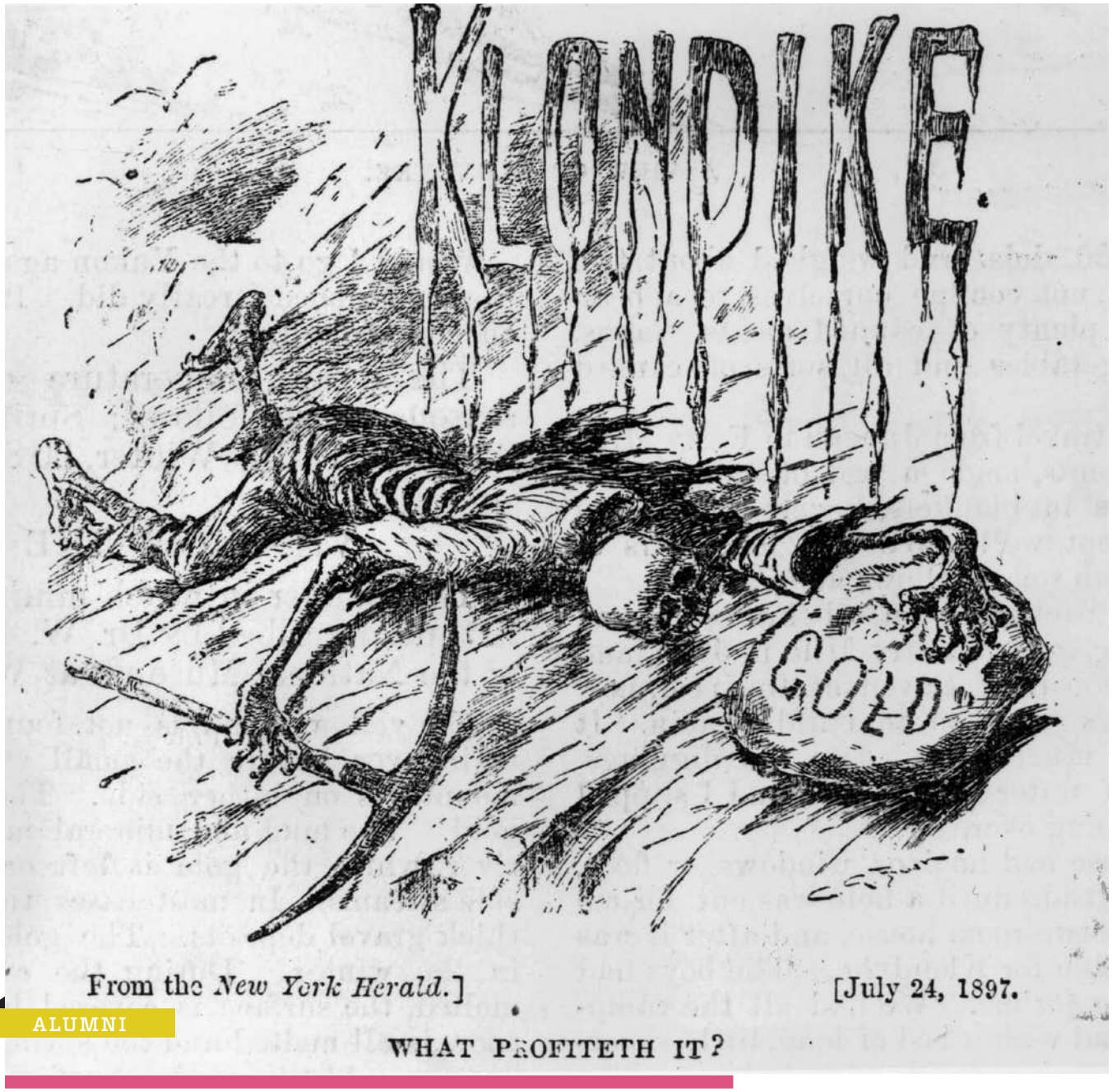
by James Tobin



ALUMNI

Starved or Drowned or Chased Down by Wolves: The Disappearance of Dutch Ferbert

A great halfback and coach of the pre-Yost era went off to find millions in Alaskan gold—**but did he?**

PHOTO Hulton Archive/Stringer

IN THE SPRING OF 1900, football fans in Ann Arbor got bad news. After three winning seasons, word was going around that the Wolverines' 26-year-old coach — Gustave "Dutch" Ferbert — would not be back in the fall. He was heading for the Yukon gold fields, he had told friends, and he would come back with a fortune or not at all.

In Seattle, with a couple of pals, he boarded a steamer for the frigid wilderness where prospectors were panning streams in the greatest gold rush since the 1850s in California. Early reports placed him in the Klondike region of the Yukon Territory, where the first strikes had been made in 1896. But by 1900 the dwindling Klondike claims were surpassed by new strikes in Alaska's impossibly remote Seward Peninsula, near the Arctic Circle. Ferbert's remaining prospecting buddy, Jack Noyes, was ready to quit the Yukon, but Ferbert was still game. He'd try his luck in the new gold fields near Nome, he told Noyes. The two parted, and Noyes sailed for Seattle.

