

[Excerpt on Louis Elbel and the writing of “The Victors” from “Natural Enemies”, John Kryk’s book on the history of the Michigan vs Notre Dame rivalry. (Taylor Trade Publishing 2004)]

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Extra Points

Who’s No. 1? Fight Songs

Ask any American sports fan to hum the two most famous college fight songs, and you’ll probably hear *The Victory March* of Notre Dame and *The Victors* of Michigan.

Fight-song expert Bill Studwell confirmed the popular appeal of these songs in 1990, ranking the top 13 college tunes of the more than 100 written. Studwell placed *The Victory March* first, *The Victors* second. “These are clearly the top two,” he later said.

The Victors was the first college fight song of any note ever written, in 1898. The composer was Michigan junior music student Louis Elbel—an aspiring classical pianist, an accomplished sprinter, and, in his own words, Michigan’s most enthusiastic fan.

Elbel’s inspiration was Michigan’s 12–11 victory over Amos Alonzo Stagg’s Maroons in Chicago on Thanksgiving Day, 1898. Events of this day continue to be exaggerated in Michigan annals. One account had Wolverine halfback Charles (Chuck) Widman, a little-used reserve, dashing 92 yards in the waning seconds for the winning touchdown.

The true circumstances of that run are far more astounding than the common exaggerations. First, the speedy Widman not only started this game, but he was also one of the star Wolverines that year, and he dashed 65 yards for the winning score, his second TD of

the game. On his winning score, Widman was merely trying to buck the line when a group of Chicago tacklers began pushing him backward. But Widman twisted away, broke outside, and sprinted down the sideline, with Chicago right end Ralph Hammil in hot pursuit, just a few feet behind. Two Maroons tacklers had the angle on Widman and tried crowding him out of bounds but couldn’t. Finally, Hammil dived and tripped up Widman just a few yards short of the goal. But back then, ball carriers were not deemed tackled until held down or until they cried out, “Down!” So Widman proceeded to crawl across the goal and touch the ball down for the go-ahead score.

What’s more, Widman’s touchdown did not come late enough in the second half to prevent Chicago from later marching back to kick a (then five-point) field goal, cutting the 12–6 Wolverine lead to 12–11.

Yet no matter how it all happened, it was a thrilling victory that gave the Wolverines a 10–0 season as well as their first Western Conference football title. Recalled Elbel:

Out of a student body of 3,500, 1,200 of us were in Chicago for the game that day. When the fierce contest was finished we were literally crazed over the result. We formed a procession and, yelling and shouting and dancing the serpentine, we paraded around the old Chicago



Dear Baird. Talking about information regarding the Notre Dame team. I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you better information. I haven't seen them play and you've know definitely what it is.

The composer of Michigan's famous fight song, "The Victors," lived most of his life in South Bend, Indiana, where his family had long been renowned for their musicianship. This is a letter he wrote to Michigan athletic director Charles Baird after the Wolverines' relatively narrow win over Notre Dame at Toledo in 1902. *University of Michigan, Bentley Historical Library*

university behind the little U of M band to the tune of *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*. . . Suddenly it occurred to me that such an epic victory as ours ought to be dignified by something more elevating in music. We were all feeling that exaltation of spirit that comes only to youth in moments of conquest. That night, when I was alone, I found the strains of *The Victors* running through my mind and gradually the entire march took form.

Elbel finished all the parts of the composition on the train ride back to Ann Arbor and published the work in early 1899.

The entire piece—referred to by Michigan band members as "*The Victors* as written"—follows the standard construction of a military march: a two-bar introduction, an opening eight-bar strain repeated once, a second eight-bar strain repeated once, then the 16-bar chorus—or "trio"—played three times but bridged by an eight-bar interlude.

The famous chorus consists of a simple, repeating musical phrase:

*Hail to the victors valiant!
Hail to the cong'ring heroes!
Hail! Hail to Michigan
The leaders and best!
Hail to the victors valiant!
Hail to the cong'ring heroes!
Hail! Hail to Michigan
The champions of the West!*

Research for this book found a set of alternate lyrics in the Michigan athletic files circa the 1920s, but it's not known if it was Elbel or someone else who later penned them:

*Hail! to our Alma Mater!
Hail to dear old Ann Arbor!
Hail! Hail to Michigan
The Athens of the West!*

Since at least 1930, the universally reported story—and still endorsed by the UM athletic department—is that John Philip Sousa, the revered “March King” who wrote *Stars and Stripes Forever* and *The Washington Post*, performed the first public rendition of *The Victors*, in Ann Arbor on April 8, 1899.

Not true.

Sousa and his famous band did indeed perform *The Victors* that day. But three days earlier, on April 5, 1899, Elbel himself directed a student orchestra’s playing of *The Victors* during the on-campus performance of an undergraduate musical, *A Night Off*. The audience, comprising both students and faculty, “greatly appreciated” Elbel’s latest composition, the *Michigan Daily* reported, “and an encore was called for after its rendition.”

In later years, *The Victors* was played by the French and German military bands during the First World War; was played by the American 125th infantry band as Michigan troops marched into captured Germany in 1918; was once heard in front of Buckingham Palace at the changing of the guard; and was played in 31 countries by the Michigan Marching Band on a world tour in 1961.

