Bud and Dode and Death in Le Beau

Started out as a trading post named after the man who decided, right then and there, to do some business, Antoine LeBeau, a Frenchman, like so many other trappers of his time. In 1875, he put up his business on the east side of the Missouri, just across from the Cheyenne River Reservation, and started trading furs, pots, pans, and whatever his customers, white and red, thought worth buying and selling in LeBeau, South Dakota.

By 1880, LeBeau had come into its own--sixty buildings and a population of some 250 souls, which was, back then, about half a metropolis. White folks were streaming into the region. Things were booming.

Then, for a time, when the railroad decided to push its line slightly south, cowboys who'd used LeBeau before, started moving their herds and their business with them. The little town gasped for breath.

But when the railroads moved farther north to cross the Missouri near Mobridge, Le Beau got reborn. Business returned, including Phil DuFran's saloon.

If you think this is going to be another lawless Western story, you better believe it.

Now the cowboys who drove their cattle northward and eastward, many of them Texans, weren't Eagle Scouts. Hollywood made money on them early in the last century and created standard images that weren't a country mile off center. Full of dirt and dust and smelling up a storm, they could be hellions.

One of 'em, one of Murdo McKenzie's boys, Dode, lacked the requisite control his father had when it came to wild living. Can't blame him, really. Driving cattle through the reservation "strip," as railroad land was called, was
no picnic. When finally "them little dogies" were on the train, the boys had reason to wash down whiskey and visit the occasional decorated bedroom.

Seems Dode McKenzie and Bud Stephens, who tended bar at Phil DuFran's saloon (I'm not making this up), had words some time in the past. Don't know what was said or done, but the feuding was nowhere near to being behind 'em. They weren't on speaking terms, to put it lightly.

One day Stephens got warned that Dode McKenzie was coming into town, packing mischief in his gun belt. Bad blood.

Stephens was ready. Dode marched in the Phil DuFran's saloon, and the bartend let him have it right in the chest with the piece he was wielding. Twice. Dode staggered back out the door, fell down the steps and spilled out into dusty Main, where Bud Stephens, having stepped outside, let him have it again. And again. True story. Or at least, that's the way they tell it.

I don't know if LeBeau ever had a Boot Hill, but if they did and Dode's there, it was Bud Stephens who put him in the ground.

In March of 1910, in a nearby town, Bud Stephens went to trial for the murder of Dode McKenzie. Dodie's old man, Murdo, hired a hot shot lawyer, and Bud Stephens grabbed a kid out of Mobridge, barely old enough for sideburns. But the kid pulled it off and beat the fancy pants lawyer, so Bud Stephens walked away as far as he could from LeBeau, South Dakota, but free.

Murdo McKenzie lost a son and was hot as a branding iron. He said he'd never, ever again run cattle from his vast, west river empire through the dad-gummed streets of LeBeau, South Dakota.

So the town of LeBeau died. That simple. End of story. No more cattle; no more business. Phil DuFran left town again, started salooning elsewhere.
You can't go to LeBeau anymore, and it's too bad because the whole thing would make one heckuva tourist attraction, a scraggly collection of unpainted frame shacks and false fronts down a dusty Main, swinging doors on an old saloon, some tumbleweed, and a cowboy falling out into the street.

These days, LeBeau, South Dakota, lies perfectly still beneath the sparkling waters of Lake Oahe. If you want to stop by, strap on scuba or wait for drought.

Maybe it's a good thing. There's lots of room out there on the prairie, lots of tales to tell, LeBeau's being just one of 'em.