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THE ICARIANS IN IOWA

by

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Surprising little has been written about the three Icarian communities that were founded in the area around Corning. In fact a complete list of the material written on the communities would be quite imposing, but it is difficult to find a complete objective account of the communities. Most of the materials were either written during the life of the communities and hence did not have the complete picture or take a partisan view of the disagreement that caused the original community to be dissolved and two new communities to be formed. In addition some documents have been discovered that shed considerable light on that disagreement. In the following I have attempted to pull together the various sources

to present a coherent picture of the Icarians in Iowa.

Etienne Cabet

The Icarian movement in this country was founded on the ideas of Etienne Cabet (1788-1856).¹ Although Cabet died before any of the Iowa communities were formally established, they were based on the principles he set forth. His ideas were not particularly complex and can be briefly summarized. His most basic assumption, common at the time and not surprisingly little heard of today, was inevitable progress—"The Icarian System recognizes . . . continuous progress, and the perpetual tendency toward perfection in all."² He argues that progress is a natural law³ and that ". . . the human race from its birth to the present has been generally and constantly perfecting itself. . . ."⁴

His second proposition was equality, which was based on the belief that ". . . Nature is the common *mother* of men, that all men are equally her *children*, that all are her *brothers*, and that the human race forms only one family."⁵ He also said that ". . . Nature destined the earth to be held in common and indivisibly."⁶

The specific content of his idea of equality is treated at some length near the end of *Voyage en Icarie*. His points may be summarized as follows:

1. Inequality is almost always a matter of different environment rather than heredity.⁷
2. Differences in ability that are based on heredity should not be used to penalize the less well-endowed.⁸
3. In his utopia there would be complete legal, political, economic, and social equality.
4. The only allowable distinctions were sexual and occupational, and these were expressed solely in differences in dress.

His third concern was community, which he defined as ". . . a fraternal, equal, and unitary association."⁹ Politically this association should produce unanimity,¹⁰ but if it doesn't the minority must always give way to the majority.¹¹ Liberty consists ". . . in the ability to do that which is not forbidden by Law and not to do that which is not stipulated by it."¹² And the law is very detailed. For example,

It is unanimously decided that there is a God who is First Cause and that this God is not known and likewise, that His form is not known. The councilmen decided that they would like to believe that man was made in the image of God, but that they had no knowledge on this matter.¹³

This is all possible because Cabet believes that "the number of men whose reason could be corrupted when developed by good social Organization to be infinitesimally small."¹⁴ All men will reason together to the same conclusion.

Finally, Cabet was a pacifist—a point neglected by virtually every writer in English. When asked if he would use violence to establish his community, he said, "*No neither violence, nor révolution, thus neither conspiracy nor crime.*"¹⁵

Since Cabet was neither a particularly complex or subtle thinker, this brief summary will suffice for present purposes. Perhaps it was this very simplicity that attracted so many followers and made possible the seven communities in the United States.

There were three Icarian communities established before the move to Iowa. The first, in Texas, never got off the ground and was abandoned almost immediately. Cabet had been taken in by an American land company—the land he bought was barren and the sections were not even connected to each other.¹⁶

The second community, in Nauvoo, Illinois, was very successful and lasted from 1849 to 1860. But the community was rent by factional disputes and in 1856 Cabet was ejected from the community with some of his followers. Cabet died on the way to St. Louis where his followers buried him and established a third community which managed to survive for eight years.

Corning

Returning to Nauvoo, we find that as early as 1852 Cabet had purchased 3,115 acres of government land in southwestern Iowa, and by 1857 eighteen men were cultivating 273 acres of it.¹⁷ Cabet had procured this land feeling that the community needed further isolation;¹⁸ possibly he took his cue from the experience of the Mormons who had previously occupied Nauvoo.

The Nauvoo Community had been seriously damaged by the removal of the minority, and particularly by Cabet's death, since all the property (amounting to \$76,439.76 in 1855 exclusive of the Iowa holdings)¹⁹ was in his name and his heirs were not willing to turn over title to the community.²⁰ After months of litigation the community won title to the property in both Illinois and Iowa, but by then the 1855 debt of \$11,633.23²¹ had risen considerably.