Studwell, the fight-song expert, said *The Victors* “has no peer in style. The purpose of a fight song is to inspire emotion, and *The Victors* is a proud, stirring song. If you’ve ever heard a hundred thousand people at Michigan Stadium sing it, well, it leaves you breathless.”

The song’s greatest endorsement, though, was an assessment Sousa himself reportedly made on at least one occasion. Michigan alumnus Charles D. Kountz said Sousa told him in 1905 that *The Victors* was “one of the nation’s finest military marches and the best original college song he had ever heard.”

Elbel, meanwhile, graduated from Michigan in 1900 and studied classical piano in Germany before touring Europe and America as a soloist with various orchestras.

Within a couple of years he returned to the city where he was born and raised, and where he would live most of his adult life—of

all places, South Bend, Indiana. That’s where his family owned a music store and had earned renown as local musicians dating back at least to the 1880s.

Elbel, ever the fan of the Wolverine football team, even wrote Michigan athletic director Charles Baird in 1902 with reports from the enemy camp prior to the game against Notre Dame in Toledo. After the unexpectedly close contest he answered Baird’s query by writing, “Some here think it is possible they played some ringers.”

He annually returned to Ann Arbor for homecoming to lead the Michigan band in *The Victors*, right up until his death in 1959.

The Notre Dame Victory March was written in 1908 by then-recent Notre Dame graduates Michael J. Shea (’04) and his younger brother, John F. Shea (’06).

Michael was the gifted musician who composed the tune, while John was credited with having written the lyrics. Author Murray Sperber, however, has supplied strong evidence to indicate it was probably Michael, a graduate student at Notre Dame at the time, who also wrote most of the lyrics, and that John probably just suggested word changes.

The song was largely inspired by Notre Dame’s 12–6 loss to—who else?—Michigan on October 17, 1908.

The Sheas had been in attendance at Ferry Field that day and no doubt had sat despondently while the Michigan band had blared out *The Victors* and other school fight songs. Notre Dame lacked any such composition of its own, as did most schools.

A few days later back at Notre Dame, Michael put to piano “a tune that had been running through my head.” A day after that, so the story goes, he and John completed both tune and lyrics—and together they performed the first rendition of *The Victory March* on an organ at Sacred Heart Church on campus.

The Victory March does not follow the usual military march progression. It opens with a four-bar introduction (taken from the chorus’s conclusion), is followed by a 16-bar opening strain that repeats once, and con-

cludes with the rousing 16-measure chorus that repeats once without interlude.

The world-famous lyrics come from the first two verses of the chorus:

*Cheer, cheer for old Notre Dame,
Wake up the echoes cheering her name,
Send a volley cheer on high,
Shake down the thunder from the sky.
What though the odds be great or small,
Old Notre Dame will win over all,
While her loyal sons are marching,
Onward to victory.*

In the 1920s, Notre Dame band director Joseph Casasanta rearranged the tempo of the song, around the same time the Fighting Irish became “America’s team.” Accordingly, *The Victory March* became not only the most famous college fight song but also one of the most identifiable songs of any kind in America. Its popularity doesn’t end there.

One Notre Dame alumnus heard it played on Chinese violins in Tientsin during the Second World War. Most revealing of its popularity, though, is the fact that at least one group of American POWs in Vietnam sang *The Victory March* daily as a morale-builder. The Viet Cong guards generally wouldn’t let the prisoners sing patriotic anthems, but the guards didn’t fully understand the lyrics to *The Victory March*. The prisoners picked this tune because, one later pointed out, “it was the one song we all knew.”

Studwell said *The Victory March* is, by far, the most copied and the most widely played college fight song. “It’s an incredibly inspirational song,” he said.

Michael Shea, meanwhile, went on to become an organist at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. Shortly before his death in 1940, he indicated his surprise over the mass appeal of his song, deeming it “very amateurish.”

What’s most amazing about these two songs is that they weren’t written by grizzled march kings or Broadway composers. Louis Elbel was a 21-year-old music student, Michael Shea a graduate student who became a priest.

Neither ever again composed anything remotely as memorable. Years later, Elbel knew the reason:

I have always been interested in the psychology of composing, but have never been able to explain just how a melody originates spontaneously under the stress of emotion. It is easy enough to make tunes. Anyone with the knack of it can compose a dozen songs a day. An improvisatore [sic] will sit at the piano and play unwritten tunes by the hour, composing as he goes along. But sweeping, inspiring strains are rarely made to order—they flash unawares.

That’s why these fight songs are the single greatest testaments to “Michigan spirit” and “Notre Dame mystique.”

Who’s No. 1? Marching Bands

Tradition-laden. Proud. Competitive. Arrogant.

These descriptions apply as much to the Notre Dame and Michigan bands as they do to the respective football teams.

- At the 1993 game, some Notre Dame band members could be overheard mocking various Michigan fight songs—on cue shouting “High school cheer!” instead of “Let’s go Blue” at the end of each refrain of Michigan’s other famous original tune.
- In casual conversations in 1990, several Michigan band members rolled their eyes when asked to assess their Notre Dame counterparts. “Second rate,” was one comment. “They think having that song makes them a great band. Hardly.”

What else would you expect from the students who die the hardest for their football teams?

Notre Dame had the first organized college band in America. It formed in 1846 and almost immediately took an active posture. In the early 1860s it gave rousing sendoffs to stu-