, all Icarian citizens would be led to fervently dedicate themselves to reconciling “all the pleasures of variety with the advantages of uniformity.” This happy state would be accomplished when each person evolved beyond the reach of the “harmful” ideas which came in the wake of unbridled individualism.²

Cabet’s ideas “found numerous admirers in the working class,” especially among the artisan communities of Paris and Lyon. Many of these workers, who had seen guilds

¹ Hertzler, 207-8; Jean François Cretinon, *Voyage en Icarie: Deux viennois aux Etats-Unis en 1855* (Paris, 1952), 259.

² Cretinon, 13, 17-18, 258-61; Piotrowski, 102-3; Magraw, 69-70; Johnson, 49-51, 57, 99; Raymond Ruyer, *L’utopie et les utopies* (Paris, 1950), 222-28; Prudhommeaux, 146-59, 175-82.

dismantled, now found their cooperative ventures undercut by a factory system which thrived on unskilled labor. Hardly prone to violent revolution, these men were yet touched by a searing frustration since they were treated “as playthings of the idle rich.”³ Thumbing the pages of *Le Populaire*, the dispirited workers of France’s burgeoning industrial zones found hope in the prediction that “Communism has passed the Rubicon...neither force nor slanders nor outrages nor persecutions are capable of stopping it.”⁴ While the numbers of such hopeful communists were clearly small, their allegiance to *pere Cabet* was extremely enthusiastic, though not unlimited. As apparent in his later utopian ventures, Cabet had little use for democratic consultation and did not tolerate lightly “freethinkers” among his followers.⁵

While the socialism of Cabet and Fourier found a ready audience in a Europe buffeted by revolution and reaction, their ostensibly radical ideas broadly appealed to an ante-bellum America long thought to be primarily moved by the intellectual engine of individualism. Translated into American verities by such Fourierist writers as Arthur Brisbane and Horace Greeley, utopia became an answer to many heartfelt needs. With the extension of American industrialization and the waves of economic and social displacement it caused, many of the lower middle classes who had suffered through the Panic of 1837

³ Magraw, 67-69; Christopher H. Johnson, “Communism and the Working Class Before Marx: The Icarian Experience,” *American Historical Review* (1971):657-62.

⁴ Johnson, “Communism,” 646-47.

⁵ Magraw, 67; Prudhommeaux, 199-203.

were ready to at least flirt with new social ideas.⁶ Religionists, especially those expecting the last days, were already beginning to desert the old faiths for communal experiments in which their members would not be tainted by America's growing materialism. The dominant intellectual strain of the era, transcendentalism, called for the abandonment of self aggrandizement and dedication to social justice. As John S. Dwight (a minister who exchanged Unitarianism for Fourier's vision) observed: "The fact that poverty exists anywhere makes you poor."⁷ In the midst of America's booming factory-state, then, many in the middle class, who saw family values and democratic ideals eroding in the mad rush for profit and land, turned to socialism as a means of truly accomplishing America's revolutionary dictum: "All men are created equal."

As America's evolving intelligentsia sought new sources of non-material enrichment, the majority of their countrymen continued to equate prosperity with the ownership of land. In the decade before the Mexican War, the principal focus of this all-but-perennial concern with land was the vast ocean of territory between the Red River and the Gulf of Mexico. To settle their frontier zones of Texas and Coahuila, the Mexican government – and later the Republic of Texas – relied on the *empresario* system. Individuals were given vast, largely

⁶ Guarneri, 9, 44, 65-66; Charles M. White, *The New Nation, 1800-1845* (New York, 1964), 134-35.

⁷ Guarneri, 45, 65-66, 73; *A Documentary History of American Thought and Society*, ed. Charles Crowe (Boston, 1965), 126-27; Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (Philadelphia, 1959), 127-28, 153-58; Theodore Parker, "Transcendentalism," in *The Transcendentalist Revolt Against Materialism* (Boston, 1949), 76-80. For religious communes in nineteenth-century America, see Holloway, 53-100; Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States from Personal Visit and Observation* (New York, 1966), 63-329.

unmapped, tracts of land for a set period; the *empresarios* were responsible for advertising the land and bringing in settlers. When the requisite number of settlers was reached, the settlers would supposedly be rewarded with legal titles to their and the *empresarios* with a great amount of territory which they could retain or put up for sale.⁸ This method, which required very little money from developer or settler, greatly appealed to land-hungry Americans as well as British, German and French groups attempting to escape the economic and political barriers of their own societies. In the midst of what Olmstead called a “barbarizing scramble” for landed wealth, foreign settlers were especially vulnerable.⁹