The three Iowa experiments included the two Icarian communities of longest duration, as is shown by the following chart.²²

TEXAS	
1846 (3 months)	
NAUVOO	CHELTENHAM
1849-60 (11 years)	1856-64 (8 years)
CORNING, IOWA	NEW ICARIA, IOWA
1860-78 (18 years)	1878-98 (20 years)
JEUNE ICARIA, IOWA	ICARIA SPERANZA
1878-86 (8 years)	CALIFORNIA
	1881-86 (5 years)

The Icarians at Nauvoo decided that the best course would be to settle the Iowa land, at which point many left the community. The remaining members wished "... to show that they could live and grow without being under the rule of their founder. . . ."²³

The Civil War, although bringing desolation to many, brought hope and prosperity to the Corning Community in the form of booming crop prices. By 1868 Icaria was solvent and had a membership of sixty. A glance at the annual tax paid by the community gives a general idea of the developing financial position. It rose, quite steadily, from \$135.38 in 1861 to \$620.82 in 1878.²⁴ It should also be noted that receipts for agricultural produce between the years 1869 and 1877 amounted to \$50,584.88,²⁵ and that by July 1, 1876, the community felt that it was "... now prepared to receive a few more members," and set out its terms and conditions for membership.²⁶

Corning had not always been so prosperous. In the first years of the community it was so poor that they were able to build only mud hovels²⁷ and "the able-bodied drank coffee

made of roasted rye, without sugar, and ate corn bread and bacon. The menu for meals was soon arranged. For breakfast rye coffee, corn bread and butter; dinner, corn bread and bacon; supper, mush and milk."²⁸ Still, the people were all ". . . ready to live and die for Communism."²⁹ One member said, "It is very plain, but we are independent—no man's servant—and we are content."³⁰ Shortly after moving from Nauvoo to Corning the community was forced to sell a portion of its Iowa holdings to settle some debts and pay for the rest of the land, but in 1877 it held 2,150 acres of the land; 700 acres cultivated, 400 in timber, and the remainder in pasture.³¹ Also, by the same year the membership had risen to eighty,³² and a year later it stood at eighty-three with fifty applications on hand.³³

The Corning Community produced the newspaper, *The Communist*,³⁴ and numerous pamphlets. In addition, the reading material provided by their library of two thousand volumes,³⁵ primarily in French, was widely used. Also, there were many plays and singing groups that appealed to the cultural side of life.³⁶ It must be noted that the community did not fail because it could not provide cultural amenities equal to the surrounding countryside. In fact, Icaria was the cultural center for the neighboring towns and farms.³⁷

In the Corning Community a few slight changes were made in the attempt to put the Icarian theories into practice. Marriage was still emphasized to the extent that celibacy was prescribed. The family was not split as it had been in Nauvoo, and the women were able to take a greater role in the life of the community even though they were still not allowed to vote.³⁸

Furthermore, the community was run as a democracy to the extent that the President ". . . could not sell a bushel of corn without instructions."³⁹ On the other hand, they were not completely able to reach a pure state of communism and this caused a great deal of trouble with the younger members who were truly devoted to the communal life.

With all its accomplishments Icaria was unable to prevent the development of two opposing factions. The group in the numerical minority, but voting majority, assumed dictatorial powers, but both sides had lost sight of the principles

of equality and brotherly love to which they supposedly still gave allegiance.

The first evidence of the trouble appeared in a letter to the editor of the *Corning Union*⁴⁰ from a recent visitor to Icaria. This letter produced an immediate denunciation signed by E. Bettanneir. The following week another letter appeared, this one from the Executive Committee of the Young Branch at Icaria denouncing Bettanneir's letter and substantiating the first one. This letter, among other things, said, ". . . twenty months ago, in April 1876, a demand for separation was presented by the young progressive party to the old conservative one."⁴¹ It is noteworthy that this letter assigns the cause of the trouble to ". . . an old leaven of enmity which was brought from Nauvoo. . . ."⁴² The letter then goes on to describe, in detail, the conditions at Icaria as a result of the Young and Old Branches,⁴³ as they were termed.

In April 1876 the Young Branch demanded the dissolution of the community. In doing so they laid the blame for the trouble on Cabet, but at the same time they said that the past must be forgotten so as to not damage the Communist cause.⁴⁴

Even in the midst of turmoil "the plan was perfect"; obviously human beings have not evolved to the stage of perfectibility seen by Cabet in the *Credo communiste*. Whether the Young Branch was merely appealing to precedent in its comments on Cabet and Nauvoo or whether there still existed a feeling of enmity is not known, but it must be noted that the President of the community and the leader of the Old Branch had been a pro-Cabet member at Nauvoo and had journeyed to St. Louis.

