

## The Icarian Community

Charles Gray

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

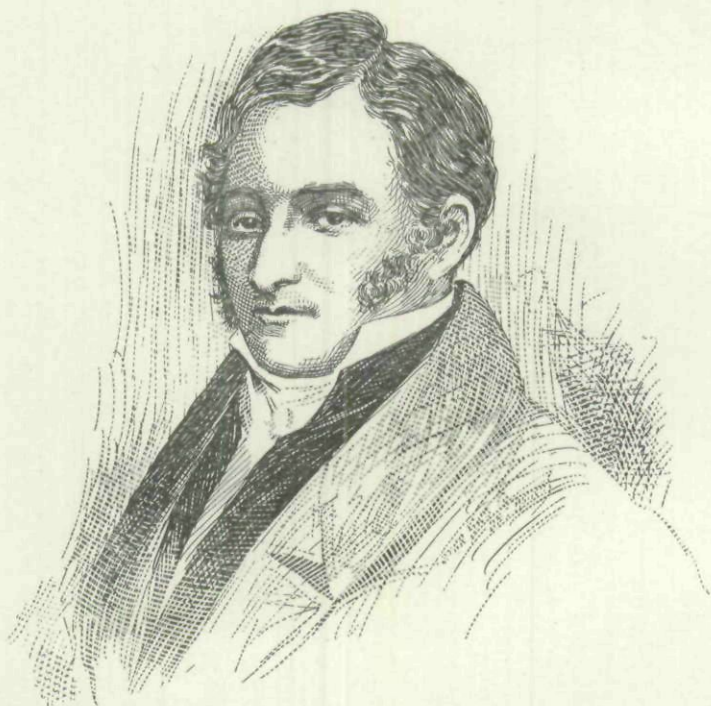
---

### Recommended Citation

Gray, Charles. "The Icarian Community." *The Annals of Iowa* 6 (1903), 107-114.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.4553>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://www.iowaresearchonline.org/)



ETIENNE CABET.

French socialist and leader of the Icarians. He was born at Dijon, France, 1788. Led the Icarians to Texas, 1843, thence to Nauvoo, Ill., 1849, and to Corning, Iowa. He died at St. Louis, Mo., in 1856.

## THE ICARIAN COMMUNITY.

BY CHARLES GRAY.

Doubtless comparatively few citizens of Iowa are aware that within its borders, in the county of Adams, about seven years ago, expired the last dying embers of a communistic movement which at one time was probably the greatest socialistic enterprise the world has ever seen, numbering its enthusiastic admirers and supporters by the thousands. I refer to the French colony, established about three miles east of Corning, in about 1858, under the name of the "Icarian Community." At no period of its life in America did Icaria boast so large a membership as many other socialistic communities which have at various times existed in the new world; indeed the zenith of its prosperity seems to have been reached before the Icarians departed from France with the intention of establishing a colony in America, in February, 1848.

Etienne Cabet, founder of Icaria, was conspicuously identified with the revolutionary movements in France during the early portion of the last century. In 1840, after his return to Paris from political exile in England, he published his "*Voyage en Icarie*," similar to More's "Utopia," in which an imaginary traveler discovers an ideal community based on the socialistic tenets which form the greater part of the foundation of all communistic doctrines. The French people, on account of the then recent political upheavals, seem to have been in just the right mood to accept Cabet's ideas, as promulgated in the "*Voyage en Icarie*," and soon many thousands were enrolled under his banner, with the avowed intention of establishing a community in the new world where the precepts of Icaria might be put into practice. To this end a large grant of land was secured in the then newly admitted state of Texas, and in February, 1848, sixty-nine enthusiasts, constituting what its members proudly termed the "advance