The experience of the immigrant to *ante bellum* was an unsettling amalgam of exaggerated expectations and brutal realities. As most inhabitants of the new Republic saw their prosperity tied to the rapid settlement of the region, they soon assumed the boosterism of land developers. Texas thus became a landscape of “noble forests...perennial flowers [and] crystal streams, ...[a land unexcelled] in the ease and facility of raising stock...which makes easy work for farmers.” The potential settler was assured that Texas was, in effect, “one of the richest, most prolific and best watered countries in North America.”¹⁰ The “sad picture”

⁸ Walter Struve, *Germans & Texans: Commerce, Migration, and Culture in the Days of the Lone Star Republic* (Austin, 1996), 42; E. C. Barker, “Notes on the Colonization of Texas,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* [SHQ] 27(1924): 108-19; Mary Virginia Henderson, “Minor Empresario Contracts for the Colonization of Texas 1825-1834,” *SHQ* 31(1928): 245-324; Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *Travelers in Texas 1761-1860* (Austin, 1967), 160.

⁹ Frederick Law Olmstead, *A Journey Through Texas: Or a Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier* (Austin, 1978), 282; Sibley, 168-69.

¹⁰ Robin W. Doughty, *At Home in Texas: Early Views of the Land* (College Station TX, 1987; Fischer, 127-31; George H. Sweet, *Texas: Her Early History, Climate, Soil and Material Resources or the Immigrants' Hand-Book* (New York, 1871); Sibley, 48, 161-63.

that visitors encountered when they threw in their lot with Texas was a land of few roads, largely impassable and unnavigable rivers, no railroads, few urban settlements and weather as unforgiving as it was changeable.¹¹

Surely the rudest shock the newcomer felt when he walked into reality which had very little to do with Texan hyperbole was the legal basis of all new settlements in the region. As the Republic of Texas became increasingly strapped for cash, the need for landowning taxpayers became chronic.¹² As a result, individual *empresario* contracts were largely replaced by American and European land companies which had the immediate prospect of funneling more money into the treasury. With the commencement of Sam Houston's second presidential term in 1842, Republican land policies shifted drastically when individual settlers were allowed to occupy tracts once reserved for *empresarios* or companies.¹³ The great companies, especially that of W.S. Peters which controlled most of north central Texas between the Red and Trinity rivers, defied this change for almost a decade and continued to lure settlers into present-day counties of north central and northeastern Texas without providing them with adequate legal titles.¹⁴ This confusion was deepened by the Texans'

¹¹ Sibley, 27; Olmstead, 55, 57; John Edward Weems with Jane Weems, *Dream of Empire: A History of the Republic of Texas 1836-1846* (New York, 1971), 65-66; Michael L. Collins, "Statehood, 1845-1860" in *The Texas Heritage*, ed. Ben Procter & Archie P. McDonald (Wheeling, IL, 1998), 54-55, 61-62.

¹² Struve, 46-50; Reuben McKittrick, *The Public Land System of Texas, 1823-1910* (Madison, 1918; A.S. Lang, *Financial History of Public Lands in Texas* (Waco, 1932).

¹³ Rupert Norval Richardson, *Texas: The Lone Star State* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1964), 142-43; Struve, 45-46.

¹⁴ Seymour V. Connor, *The Peter's Colony of Texas* (Austin, 1959), 2-21; idem, A Statistical Review of the Settlement of the Peters Colony (1841-1848), *SHQ* 67(1964): 38-64.

“native shrewdness” in dealing with newcomers, especially those who did not speak English. Consequently, many new arrivals in the Texas of the 1840s found themselves without legal grounds to settle on. Some, like Cabet’s followers, discovered that they did not hold rights to all the land they had contracted for; other were amazed to find that the land they had invested in simply did not exist.¹⁵

The catalyst which brought socialism to Texas was the deterioration of liberal control in France which in 1848 led to another revolution. The decade of the 1840s ultimately affirmed for Étienne Cabet and other left-wing leaders that real social justice could only be attained in America. As the government of the bourgeois king Louis Philippe and his historian/minister François Guizot became more autocratic and unwilling to listen to dissent from any political quarter, widespread frustration erupted in February, 1848, fueling an “accidental” revolution.¹⁶ As with France’s first revolution, the winds of political opposition blew erratically between the poles of capital and labor. With Louis Philippe’s immediate, almost unforced, abdication, France came under the rule of the Second Republic, which became a battle zone between the forces of socialism and conservatism. When Cabet’s colleague, Louis Blanc proposed the creation of “national workshops” which would regulate factory hours and conditions while allowing workers to unionize and control their own job site, many of the ideas of Icarie seemed within reach.¹⁷ With the backlash of the propertied

¹⁵ Sibley, 160-61.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 63-64; J.A.S. Grenville, *Europe Reshaped 1848-1878* (Ithaca NY, 1976), 32-33; Collingham, 406-10.

