

Les Misérables in Texas

Written by Jim Morriss



It is often a joy to learn about some of the early settlers of our area who came here and in spite of many hardships, succeeded in taming this land, raising their families, and leaving us a rich history.

So many of our earliest Texans displayed a spirit of tenacity and durability that it might seem that the land itself strengthened those who settled here. However, there is a clear example of a group who came here and did not thrive. Perhaps it would be good for us all to know of the time when some settlers left the misery of their distant homeland but could not take root in the fertile land that they sought in the Cross Timbers.

After Texas won its independence from the Empire of Mexico, there were very few people living here. Our leaders in Austin wanted people to settle here and help bring prosperity to the new Republic of Texas. The one way they could encourage immigration was by offering free land. Real estate promoters, called empresarios, were given large tracts of land to distribute to families if they would come and build their farms here. All of Denton County was once in a large tract called the Peters Colony. William Peters was able to convince many Americans to come to Texas but not nearly enough of them to satisfy the contract that he made with Austin. In the 1840's he made several trips to Europe to seek people willing to come to the promised land of Texas. One place where Peters found a large audience of people, very ready to listen to his sales pitch, was France.

By most accounts, France in the 1800's was not a good place to live. The wars with England and the excesses of the French aristocracy led to a very bloody revolt, which in 1793 resulted in the beheading of King Louis XVI and later his queen, Marie Antoinette. Over the next decade a succession of no fewer than 20 different governments were formed and failed. Finally in 1804 there was a violent takeover of the country by Napoleon Bonaparte who declared himself emperor. Napoleon led his country to many glorious military victories, but finally a disastrous defeat. After several more revolts, there was a return of the French royal family. In 1830, the leadership of France was assumed by King Louis Philippe. Conditions declined. Heavy taxation, disease and starvation led to more revolts which were brutally crushed. This period of French history was documented by Victor Hugo in his top selling book, "Les Misérables."

One of the social movements spawned in France at this time was led by a former official of King Philippe, named Étienne Cabet. Cabet was a lawyer, philosopher and writer who encouraged his countrymen to form a utopian system that he called "Communisme." His ideas were later taken over by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but that is a different story. Naturally the French king said, "AUCUNE VOIE!" Cabet himself was banished because he was no longer loyal to

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Louis Philippe and the king tried to suppress his evolving movement with different degrees of persecution.

In 1841, William Peters met with Cabet in England. Cabet had written several books and numerous radical pamphlets. He was becoming famous and because of his world-wide notoriety, he was allowed to return to France on the condition that he tone it down a little. Cabet encouraged his followers to listen to the very persuasive Mr. Peters. Peters must have been surprised that he found no opposition from the French royal government. Philippe was more than willing to allow the reformists, who were gaining in numbers, to just go away. It was said that Étienne Cabet often rode, on a white horse, through the streets of many French cities yelling, "Allons en Amerique" which means, "Let us go to America."

The followers of Cabet had been planning to create a perfect community that they would call Icaria, the name of a fictional country in one of the idealistic books that Cabet had written. Peters' offer seemed too good to be true; each single man would get 320 acres and each family would receive 640 acres. All they were required to do was live on the land for five years. Cabet required that all of his followers give him their money and that they must agree to turn over the deeds for the land they receive to the collective community. Peters just needed settlers to come and live in Denton County. If the French settlers decided to give away their land after they gained title to it and their houses after they built them, that was their own business.

As France entered the new year of 1848, rumors of still another revolt were brewing. This greatly aided the objectives of both Mister Peters and Monsieur Cabet. Plans were made to relocate 1,500 disgruntled Frenchmen to North Texas as soon as possible. Cabet decided that he should remain in France to recruit and direct the additional colonists that would soon follow. One of their number, Adolphe Gouhenant, was selected to be the new leader of the avant guard platoon. They planned to sail right up the Red River and start building their "New Icaria" on the south bank. The first group of 69 settlers left Le Havre on January 27, 1848. When they arrived in New Orleans on March 27, they learned that they were no longer destined to become citizens of the Republic of Texas. Texas was now the 28th state of the USA. To them it just meant that they would now be subject to taxation and harassment from the soldiers of their new ruler, President James K. Polk. They also found that they would not be able to take a steam boat all the way to the land of the Peters Colony; the Red River was only navigable as far as Shreveport.