The majority did not make as many constructive proposals as the Young Branch, but a document dated November 29, 1877, and signed by Sauva, presents the plan of the General Assembly.⁴⁵ This plan consisted of withholding from the Young Branch "Sugar, Coffee, Rice, dessert of all sort, Clothing, and generally all that is necessary, but that can be suppressed."⁴⁶ Again the principle that all men are brothers has been lost in the struggle for dominance.

The major contribution of the majority to the controversy appears in a two part pamphlet entitled *La Crises*

icarienne and was written by Arsene Sauva, President of the community. It is primarily a resume of the history of the conflict and separation and a report of the suit brought by the Young Branch, but the author does indulge in a few blasts at the minority, particularly at one man, Dereure, who is labeled as a centralist and seems to be strongly Marxian.⁴⁷

According to Sauva, the majority was willing to accept many of the proposals of the minority, including suffrage for the women; which would have given the minority a slightly stronger voting position. On the other hand, the minority demand that it be given one-quarter of the offices was flatly rejected.⁴⁸

The next document of importance was presented by the Young Branch. It was "A Proposition to the General Assembly Concerning the Formation of Two Branch of the Icarian Community."⁴⁹ This document states that the basis of the division lies, not in the history of the movement, but in the divergent ideals of the two groups.

One author characterized the old group as follows: "The struggle for survival had made them rigid conservatives, instinctively turning their backs on the world."⁵⁰ At the same time, Marxism had stirred Icaria; it ". . . looked for a time as if it would become one of the centers of the First International in the United States."⁵¹ Most likely the conflict between revolutionary Marxism and the conservatism of the elders was very much at the root of the Coming split. At least this seems to be the only possible interpretation of the motives of the Young Branch as quoted above.

Forty-six stockholders, including twenty children, demanded dissolution,⁵² and an article establishing two branches was drawn up by the Young Branch,⁵³ but before any settlement was made the matter went to the courts in *The State of Iowa v. the Icarian Community*.⁵⁴ The suit, instituted by the Young Branch in August 1878, was an attempt to abolish the community on the grounds that under the "Act to Incorporate the Icarian Community"⁵⁵ the commune had been established for agricultural purposes and had gone beyond its legal limits by developing industries. According to Section Two of this act, "The general nature of business to be transacted shall be all kinds of agricultural and horticulture."⁵⁶ The validity of

the suit is brought into question, however, by Article Six of the Icarian Constitution which states that the association "... is at once agricultural and industrial. . . ." ⁵⁷ Of course, the real reason for the institution of the legal proceedings was an attempt by the Young Branch to force concessions from the Old Branch. In one sense they succeeded because the Corning Community was legally dissolved and two branches were established on the land owned by the previous community. These branches were New Icaria, the Old Branch, the Jeune Icaria, the Young Branch.

New Icaria

New Icaria was established a few miles away from the old site and existed in a weakened state until 1898⁵⁸ when it was dissolved by the agreement of the remaining members. Its twenty year life span was the longest of any of the Icarian communities, but it was also the least active. It had some contact with the outside world and published the newspaper *Revue Icarienne*. There was little contact with Jeune Icaria which was established on the old site.⁵⁹

The New Icarian Community had to start fresh on completely unbroken prairie land, and even by 1881 they were unprepared for the severe winter. Still, through an extreme conservatism they were able to make the community prosper so that by the time of dissolution they could provide quite well for the remaining twenty-one members.⁶⁰

The contract signed at the formation of the New Icarian Community indicates that all property whatsoever was to belong to the community and the members could make no claim for its return at any time. They further consented to "... submit our children during their minority to the care and the absolute control of our association, giving it the same rights and same power over them, and charging it with the same duties toward them, as if they were under guardianship conformably with the laws of Iowa."⁶¹

In this contract the voting right was extended to women, but they were not eligible to be elected to any post but that of Director of Clothing and all committee posts. Also, the women were not allowed to vote on financial matters.