¹⁷ Grenville, 102; Sewell, 270; Johnson, “Communism,” 646-47; Eugène Fournier, *Le Règne de Louis Philippe*

classes in the spring of 1848, Blanc's plan was subverted into a way of cashiering France's unemployed into the army. Though the leftists took their opposition to the barricades in the famous "June Days," they could not stand up to the new military and police units which packed Paris and so saw their political power slip away.¹⁸

Long before Louis Philippe's government had fallen, certain of its agencies such as the French Legation, headquartered in Austin, persistently counseled the expansion of French trade with Texas. Despite the state of Texan democracy which was "more turbulent and anarchical than in the United States" and the undeniable fact that the Republic was "a poor country with a population widely dispersed over a vast territory," France's liberal government recognized the region's economic potential and hoped to capitalize on it by promoting French immigration into Texas and preventing the Republic's annexation by the United States.¹⁹ Despite its intense effort to expand a sphere of influence within Texas, French immigration would only begin in earnest after Texas became a state in 1845. Far from being a chit in a vast geopolitical game, Texas would evolve as the site for the vindication of one man's vision for a new society. From Étienne Cabet's point-of-view, the region was an empty slate awaiting the message of utopia.

In the swirling events of 1847-48, Cabet and other socialist leaders saw their long-

(1830-1848), vol. 8 of *Histoire socialiste 1789-1900*, ed. Jean Jaures, 13 vols. (Paris, 1910-1908), 367-83.

¹⁸ Greenville, 101, 103; Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 278-87; Thomas R. Forstenzer, *French Provincial Police and the Fall of the Second Republic: Social Fear and Counterrevolution* (Princeton, 1981), 24-54..

¹⁹ Nancy Nichols Barker, *The French Legation in Texas*, 2 vols. (Austin,), 347-48, 412.

held political and social theories put to the practical test. There was no time for the evolutionary millenarianism which had long marked socialist thought; for the future, it seemed, had suddenly come. From 1845 onward, the French economy entered a period of stagnation marked by frequent strikes, bread riots and a steady upward curve of malnutrition and disease among the laboring poor. The effect of industrialization was disastrous on the French artisan class. After decades of seeing their livelihood slowly eroded by machine-made goods, these later-day guilds men could not contain their frustration. When revolutionary barricades sprouted in Paris in February, 1848, many workers rejoiced at their deliverance. When the dreams of “Community” were dashed in the early summer by force of arms, many a disillusioned worker now proclaimed that “only Icaria now holds out any hope.”²⁰

Even before these revolutionary hopes had faded, other events forced Cabet to put his long-held ideas into action. Mexico, and later Texas, had emerged as the focus for socialist settlements as early as 1828 when Robert Owen, hoping to emulate the colonization efforts of Stephen F. Austin and other early Texas *empresarios*, began negotiations with the ineffectual, Mexican president Vincente Guerrero for the use of a large tract of land between Texas and Coahuila on which to found a community not unlike that of New Harmony, Indiana which had come into being in the mid-1820s. Though his plans did not survive the political revival of Santa Anna in 1829, Owen remained enthusiastic for the next two decades about the region as the perfect site for colony-building. He ultimately influenced Cabet towards Texas. In the early 1840s, when W.S. Peters was involved in maximizing his

²⁰ Magraw, 15, 119-22; Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 282-83.

company's profits, he turned to Owen as a potential customer whose influence might bring thousands of Europeans into north central Texas. Owen quickly referred the persistent developer to his *protege* Cabet.²¹

Throughout the dark days of 1845-46, issue after issue of *Le Populaire* had moved towards the bitter realization that the new socialist society could not be attained in France which remained in the death grip of the bourgeoisie. The only answer now was the "new terrestrial paradise" of America where the "social experimentation" of Icaria could come into being unfettered by old ideas. On January 17, 1848, Cabet joyfully announced that Texas was to be the "Promised Land" for up to twenty-thousand of his followers.²²

Even as the French political forces of 1848 moved toward their ultimate destination, the Icarians were busy on both sides of the Atlantic in making utopia a reality. Shortly after announcing the Texas project in print, Cabet dispatched an agent to St. Louis to make the final arrangements with the Peters Company. Though a number of official and unofficial Texas land agents routinely advertised in American and European newspapers of the time, the Icarians seemed bound to the Peters deal because of Owen's influence. Though certain they had contracted for a million acres of North Texas prairie, the Icarians soon ran afoul of the state's land policies which alternated sections between developer tracts and public

²¹ Bestor, 216; Hubert Herring, *A History of Latin America* (New York, 1964), 310-11. For New Harmony, see Bestor, 160-201; Holloway, 106-16; Harry Wade "Les Communistes in East Texas," *East Texas Historical Association* 24(1986): 16-17.