The group set up a semi-permanent camp west of Shreveport where new arrivals could prepare for the 225 mile trek to their new home. A few rough sheds were built to hold their luggage and personal clothing. Gouhenant was provided with enough money to purchase some wagons and oxen to carry their heavy, collectively owned, tools and cold weather baggage. But most of them walked with a "brouette de roue," or push cart to carry their personal belongings. They arrived at the headquarters of the Peters Colony in southeastern Denton County in late May, and selected a remote section of the land on the western edge of the county for their settlement. The choice of location was made to get as far as possible from Alton, the seat of Denton County. They were doing what their experience had taught them to do; always avoid and distrust the government.

More settlers joined them throughout the summer and eventually the population of the

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community grew to about 150. At that time there were many more streams and creeks and they were filled with large fish. A variety of birds including wild turkey and geese could be easily trapped or shot. There was also an abundant stock of game in the woods; the settlers could feast on rabbit, deer, or even buffalo. How different it must have been than the crowded existence of meager scavenging they knew in the old country. There was a lot of work to be done and by winter 30 to 40 cabins had been built. They also staked out and cleared some fields to grow crops for the commune.

Thankfully, the Icarians did not receive any persecution from local police or soldiers; but neither did they experience the Eden-like paradise that they were promised. They had turned over all of their money to Cabet for his promise that what they needed would be provided. They had tools to make houses but only what they brought with them on their journey from Shreveport. Promised equipment for farming did not arrive. Sickness also took a toll on the little community. Soon the settlers were questioning the abilities of their leader, Mr. Gouhenant. The community had a doctor, who may have been able to diagnose and treat the diseases encountered in Europe, but he seemed powerless to do anything about the fevers and stomach ailments that were striking down the new transplants to Texas. The settlers learned from new arrivals that the bloody revolt back in France had ended well. The hated king's army lost and another republic was starting. Philippe had escaped to an asylum in England. Some believed that he was trying to come to America. There is no doubt that homesickness was also beginning to affect some of the settlers.

As with several other socialist enclaves that started in America, workers finally asked themselves why they should have to work so hard, when their reward would be the same no matter how long or hard they worked. Within one year, nearly half of the settlers were either dead or had deserted the colony. The remaining colonists finally became disgusted with the leadership of Gouhenant and all of the broken promises. The Icarians actually threatened to kill the leader but he was able to escape. One report says that he lived out his life in the Denton County town of Pilot Point. Other settlers left the community, some relocating to nearby towns and some able to walk back to New Orleans. By the end of 1849 the colony of Icaria was completely abandoned.

There is no evidence that Étienne Cabet ever did come to Texas. Later in 1848, Monsieur Cabet joined with one of the shiploads of colonists that set out for Denton County. When he arrived in New Orleans, he learned of land that was available in Illinois that was right on the mighty Mississippi River. He decided that this new location was superior to the land in Texas and bought the town of Nauvoo. As stragglers from Icaria arrived back in New Orleans, some returned to France and some were convinced by Cabet to join the much larger and more determined group in Illinois. The group in Illinois did succeed better than the colony in Denton County, but eventually it too failed and the settlers moved on. The community in Illinois became dissatisfied with the leadership of Cabet and they banished him just as the Texas group had expelled Gonnaugh. He moved down to St. Louis where he died in 1855.

Perhaps it would be good to take a look back and try to understand why the Icarians failed. They were certainly tough enough and had shown that they could endure hard times. But they did not seem willing to join the community of settlers who preceded them. Because they

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purposely isolated themselves from their neighbors, they did not receive advice on what crops would grow, what to expect from the weather, and how to deal with local sicknesses. Because of their Catholic faith they would have declined the regular visits from circuit riding Protestant preachers who provided valuable cross-communication to other North Texas settlements. Much of the reason for their failure can be laid at the feet of Étienne Cabet who sent them to the frontier, then abandoned them. But probably most of the reason for their failure was due to the lethargic attitude that seemed to be common in all of the experiments of the socialists. Their leaders and their idealism removed the incentive to work as hard as they needed to.

Despite the failure of the Icarians in Denton County, other settlers who came here did well. The towns of Justin, Medlin, Drop and Elizabethtown grew where Icaria once was. By 1875 all traces of the colony were gone. The land between Justin and Argyle was then known as “Frenchtown Prairie” and the place where the road crossed Denton Creek was called “Frenchtown Crossing.” Today the path that the Icarians took to cross what is now Bartonville and Argyle is called “Frenchtown Road.”

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