guard," set out from Havre, France, for America. On arriving at their destination, near the present site of Dallas, Texas, they were disappointed in finding that the land grant, instead of being one large tract as they desired and had expected, consisted of portions of sections scattered over a large area. This fact, combined with their utter lack of knowledge of agriculture, as exemplified in western ranch life, and the further fact that they were stricken with an epidemic of malarial fever, determined them to give up their present site for a colony in Texas and seek other and more congenial quarters. Nauvoo, Illinois, having just been deserted by the Mormons, was the most promising field, and the remnant of the Texas colony, joined by a second party from the main body of Icarians in France, in all about 250 or 300 persons, settled in the former stronghold evacuated by the disciples of Joseph Smith. This was in 1849. Cabet himself was with the colonists, having arrived with one of the later contingents from France. Nauvoo, however, was only a temporary camping ground, for soon a large tract of land was secured in Adams county, Iowa, whither a portion of the colonists came later. During the sojourn in Nauvoo the membership was increased to about 500 and the financial fortunes of the Icarians seem to have been recuperated for a time at least, until dissensions arose which led to a separation of the two factions engaged in the controversy. The trouble seems to have arisen chiefly from Cabet's desire to arrogate too much dictatorial authority to himself. As a result of this disruption Cabet, at the head of the minority party, went to St. Louis, Mo., where he died a few days after their arrival there. His followers, something less than 200 in number, sought employment, established themselves in a colony based upon communistic theories, and led a precarious existence for about five years, when the experiment was wholly abandoned. This branch was known as the Cheltenham wing of Icaria, so named from the estate upon which they settled near St. Louis.



The misunderstanding at Nauvoo which led to the separation of the two factions, and also the death of Cabet, doubtless had much to do with the loss of enthusiasm on the part of the great mass of his disciples in France, who were anxiously awaiting the selection of a permanent abiding place for Icarians when they would join the commune. Evidently the cold, hard facts of existence could not be harmonized with the Utopian dream of the founder. At any rate, no more recruits came to America from France.

In 1860 the major faction remaining in Nauvoo, consisting of something more than 225 persons, removed to Adams county, Iowa, settling upon the land previously acquired there, and incorporating under the laws of the State as an agricultural society. The community owned a tract of 3,000 acres, but the same was heavily mortgaged, and at that time a suitable market for farm products was a long distance from Icaria. Corning constituted the local trading point. However, by cultivating the sheep-raising industry and taking advantage of the excessively high price of wool during the civil war, together with a surrender of more than half their land, the Icarians finally succeeded in getting out of debt.

Here, then, in Iowa, really began the permanent work-a-day life of these communistic enthusiasts. A large edifice was erected which served as an assembly room for the Icarians and also as a dining hall. Here were held all the public gatherings of whatever nature, and they were not a few. An amateur theatrical was often produced, and not infrequently a social ball enlivened the tedium of their existence. Outsiders were frequently invited to attend these social gatherings. Surrounding the assembly hall were the residences of the members, who preserved the family relation sacred. Everything in the community was held in common, and all funds went into a common treasury. A president had general supervision over the affairs of the society in its relation to the outside world, while the duties and assignments of members were made by a board of directors; thus,

one attended to making the purchases of food, another of clothing, another directed the labor of the members, etc. Matters of more than ordinary import were discussed in the general assembly, where a majority vote decided the action to be taken. Except in particular instances, women were excluded from the privileges of the ballot, and the usual age restrictions were placed upon the men. So far as I have been able to learn there never was occasion for complaint because of any member failing to fulfill his duties along the lines of manual labor. The peculiar zeal or enthusiasm of the members seems to have been such that each regarded his own portion of the work in building up the community as a sacred duty—a labor of love and sacrifice for the well-being of others, and all entered into the spirit of this idea with commendable zeal, to the extent that the assets of Icaria at one time reached the sum of \$60,000 or \$70,000. While a majority were employed in agricultural pursuits, yet other vocations were represented in the community, each member having the right to exercise his preference in the matter of occupation so long as the interests of the colony were subserved and the daily requirements were met. A tailor looked after the wearing apparel of Icarians, and a shoemaker performed a similar office in his line. A flouring mill, sawmill, blacksmith shop and other industries were fostered. The importation of Percheron horses at one time furnished no mean source of revenue to the Icarians, who were among the first to recognize the demand for imported stock in the agricultural country where they were located. The journalistic field was filled by the publication of various periodicals during the life of the colony. The "*Revue Icarienne*" was an exceptionally well edited journal, and for many years had a wide circulation in France among the devotees of Cabet. In the houses that constituted the homes of these Frenchmen were not a few men of superior intelligence who had had the advantages of education, and the library of the community contained something more than 2,000 volumes of the best

literature. The remnant of this fine library is now in possession of Tabor college, in Fremont county, Iowa.