²² Albert Shaw, *Icaria: A Chapter in the History of Communism* (New York, 1884), 21, 23-24, 37-39; Fischer, 126-30; Wilbert H. Timmons, "Robert Owen's Texas Project," *SHQ* 52(1949): 286-93; Bestor, 264; Wade, 17; Whitridge, 306-7.

acreage. The developer then proceeded to divided each of it sections in half, an area comprising 320 acres. As a result, the million acres Cabet thought he would occupy soon shrank to under ten-thousand, none of it in one contiguous land mass.²³ Since the Icarian crusaders would remain ignorant of this fact until they had deserted the old world for the new, Cabet's plan for American immigration went on full tilt, first in spite of and then because of France's domestic politics.

As the left-wing of France's new parliamentary government began to splinter and slowly lose control of the country's political direction, Cabet and his followers resolved to waste no more time on political debate "but only discuss arrangements for emigration."²⁴ Cabet founded travel bureaus in many of the industrial towns where his support had been the greatest, and yet despite a initial spike of enthusiasm for the Texas project in the early months of 1848 which manifested itself in some few able-bodied colonists and a large number of contributions, the dream of Icaria was soon swallowed by the early successes of the Revolution which, thanks to Blanc, promised French workers an industrial paradise without the attendant hardships of resettlement in an alien land.²⁵ Though the general response of French labor was decidedly tepid to the idea of utopian emigration, an inner core of Cabet's supporters were willing to risk their lives and a sizeable subscription fee to

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The New Orleans Daily Picayune, October 28, 1847; Shaw, 33-35, 41-42; Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 256; Wade, 18; Prudhommeaux, 212-7; Étienne Cabet, *Défense du Citoyen Cabet accusé d'escroquerie devant la Cour d'Appel de Paris (11 déc 1850)*, (Paris, 1851), 7-9, 29, 30.

²⁴ Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 282; Fischer, 126-30; Grenville, 135-36.

²⁵ Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 283; Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Mobilization of Rural France*,

plant the flag of Icaria in the wilderness. Like most readers of *Le Populaire* and subscribers to Cabet's ideas, this group was well-off and middle-aged by nineteenth-century standards. One-third of the Icarian "advance guard" was comprised of farmers and gardeners; the group also contained a sizeable contingent of artisans and professional men, some of whom would go on to important subsequent careers in France or in the United States.²⁶

While the initial response to his immigration appeal was disheartening, Cabet used his newspaper to amplify his Icarian activities. On February 3, 1848, he wrote of the departure from Le Harve of the "advance guard," a group of sixty-nine especially liveried socialist heroes. The scene, complete with the administering of oaths to uphold the "Social Contract," a list of socialist principles which would realize Cabet's vision of the new society and then a series of tearful farewells, was one of the most memorable vignettes of early socialist literature. Cabet was later to write that this event clearly signified "the regeneration of the human race."²⁷ As the Icarians embarked on the ship *Rome* and it cast off, the strains of workers' anthems echoed across to the harbor where Cabet and a large crowd of his emotional retainers responded with stanzas of their own replete with martial energy and unvanquished hope. The "soldiers of Fraternity" were encouraged to "establish in Icaria the happiness of Humanity." This principle of brotherhood would put forward "a pure wave of

1870-1914, (Stanford, CA, 1976), 12.

²⁶ Wade, 18-19; Prudhommeaux, 20. For nineteenth-century life-expectancy, see Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist – the Facts of Daily Life in 19th-Century England* (New York, 1993), 234-35; Pounds, 355-56. The French death rate remained fairly constant throughout the nineteenth century at between 2 and 2.5%.

socialism” which existed “without property and money...dowry and privileges.”²⁸

After fifty-one days at sea, the *Rome* anchored at New Orleans on March 27, 1848. With a sizeable French population, the city proved extremely congenial to the Icarian voyagers, but after a short stay they boarded a river steamer for the long trip up the Red River to the frontier entrepôt of Shreveport.²⁹ As they neared their destination, the voyagers seemed less and less in control of their fate. With few of the “advance guard” well-versed in English, the entire party became more vulnerable as it moved toward the Texas border which marked off both a national but also a linguistic frontier. When they landed at Shreveport on April 4, they were shocked to find that the land that Cabet’s agent had chosen for the colony was over 250 miles away across a Texas hinterland devoid of roads and only lightly settled. Because they had been told that the Peters grant was close to the Louisiana border and could easily be reached by boat, the Icarians were betrayed by their Continental assumptions of travel which seldom applied to the Great West. The great number of steamer trunks the party had brought from Europe could not be transported across the Texas prairie without extreme hardship and expense. By an incredible coincidence, one of the newcomers discovered that one of his cousins was prominent merchant in Shreveport. Through his help, a portion of the luggage was stored and the rest was transhipped across the Red River

²⁷ Shaw, 24-25; Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 282-83; Holloway, 200-2; Wade, 18; Prudhommeaux, 217-8.

