During the first decade of the twentieth century, as South Dakota recovered from the devastating collapse of the Great Dakota Boom, several railroad companies rekindled their interest in the area and built important new arteries to flesh out the state's rail network. One of these railroads, the Minneapolis & St. Louis (M&StL), operated two lines from Minneapolis into Iowa as well as a westward arm that had reached Watertown in 1884. A minor player compared to the powerful Chicago & North Western (C&NW or North Western) and Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (CM&StP or Milwaukee Road), which figure prominently in South Dakota's railroad history, the M&StL determined in 1906 to penetrate further west with construction to the Missouri River at LeBeau. When regular trains began rolling along the new line and its branch from Conde to Leola in 1907, the company's New York owners focused on building up grain shipments from fledgling towns sprinkled along the new routes. More importantly, however, they eagerly looked forward to heavy shipments of livestock to and from LeBeau. Indeed, the fortunes of the M&StL's Missouri River extension and that of LeBeau were inextricably intertwined and, sadly, short-lived. LeBeau's sun flamed brightly for only a few seasons and then flickered out altogether—a casualty of altered patterns in the cattle industry, a changed competitive landscape for the railroad, and downright bad luck. Linked in a symbiotic relationship, the railroad and its service area simultaneously experienced good times or bad. As LeBeau prospered, so did the M&StL's westernmost extension; as LeBeau withered, so did its railroad.¹

¹ This study is part of a larger work on the Minneapolis & St. Louis Railway to be published by the University of Minnesota Press.
This detail from a 1906 promotional map depicts the M&StL line across northern South Dakota from Watertown to its terminus at LeBeau.

The M&StL had seventy livestock shippers strung out over its new lines, but most of these accounts were piddling when compared to the handful of large customers at LeBeau. In addition, the expansive “boot-and-saddle” territory around LeBeau gave the M&StL its only contact with cattle country and its sole flirtation with the romantic West. Thomas A. Way, townsite agent for the M&StL, promoted a grandiose vision for what he called “The City of Promise.” In 1908 and 1909, Way confidently predicted that LeBeau would become a small metropolis and promised to take payment for residential lots only when the town’s population reached

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three thousand. The townsite itself was bounded by the Missouri River on the west and the railroad on the east. It boasted ten streets and six avenues, with the depot situated immediately beyond the intersection of Main and Railway streets.³

The catalyst for LeBeau's brief glory years was clearly the cattle trade, which had begun at the end of the Civil War with long drives of steers from south Texas to places such as Abilene, Ellsworth, and Dodge City, where the animals were sent east by rail for slaughter. The opening of new ranges and the advent of rail service to points in the Northern Great

Plains spread the cattle kingdom throughout the region with astonishing swiftness. In mid-summer 1880, for example, an entire trainload of Montana cattle was billed “for transportation east” from Bismarck. “This will be the inauguration of large shipments of Montana stock over the Northern Pacific,” Railway World correctly forecast. These animals were likely bound for Chicago, where Nelson Morris, Philip D. Armour, Gustavus F. Swift, A. A. Libby, and John Cudahy had already established themselves among the titans of meat-packing. A vast web of rail arteries from the West brought in raw material (live animals), and an equally impressive web of lines sped the finished product (dressed meat) in a steady stream of refrigerated cars to eager markets in the East. In short order, Chicago became the “Great Bovine City of the World.”

Movement of the cattle culture into what became South Dakota had been hindered initially by the absence of rail routes and the fact that much of the region remained “Indian country.” Nevertheless, by the end of 1884, about eight hundred thousand head of cattle roamed in and about the Black Hills, and little by little federal legislation opened up more Indian reservation lands to leasing by cattlemen. Among those who watched developments with great interest was Murdo Mackenzie, who in 1890 had become general manager of the Scotland-based Matador Land & Cattle Company, which owned substantial operations in Texas. Under Mackenzie’s talented leadership, the Matador expanded into Kansas for short-term fattening of animals and in 1892 moved into South Dakota, near Belle Fourche, for an experiment in “double wintering” to see if range animals could tolerate harsh northern climes and produce satisfactory gains on northern grass. The answer came in 1894, when four-year-old Matador steers from South Dakota netted thirty-five dollars per head on the Chicago market—the best average price the company ever had re-
ceived. The experiment an obvious success, Mackenzie was predictably eager to expand Matador’s Dakota theater.  