Then Dutch Ferbert disappeared.

A year went by, then two. No news came to Ann Arbor or to Ferbert's mother in his hometown of Lakewood, Ohio, near Cleveland. Letters to him were returned stamped "Uncalled for" or "Address unknown." "Where is 'Dutch' Ferbert?" sports pages demanded.

"If Ferbert is alive," his friend George Haller said, "some of us would surely hear from him."

IN THE 20 YEARS that varsity football had been played at Michigan, Ferbert had been one of the greats, a quarterback and right halfback who helped the squad to a four-year record of 33–6–1. Stocky and no one's idea of handsome, he was "a bulldog in courage," a sportswriter said. At 150 pounds he was small even by that era's standards, but "he could send that 150 pounds into the line with all the force of a battering ram."

The fall after his graduation in 1897, he

(OPPOSITE PAGE) **24th July 1897:** A *New York Herald* cartoon illustrating the destructive power of gold fever in relation to the Klondike gold rush.

(ABOVE) **A long line of gold prospectors** (circa 1898) climb the Chilkoot Trail through Chilkoot Pass during the Klondike gold rush. The temporary tent settlement called "The Scales" sits on a flat below.

(LEFT) **The 1893 University of Michigan** football team. Dutch Ferbert is second from the right in the second row.

PHOTO (Top) Michael Nicholson/Corbis; (bottom) Courtesy of Bentley Historical Library

CHAMPIONS OF THE WEST

Dutch Ferbert hardly ranks with the household names of Michigan football history. But it's because of Ferbert, as much as anyone, that we sing of the Wolverines as "the champions of the West."

On November 24, 1898, in the last seconds of the season-ending game at Chicago, Michigan—coached by Ferbert in his second season—went ahead by one point to win its first Western Conference championship. In the stands was U-M student Louis Elbel, and in the euphoria of the train ride back to Ann Arbor, Elbel jotted lyrics to a song in praise of "The Victors" of that day.

For a brief period, "The Victors" was ousted as the Michigan fight song by "Varsity." Read about Michigan's other fight song on p. 57.

was back in Ann Arbor as head football coach. In his first season the team won six, lost one (to Chicago) and tied one — a scoreless contest against an Ohio Wesleyan team coached by one Fielding H. Yost, then 25 years old. The next year was Ferbert's best, with the team seizing its first championship of the Western Conference (forerunner of the Big Ten). Ferbert finished the 1899 season, his third, with an overall record of 24–3–1.

Then came the itch for gold, the lure of the north — whatever it was that Robert Service, poet of the gold rush, called "The Spell of the Yukon."

FOR THE NORTHERN PROSPECTORS, the odds against riches were long. In the Klondike rush alone, 100,000 tried to get there, 40,000 made it, and only 4,000 found any gold at all. And it was brutally dangerous, as Jack London's classic stories make clear.

In 1904, hopes for Ferbert's survival rose when a member of the faculty received a letter from the adventurer. Then he dropped out of sight again. Reports filtered back that he had starved or drowned or been chased down by wolves.

Finally, in the fall of 1909, the sports page of the old *Chicago Record-Herald* carried a blaring headline: "'Dutch' Ferbert Makes Fortune in Alaska."

The story said Ferbert was in Seattle. There he had written an unnamed friend to say he was back in the United States with "enough of this world's goods to keep the wolf from the door the balance of his life," and had claims in Alaska's Candle Creek region worth a million dollars or more.

He had struggled for years, the story said. One claim after another had failed to pan out, and he had scraped by on earnings from odd jobs. Then came his big strike near the tiny town of Deering, on the Kotzebue Sound, where he staked out "some of the best claims in the region." Why family and friends had barely heard from him in all those years remained a mystery.

Was it all true? There seems to be no way of knowing for sure. Newspapers of that era were notorious for embellishing scarce facts for the sake of a good story, and the *Record-Herald*'s article attributed its information to not so much as a single named source, let alone Dutch himself. And a man gone nearly 10 years may have felt the need to exaggerate his deeds to account for lost time.

The record of Ferbert's later life is frustratingly thin. When he died of a heart attack in Cleveland in 1943 at the age of 69, brief obituaries noted his Alaskan adventure but said he had spent the rest of his career as a mining engineer, not as a millionaire who had made it for life when young. He never married.

On his death certificate there was a blank for "Industry or business in which work was done." On that line, whoever filled out the form wrote one word: *Coach.* ■

High Street in Canada's Dawson City, a gold mining town, on January 1, 1898.

PHOTOS Courtesy of Ken Magee; Henry Guttmann/Hulton Archive/Getty Images