²⁸ Wade, 18; Johnson, “Communism,” 680-81; Cretinon, 259.

²⁹ *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, March 27, 1848; March 31, 1848; Wade, 19.

into Texas.³⁰ “This able set of fellows,” as one local newspaper characterized them, seemed perfectly fitted by health and demeanor to deal with “the difficulties with which they expect to meet.”³¹ Before their Texas summer was over, almost twenty percent of the “advance guard” would die as would Cabet’s initial concept of Icaria.

The first leg of their journey took the socialist pioneers across territory only recently cleared of the Choctaw Nation.³² Though they thus saw few aborigines, the French urbanites soon found how unprepared they were for the “primitive” landscape they were bound to cross. After two weeks marked by sweltering heat, lack of provisions, bad water, dysentery and a broken wagon axle, the colonists arrived at Sulphur Prairie, a large farm near Titus to the north of Mount Pleasant. This land had been bought by Cabet’s agent at the same time as the Peters grant. In spite of the growing xenophobia of 1840s America, such a rapid intrusion of manpower into the East Texas frontier was seen as a multiple “benefit to all the people of this section of the country.” The iron-foundry and brick structures the Frenchmen proposed to build at Sulphur Prairie, however, were never fully completed. Before the beginning of the summer, most of the colonists had left for their short-lived Icarian

³⁰ Wade, 17, 19-20; Shaw, 31-32; Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 282-83; Olmstead, 48; Prudhommeaux, 223-24.

³¹ *Shreveport Journal*, April 10, 1848; Wade, 20.

³² Jean Louis Berlandier, *The Indians of Texas in 1830*, ed. John C. Ewers (Washington, DC, 1969), 109; Arthur H. DeRosier, Jr., *The Removal of the Choctaw Indians* (Knoxville, 1970), 183-84; Anna Muckleroy, “The Indian Policy of the Republic of Texas,” *Texas State Historical Association Quarterly* 25 (1923): 229-60.

homeland.³³

The gradual establishment of colonists in Texas envisioned by Cabet was soon rendered impossible by the anomalies of the state's land policies. On the "advance party" had established itself at Sulphur Prairie, a lead party went on to occupy Icaria in early May. Besides the scattered nature of the grant Cabet had acquired from the Peters Company, the Icarians and their trek leader Alphonse Gouhenant were stunned to discover that each half-section of land designated for the colony had to be occupied; that is, built on, by July 1 or the grant would revert back to the State of Texas.³⁴ Leaving all the other members of the lead party in Icarie to begin the massive construction project, Gouhenant rushed back to Sulphur Prairie and gathered as many of the original "advance guard" as feasible to succor the beleaguered colony in its first and possibly last crisis. Leaving behind most of the supplies they had transported from Louisiana, they filled back packs with enough essentials to support them for a few days, hoping to purchase food on the journey. Following the Sulphur River along its southern fork, the colonists, now looking somewhat like peddlers because of their knapsacks, moved across two zones of Texas prairie and into the Cross Timbers, the swath of forested territory between grand bands of grasslands in which Icaria was located.³⁵ Because of the intense heat and the need to cover as much territory as

³³ *Clarksville National Standard*, April 22, 1848; Wade, 20-21; Shaw, 33; Prudhommeaux, 224-25.

³⁴ Shaw, 33-35; Wade, 22; Prudhommeaux, 226-28.

³⁵ For zones traversed, see Richardson, 2-3; Elmer H. Johnson, *The Natural Regions of Texas* (Austin, 1931). The modern Texas counties the Icarians crossed between the Red River and Sulphur Prairie were Harrison, Marion, Cass, Morris and Titus. Between Sulphur Prairie and Icarie, they were Titus, Franklin, Hopkins, Delta, Hunt, Collin and Denton.

possible everyday , Gouhenant and his fellows often walked into late into the evening before making camp. With no tents, they normally took shelter along the stream beds which were shadier and less exposed to animal or Indian attack. When the late spring turned monsoonal as one frightening thunderstorm after another marched across the plains, this strategy proved impossible as did getting any rest during these downpours which often drove the rivers out of their banks and flooded the grasslands. Surviving on a kind of water-logged cornmeal mush, the Icarians persisted and even increased their daily pace. On June 1, after twelve days of walking, the majority of the Icarian population, now suffering from exposure, dysentery, and malnutrition, arrived at the earthly paradise and immediately set to work, amidst the joyful reunion with their fellows, to vindicate their claim to utopia.³⁶