Necessarily, in a community founded upon such principles as those of Icaria, where each individual enjoyed the same privileges as the other, the matter of dress and other expenditures was placed upon a sensible basis. Plain, but serviceable clothing was worn; good, wholesome food was served, and the right sort of literature was placed in the hands of its members. In matters of religion each individual might exercise his own ideas. Sunday was observed in the usual orthodox way and a moral atmosphere permeated the colony, though no religious dogmas in any way entered into the tenets of Icaria. In this particular Icaria occupied a field peculiarly apart from most socialistic experiments, the very foundations of which are usually certain religious theories. A portion of the time when the adjoining country was sparsely settled, Icaria furnished its own schools. While in a sense exclusive, in its dealings with the outside world the community always exercised tact and judgment, commanding and receiving the respect of all. Its members participated in the political movements of the country, and at the time of the civil war, if I am correctly informed, every male member qualified to enlist was enrolled in the Union army, where they made enviable records as soldiers. Mr. E. F. Bettannier, the last president of the colony and still a resident of this county, has always been an active Republican; and, indeed, such has been the political affiliation of every one of the Icarians—a rather peculiar fact. As the accumulation of wealth could not operate for the aggrandizement of the individual, there was small ambition among the members to build up great riches, and a reasonable degree of prosperity seemed to be very satisfactory to all concerned, though their early experience had impressed upon them the importance of keeping out of debt.

So long as the older members, who had together borne the hardships and privations of the early efforts of the com-

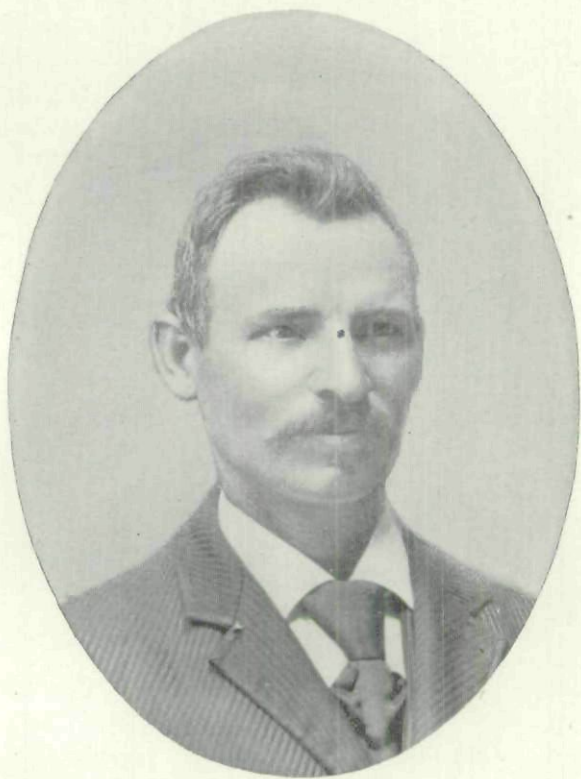


munity, were in control, matters ran along with little friction in the Iowa community. However, when the younger generation arrived at the age where their voices should be heard in the councils, various little dissensions arose, which culminated in 1877 in a split between the younger members and the old. After various unsuccessful efforts to settle the difficulties, an agreement was at last entered into whereby the old party secured possession of the eastern portion of the domain, and the younger party remained at the old site of the colony. An equitable and satisfactory division of land and effects was arrived at, and the old party proceeded to establish themselves in the new location under the name of New Icaria. The young people continued their organization in Iowa until 1883, when the few remaining (several of its members having withdrawn) went to Cloverdale, Cal., where had already gone several ex-Icarians. In California a new society was formed under the name of "Icaria Speranza," which existed for several years and then disintegrated.