A contemporary observer noted that:

"Having learned from bitter experience that debt

is the bane of societies, as well as of individuals, the Icarians have adopted it as a fixed principle, to contract no liabilities, and to avoid all speculative and hazardous enterprises. They are content with small gains, and in an old-fashioned way study rather to moderate their outlays rather than to increase their profits. Naturally, as they own in common, they are not in haste to be rich. With them the acquisition of wealth is not a leading object of life. They have greater regard to independence, and give more thought to personal ease. They labor industriously, but make their toil as comfortable and pleasant as possible.⁶²

Jeune Icaria

Jeune Icaria “. . . attracted as many native radicals and cranks as communists, and during the 1860's the Young Icarians voted for the Greenback Party rather than the Marxian Socialistic Labor Party.”⁶³ In spite of their voting record, Jeune Icaria was represented at the July 1881, London Congress.⁶⁴

The outlook for Jeune Icaria was bright for the first year: “. . . The membership rose to seventy-five by the Fall of 1880; the debt in October 1889 decreased to \$4,000 and an Icarian forge and shoe-shop opened in Corning.”⁶⁵ At another point the membership rose to eighty-two,⁶⁶ but on the whole Jeune Icaria acted primarily as a staging ground for the last Icarian community. They did, though, adopt women's suffrage and lower the voting age to twenty.⁶⁷ Also, they aspired again to a pure communism, donating all property to the community and stipulating that in the case of dissolution all property was to go to those who wished to carry on the experiment.⁶⁸ They also completely abolished the Presidency and located the executive power in four annually elected trustees.⁶⁹ At the same time, however, they maintained their Icarian heritage by keeping marriage and some aspects of the conventional family system.

The final community, Icaria Speranza, was the only Icarian community to fail for largely economic reasons. It

never really managed to get established financially due to a dispute over the sale of the Iowa land. In 1886 Jeune Icaria was dissolved by the courts and a receiver appointed to sell all properties. The proceeds were dispersed as follows:

1. All debts were paid.
2. All donors to the community were reimbursed.
3. The eleven remaining members shared equally in the balance.⁷⁰

Icaria Speranza was dissolved shortly thereafter, and with the end of New Icaria, twelve years later, came the end of the Icarian communities.

Notes

¹For biographies of Cabet, see Félix Bonnaud, *Cabet et son oeuvre: Appel à tous les socialistes*. Paris: Société Libre D'Édition des Gens de Lettre, 1900; Paul Carré, *Cabet de la démocratie au communisme*. Lille: Bigot Frères, 1903; Jules Prudhommeaux, *Icarie et son fondateur Etienne Cabet; Contribution à l'étude du socialisme expérimental*. Paris: Edouard Cornély, 1907; and Sylvester A. Piotrowski, *Etienne Cabet and the Voyage en Icarie*. Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1935.

²Etienne Cabet, *The History of the Colony or Republic of Icaria in the United States of America*, trans. by Thomas Teakle in an article entitled "History and Constitution of the Icarian Community," *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 15 (April, 1914), p. 233. Actually Teakle translated one of the few Icarian items that was originally published in English (*Colony or Republic of Icaria in the United States of America*. Nauvoo, Ill.: Icarian Printing Establishment, 1852). In 1854 it was published in Paris in French. In 1855 a second edition with no significant changes was published in French and Teakle's translation was based on this edition.

³Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie*, 6^{me} éd. (Paris: au bureau du Populaire, 1848), p. 661; Cabet, *Credo communiste*, 1^{er} éd. (Paris: Prevot, n.d.), p. 1.

⁴Cabet, *Credo communiste*, 1^{er} éd., p. 5.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 4. Emphases in the original.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie*, 6^{me} éd., p. 365.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁹Cabet, *Douze lettres d'un communiste à un réformiste sur la communauté*, 3^{me} lettre (Paris: au bureau du Populaire, 1841), p. 17.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 8^{me} lettre, pp. 65-66.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Cabet, *Credo communiste*, 1^{er} éd., p. 8. Article 40 of the Icarian Constitution repeats this sentiment in almost the same words. See Cabet, *The History of the Colony or Republic of Icaria*, p. 256.

¹³Glen Negley and J. Max Patrick, *The Quest for Utopia; An Anthology of Imaginary Societies* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), p. 578, summarizing Voyage en Icarie.

¹⁴ Cabet, *Credo communiste*, 1^{er} éd., p. 2.