The difficulties of scratching a living out of the primaeval Texas prairie was perhaps best expressed by the German emigrants who were extremely successful at doing so. One such agriculturalist wrote: “Only determined, energetic people are fit for a country where unwonted troubles and hardships of all kinds await the newcomer.”³⁷ The French socialists who came into East Texas and the Cross Timbers were such a group of hardheaded and earnest laborers and yet they quickly failed. Overwork and a failure to mentally and physically adapt to the new world they had chosen as their own proved the ultimate bane of the Icarian venture. To meet the requirements of the Peters grant, Gouhenant and the relief party from Sulphur Prairie began building structures on as many half-sections as they could

³⁶ Wade, 22; Johnson, *Utopian Communism*, 283.

³⁷ Sibley, 163. A quote of Gustav Dresel.

around the natural center of the colony, the confluence of the Denton and Oliver Creeks. Within a month, Gouhenant was joyfully writing Cabet that enough territory had been claimed to support up to twenty-thousand of his fellows. The scene was an apparent beehive of activity which could provide Cabet and all of his followers with happiness and wealth. By the time, the second “advance party” arrived at Icarie on August 29, 1848, however, the harsh realities of frontier had dispelled such euphoria.³⁸

The immediate failure of the colonists was a primal one. In the midst of their frenetic activity to construct what amounted to a “Potemkin village,” the Icarians neglected planting until the mid-summer sun had baked the North Texas black land into a brick-like hardness which eventually destroyed the colony’s only plow. Even the small area prepared for planting before this accident received no rain and very few of the seeds germinated. With a growing need for food, the colonists increasingly turned to their Anglo-American neighbors (especially agents of the Peters Company) for food, running up a huge debt in the process.³⁹

Besides their failures as American farmers, the Icarians soon became physical and psychological casualties of the alien landscape. Because of their month-long exertions at building and their negligence at finding fresh water supplies, most of the colonists “suffered a good deal from sickness.” The resultant “trembling fever” (*fièvre tremblant*) was surely malaria, yellow fever or some other parasite-born disease for which stagnant water was a host. By August, four of the colonists had died of this raging infection, of which all the

³⁸ Wade, 23; Shaw, 41-42; Cabet, *Défense*, 41-42.

³⁹ Wade, 25; Shaw, 39, 42.

Icarians had “much horror.”⁴⁰ The long hours of unrelenting work, heat, mosquitoes, bad food all exercised an undeniable effect on the Icarian psyche. In addition to the fever victims, one of the colonists died of a lightning strike during one of the late-summer thunderstorms so typical of the region. Icaria’s physician seemed completely unarmed against the physical forces arrayed against the health of his fellows. He himself eventually sickened and died, but only after he had become mentally deranged. The leader of the second “advance guard”, Favard, best expressed the spirit of alienation among the Icarians as they suffered through their first and only Texas summer. In his view, the roads to Icarie were so “abominable,” they could not support any real wagon traffic. Without this line of transport, no civilization – including such indispensable niceties as women, good bread and fine wine – could come into being on the Texas prairie.⁴¹

With the arrival of the second “advance guard,” the spirit of determination to make Icaria succeed quickly dissolved. Rather than spending precious time in selling the colony’s lands and running the very real risk of the escalation of infection, the healthier members, especially Favard, counseled a “retreat” to Shreveport as soon as possible. Dividing the remaining company funds among the members (which came to approximately seven dollars apiece), they left the site of all their frantic labor and the burying of their colleagues in September, 1848. Breaking off into a number of smaller parties, they used different routes across East Texas to avoid overtaxing the scant food supplies of the region. When they

⁴⁰ *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, October 1, 1848; Shaw, 36; Wade, 24.