The veterans of the old party, however, secured a new charter under the name of New Icaria and began anew the labors of establishing themselves. At that time (1883) their membership consisted of just thirty-nine persons, I am informed by credible authority. The organization continued very much on the old lines until 1895, when the membership had become so depleted that it was thought best to disband. Accordingly on February 16th of that year E. F. Bettannier, the last president of the society, was appointed receiver of Icaria and its affairs were adjusted as quickly as possible. An amicable division of the property was arranged and in 1901 the receiver made final report to the court and was discharged. At the time of dissolution there were twenty-one members in the community, with sufficient property to place all in fairly comfortable circumstances.

Thus ended one of the great world movements along the line of socialistic reform—an experiment which has so often been launched, and which has as frequently arrived at the





E. F. BETTANNIER.

The last President of Icaria, and receiver of the property at the dissolution of the Society, February 16, 1895.

same end as Icaria. In some respects this community was radically different from any other of which I have any knowledge, notably in having no religious ideals to unify its membership; but it did not escape the common fate of all communistic settlements. However, it is not my purpose to theorize in this article, but briefly to give the history of one of the unique undertakings which for a time flourished within the borders of our commonwealth.

The requisites for admission into Icaria were an abiding faith in the communistic idea, and the turning over of all one's real and personal property to the society, for which no compensation was made and which could not be reclaimed, according to the constitution. A member's time and services were always at the disposal of the community, and he received no pecuniary reward therefor. An absence of three days without consent from the proper authorities rendered a member liable to censure or expulsion. Offenses against the society were punished by public reprimand. In aggravated cases the offender might be deprived of the privileges of membership. Propositions of names for admission must be made when three-fourths of the voting members were present, and a nine-tenths vote was necessary to elect. Novitiates were received on probation of three to six months. Withdrawals could be made on giving fifteen days' notice of such intention, and expulsions required a nine-tenths vote of all the members entitled to franchise. The expulsion of a member included his wife and minor children, the latter being at all times subject to the will of a majority during the membership of their parents in the community. The president, secretary, treasurer, and board of directors were elected in February of each year, on the anniversary of the sailing of the first Icarians from France to America.

In concluding, it may not be amiss to mention some of the notable persons who have at one time or another been identified with Icaria. Alcander Longley, founder of the Mutual Aid community at Glen-Allen, Mo., was a member

some time in the early 60's. He was identified with no less than nine different communistic settlements and edited a newspaper called the "*Communist*" at various times and places during his checkered career. Prof. A. A. Marchand, several times president of Icaria and an able editor of "*Revue Icarienne*," was a talented member whose sterling qualities were much admired in Corning. He was one of the first of the vanguard to leave France, and was also a member at the time of the dissolution of the colony, after which he removed to Florida. A. Picquenard, a member of the society at Nauvoo, became celebrated as an architect. Our own state house and the capitol building of Illinois are monuments to his genius. Don Ignatius Montaldo was a friend and companion of Garibaldi and Chateaubriand, the distinguished French author and statesman. Hearing of the Cabet movement, he joined the colony at Nauvoo. After several years he left, but later rejoined in Iowa, where he died. His eldest brother was judge of the supreme court in Spain. Another brother, who was crippled in the Union army, was at one time professor of Spanish in the Naval academy at Annapolis, Md. Antoine von Gauvain was a descendant of a French nobleman who had been decorated with the cross of the Legion of Honor. Mr. Gauvain was educated in Berlin. He edited a newspaper in New York for a time and then joined the Icarians. He enjoyed the distinction of being one of the best educated men in Iowa, for a number of years giving private instruction in Greek, Latin, German and French to pupils who eagerly sought his tutelage. E. F. Bettannier, last president and receiver of the colony, has for many years been a conspicuous citizen of Adams county, identified with many of her progressive movements. The satisfactory adjustment of such large interests in closing up the affairs of the community proves him a man of superior business ability. To him the writer is indebted for practically all the facts herein contained, for which acknowledgment is hereby made.

CORNING, IOWA, May, 1903.



Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.