¹⁵ Cabet, *Voyage en Icarie*, 6^{me} éd., p. 560. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ See the chart in Adolf Hepner, *Die Ikarier in Nordamerika; Eine Warnung vor kommunistischen Colonialgrundungen*, no. 7 of the Socialistic Library (New York: for the National Executive Committee of the Socialistic Labor Party by John Dehler, 1886), p. 14.

¹⁷ Albert Shaw, *Icaria; A Study in Communistic History* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1884), p. 21.

¹⁸ Harry W. Laidler, *Social-Economic Movements* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1944), p. 107.

¹⁹ Shaw, p. 52.

²⁰ See Ruth A. Gallaher, "Icaria and the Icarians," *The Palimpsest*, 2 (April, 1921), p. 103.

²¹ Shaw, p. 52.

²² Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1953), p. 60.

²³ A. Sauva quoted in William A. Hinds, *American Communities* (New York: Corinth, 1961), pp. 66-67.

²⁴ Document in the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library.

²⁵ Document in the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library. It is assumed that receipts refers to that received for goods sold, thus being produce over and above that consumed.

²⁶ *The Communist*, 1 (July 1, 1877), p. 1. *The Communist* was a newspaper published by the Corning Community.

²⁷ Charles Nordoff, *Communistic Societies of the United States*, New York: Hastings House, 1961), p. 336.

²⁸ Madame E. Fleury Robinson, "A Social Experiment," *The Open Court*, 4 (September 11, 1890), p. 2506.

²⁹ Hinds, p. 76.

³⁰ Quoted in Nordoff, p. 337.

³¹ Comité de Propaganda, *Icaria, Situation of the Icarian Community*. A single sheet dated September 7, 1877.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ A. Sauva, quoted in Hinds, p. 71.

³⁴ Prudhommeaux, XXXVII-XL, list 17 Icarian journals, but fails to note the *Communist*, the *Social Record*, and the *Cooperative Record*. Brief mention of the latter two is made in the first number of the *Communist*, but this is the only record I have found of them.

³⁵ Comité de Propaganda. The remnants of this library institutes a special collection at the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library.

³⁶ For everyday life at Corning, see Marie Marchand Ross, *Child of Icaria*, New York (City Publishing Company), 1938.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁸ A. Sauva, quoted in Hinds, pp. 73-74.

³⁹ A member, quoted in Nordhoff, p. 338.

⁴⁰ This letter is quoted in Hinds, p. 76.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ The name Young Branch refers to the more radical of the two groups at Corning. It was called the Young Branch simply because it was primarily composed of the younger generation, the sons and daughters of the founders of Icaria, who composed the Old Branch.

⁴⁴Document in the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Arsene Sauva, *La Crises icarienne* (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), part I, p. 5.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. I, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁹Document in the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library.

⁵⁰Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons (eds.), *Socialism in American Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), I, p. 190.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁵²Document in the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Partial proceedings at the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library.

⁵⁵Legal copy in the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, Section 2.

⁵⁷"The Icarian Constitution," in Cabet, *The History of the Colony or Republic of Icaria*, p. 254.

⁵⁸A motion for dissolution was made February 23, 1895, but the community was not finally dissolved until 1898, even though some have used the 1895 date as the year of dissolution.

⁵⁹See Ross, *Child of Icaria* for her comments on life in New Icaria. The split had caused a great deal of bitterness because it divided families.

⁶⁰See Ross, "Ventures in Idealism, II: Icaria," *The Social Gospel: A Magazine of Christian Altruism*, 38, n.s. 9 (April, 1901), pp. 6-7; and Charles Gray, "The Icarian Community," *Annals of Iowa*, ser. 3, 6 (July, 1903), p. 112.

⁶¹"Contract of the New Icarian Community of Adams County, Iowa," in Shaw, 190.

⁶²S. W. Moorhead in *The Western Magazine*, July, 1877, quoted in Shaw, p. 121.

⁶³Egbert and Persons, p. 207.

⁶⁴Henry David, *The History of the Haymarket Affair* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1958), p. 64.

⁶⁵Hine, p. 63.

⁶⁶Prudhommeaux, pp. 649-651.

⁶⁷Ernest S. Wooster, *Communities of the Past and Present* (Newllano, La.: Lanno Colonist, 1924), p. 32.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Hine, p. 63.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 76.

Editor's Note: Due to an error in the initial numbering of the pages in Volume 41, the various issues in the Volume will be numbered in the following order:

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