⁴¹ Shaw, 38-39; Wade, 24; Prudhommeaux, 232-34.

reunited at Sulphur Prairie, they were saddened to find that the “trembling fever” had claimed four more of their fellows.⁴² The complete Icarian capitulation to the harshness of frontier life did not go unnoticed by their American neighbors and other recent, European immigrants. The Bonham *Argus* chronicled the demise of the colony, attributing it to the chronic fever to which the French seemed to have very little resistance. The editor of the newspaper wished the socialists well and sardonically hoped that they would find the fevers of New Orleans (their final destination) “more to their taste than those of the Cross Timbers.”⁴³ In the following year, the German travel writer, Victor Bracht, characterized Icarie and other communal ventures as “diseased plants that will not thrive even in the healthful west” and gloated that “communism in America need not set its expectations too high.”⁴⁴ Cabet, in typical journalistic fashion, put the newspaperman’s “spin” on the events. He converted the colony’s failure and the return to Louisiana as a “death march” of sorts in which the tattered remnants of the “advance guards” were cast as heroes endowed with “a zeal, a devotion [and] a courage almost superhuman.” Privately, “Papa” Cabet blamed those who had gone to Texas and lamented that “all our hopes could have been realized,” but for their wasteful overwork and poor eating habits.⁴⁵

Once the survivors of the Texas venture reached Shreveport, they reclaimed the

⁴² Shaw, 41-42; Holloway, 202-3.

⁴³ *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, October 1, 1848.

⁴⁴ Victor Bracht, *Texas in 1848*, trans. Frank Schmidt (San Antonio, 1931), 104; Fischer, 131; Struve, 74.

⁴⁵ Shaw, 39-40.

remainder of baggage stored there and returned to New Orleans by steamer. Establishing themselves in one of the city's poorer neighborhoods, they waited for the expected army of their fellows in growing penury through the fall and winter of 1848-1849. Though still dedicated to socialist ideals, the veterans of the Texas summer had begun to lose faith in their leader's promises. Their deepening financial embarrassment must have rendered ludicrous the *Plan Financier*, Cabet's grandiose scheme for making Icarie independent of industrial society and an economic force in the post-industrial world. The veterans of Texas were also disgruntled at the version of their experiences reported in the pages of *Le Populaire*. As new adherents of Cabet began to arrive in New Orleans throughout the fall of 1848, the Icarian community in exile became rife with bitter disagreements. By the time Cabet came in January, 1849, almost half of his followers in America had lost confidence in his leadership. To scotch this schism at the source, he decided to use almost half of the remaining Icarian treasury to pay off the malcontents. With the remaining three-hundred faithful, he began planning for a reborn Icarie.⁴⁶ Despite his role as peacemaker, Cabet soon encountered the frustration of his American followers and that of his disgruntled adherents in Europe who eventually sued him for absconding with the funds which paid for the "Texas disaster."⁴⁷

With a rebellion among their numbers averted, the remaining Icarians began the process of funding a new meeting site. After interviewing the survivors of the Texas venture, Sulphur Prairie and Icarie became a closed book for Cabet and for all the new arrivals from

⁴⁶ Shaw, 41-42; Prudhommeaux, 238-42.

⁴⁷ Prudhommeaux, 258-64; Cabet, *Défense*, 43.

France whom he kept “ignorant of all that had taken place in Texas.” Maintaining the houses in New Orleans as his headquarters, Cabet appointed committees of his followers “to search out” a new colony site. At the suggestion of the French community in Saint Louis, the Icarians decided on the Mississippi River town of Nauvoo (formerly, Commerce) Illinois. A booming Mormon settlement from 1839 onward, Nauvoo had been deserted after 1845 when Joseph Smith and his brother were assassinated in a round of anti-Mormon violence. With so much of the settlement’s infrastructure still intact, Nauvoo seemed a perfect site for the homeless Icarians who moved to purchase the property and set up their new colony there before 1849 had passed.⁴⁸

What had never been accomplished in Texas was soon set in place in Nauvoo. A vibrant economic and cultural life seemed to thrive at the Illinois site – all in line with Icarian teachings.⁴⁹ In real terms, however, this meant that Nauvoo was under the complete control of its “father, savior [and] Christ,” Étienne Cabet. As the colonists – perhaps from the influence of the American democracy which existed around them – began to demand more control over the administration of Nauvoo, Cabet displayed a “dictatorial spirit” which eventually extended to the regulation of the colonists’ personal habits with an abusive campaign, the “tobacco war,” against the smoking of the “dirty weed” within Nauvoo’s city limits. As a result of this overbearing rule, a large segment of the colony “inwardly lost respect” for their leader, and this saw the division of the population into two factions: the

⁴⁸ Cretinon, 147-48; Shaw, 43-47; Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States from Personal Visit and Observation* (New York, 1966), 334; Prudhommeaux, 244-47.

⁴⁹ Cretinon, 156; Piotrowski, 91-92.

reds (the majority party comprised almost entirely of farmers, some of them survivors of the Texas venture) and the whites (supporters of Cabet who were mostly artisans who had recently arrived from Europe. When in 1856, Cabet refused to accept defeat in an democratic election for the colony's presidency mounted by the General Assembly and "board of directors" (*comité de gerance*), he literally lost control of the idea of Icaria. With his life work now subsumed by others, he again attempted to assume the mantle of prophet and lead his followers to another colony. This was prevented by a massive stroke which led to his death on November 18, 1856.⁵⁰

With Cabet's death, the frontier of America's utopianism was slowly closed. Nauvoo did not outlast the Civil War. The colony centered on Cabet's last supporters (the whites) at Corning, Iowa eventually broke into feuding factions and largely disappeared by the early 1880s. The last child of Icarianism was a small agricultural farm in Cloverdale, California known as Icaria Speranza.⁵¹ When this communal experiment failed in 1887, the dream of Icarie, which had first come to list so many years before in Texas, finally died.

The desire to found a perfect society in a perfect landscape had failed because of unescapable realities on both sides of the Atlantic. As the nineteenth century waned, European workers no longer turned to utopianism for consolation. Instead they look to such intellectual systems as Marxism and anarchism which posited systemic change for an entire

⁵⁰ Cretinon, 13, 152, 164; Vaillet, 15, 25-27, 34-35; Shaw, 43-44; Holloway, 202-4; Fischer, 136-37; Nordhoff, 335; Prudhommeaux, 251-56.

⁵¹ Holloway, 206-11; Nordhoff, 336-39; Prudhommeaux, 256-58.

society or rejected the idea of society altogether. In the short run, they gave their support to socialist and other left-leaning, political parties pledged to improve working conditions or Catholic and nationalist parties which followed the line of reform initiated by Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) which attempted to safeguard the dignity of the individual as well as the “inviolability of private property.”⁵² For many Europeans, immigration to the New World became an alternative to such domestic political solutions. The French, however, lost interest in this solution, perhaps because of their mid-nineteenth disappointments in Texas which, they discovered, was “not the utopian country they had been led to expect.”⁵³

In America, the imprint of utopianism had begun to fade even before the Civil War had ended. Despite this slow decline, Cabet’s ideas and the example of his colonies would not vanish without a trace. His desire to establish a social environment marked by “happiness which is boundless and unalterable” was emulated by Victor Considerant, Charles Fourier’s principal disciple, who would seek his own version of Icaria in 1855-56. Ironically, the site of this later utopian experiment, was only twenty miles from Icarie down the Elm Fork of the Trinity River in the center of the present-day city of Dallas. While this experiment, like Icaria, would soon disappear, its influence would far outweigh its size or duration by inserting European civilization, if only in a pale version, on the burgeoning Texas

⁵² Magraw, 262-3; Pope Leo XIII, *On the Condition of the Working Classes* (Washington, DC, 1942), 20-21; Frank B. Tipton & Robert Aldrich, *An Economic and Social History of Europe, 1890-1939* (Baltimore, 1989), 127-34; Piotrowski, 118.

⁵³ Virginia H. Taylor, *The Franco-Texan Land Company* (Austin, 1969); Fischer, 132; Cretinon, 164-65. For French immigration into the United States and Texas, see Walter Nugent, *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870-1914* (Bloomington, IN, 1995), 41-42; Barnes F. Lathrop, *Migration Into East Texas 1835-1860* (Austin, 1949), 49, 75.

frontier.⁵⁴

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3.3. Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Atlantic Migration 1607-1860: A History of the Continuing Settlement of the United States* (New York, 1991), 146-71; Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago, 1964), 198.

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⁵⁴ George H. Santerre, *White Cliffs of Dallas: The Story of La Reunion, The Old French Colony* (Dallas, 1955); William T. Hammond and Margaret F. Hammond, *La Réunion: A French Settlement in Texas* (Dallas, 1958); Guarneri, 328-32, 385; Ermance V. Rejebian, "La Reunion: The French Colony in Dallas County," *SHQ* 43(1939-1940): 472-78; Whitridge, 314; Jonathan Beecher, "Une utopie manquee au Texas: Victor Considerant et Reunion," in *Autour de la colonie de Réunion*, ed. Gaston Bordet et al. (Besançon, 1993), 40-79; Velma Irene Sandell, "The Effect of Assimilation of the La Reunion Colonists on the Development of Dallas and Dallas County," (Master's Thesis, University of North Texas, 1986); James W. Phillips, ed., *The Fulfillment or Twelve Years Afterward. Paris, June, 1858. To Texas!!! or a Faithful Report of the Important Facts of the Social Experiment Carried Out by the Great Men of the Phalanx and the Peaceful Democracy in the New World. M.A. Col., in Dallas (Dallas County, United States, Post Office) to M. Mor...at Bonneville, Savoy* (Dallas, 1963), 3; Eusibia Lutz, "Almost Utopia," *Southwest Review* 14(1928-1929): 325-26.

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