Mackenzie and others in the cattle trade soon pushed for federal policies to create grazing districts on portions of the public domain that were unsuited for agriculture and to make more grazing leases available on Indian reservations. Focus turned to the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River reservations, lying west of the Missouri River and at least thirty miles above the projected North Western line from Pierre to Rapid City. While no rail lines touched either reservation, there was a railhead about sixty-five miles north of Pierre at Evarts, located across the Missouri from the Cheyenne River reservation on the Milwaukee Road line jutting west from Aberdeen. Mackenzie, representing the Matador, and Burton C. Mossman, range manager for Hansford Land & Cattle Company, another Scotland-based firm better known as the Turkey Track, put in bids with the Department of the Interior for grazing leases on the Cheyenne River reservation, splitting nearly one million acres at 3.5 cents per acre. The leases—Matador on the north, Turkey Track on the south—were divided by a six-mile-wide neutral zone or strip from the 102d meridian east to the Missouri River that the Matador, Turkey Track, and other outfits could use to move cattle to and from their respective leaseholds.

What captivated the black-bearded Mackenzie was the Cheyenne River reservation’s ocean of hills covered with grass—fattening grass—plus an abundance of sunshine and water. To these essential elements in 1904 he added cattle, men, and horses. Mossman did the same—each man committing not more than one steer per thirty acres. Evarts became the entrepot, where cattle moved across the Missouri on a flimsy pontoon bridge or aboard a Milwaukee-owned ferry.

As always, the cattleman’s trio of enemies included the elements, thieves, and hard economic times. The first of these foes hit soon. A nasty

late snowstorm in May 1905 claimed many cattle, and the "big winter" of 1906–1907 left cowhands with ugly memories of "white hell." Carcasses littered gullies and river bottoms the following spring. Some operators simply folded, turning over their leases to others. Mossman, for instance, picked up the White River Cattle Company's rights and with others formed the Diamond A, a formidable enterprise that then assumed the Turkey Track operation in South Dakota. Diamond A, at one time or another, ran as many as forty thousand head, while the Matador's numbers were equally impressive. When 1907 ended, Mackenzie and other Cheyenne River reservation cattlemen had ample reason to smile: South Dakota steers had averaged $45.44 on the Chicago market, up $9.60 over 1906.

These same cattlemen had another good reason to be pleased. The M&StL had reached the Missouri River in time for the 1907 shipping season, offering competition to the Milwaukee Road and LeBeau as an alternative to Evarts. In addition to expansive livestock-handling facilities at LeBeau that were enlarged and improved in 1908, the M&StL established pens across the river to hold thirty-five hundred animals for transit to LeBeau aboard the Scotty Philip, a steam-driven ferry that looked much like a floating stockyard.

LeBeau not only blossomed, it boomed. One writer in 1908 called it "one of the most promising little cities in the West," a place where "every person spares neither time nor money to push the city along." The robust business district included two banks, a couple of cafés, a drugstore, a general store, and a dry-goods merchant, plus offices for physicians, dentists, and attorneys. The Idle Hour billiard and pool parlor featured cigars and soft drinks, while saloons and other emporiums of pleasure required no paid advertisement. The Hotel LeBeau, which offered steam heat and allowed no dogs in the rooms, also boasted some of the best cuisine on the M&StL's western extension. One could also check in at the Arcade Hotel, advertised as first-class and charging rates of twenty-five cents and up. The LeBeau Business Men's Association looked out for commercial interests, while Baptists and Presbyterians divided responsibility for community morality. Cultural needs could be met at Zimmer's Opera House,

Scotty Philip ferried livestock from holding pens on the west bank of the Missouri River to rail cars waiting at LeBeau.

LeBeau's bustling main street led west to the railroad tracks and the Missouri River.

and news was disseminated by the LeBeau Phenix, where Edward McBride, "an earnest and active Republican," was publisher and editor. Near the tracks were two lumberyards, a grain elevator, a livery and stable, quarters for City Dray Line, and the M&StL's various facilities. 13

LeBeau almost immediately eclipsed Evarts. In fact, rail service to that place ended in 1907, and business buildings were hauled overland to enjoy new life at LeBeau. Even though the Milwaukee abandoned the line two years later, the company did not vacate the field but rather encouraged cattlemen to use Glenham, just east of Mobridge, or the stations immediately west on what had become its transcontinental line. Still, the M&StL claimed a marvelous portion of livestock moving to and from the great leaseholds. In general, stocker cattle were moved to the range in the spring, while slaughter cattle were billed out in the fall. For the Matador, the process was threefold: yearlings from the home ranch in Motley County, Texas, were moved to the Alamositas division in the Texas Panhandle and then north for double-wintering (two winters, three summers) on the Cheyenne River reservation. Animals had to be "dipped" to rid them of ticks, lice, and scabies before leaving Texas and again at LeBeau prior to crossing the river. The process, time-consuming and unpleasant for man and beast alike, required cattle to swim through long vats containing a mixture of lime, sulfur, and hot water or a nicotine solution of tobacco and hot water.¹⁴

The year 1908 gave M&StL managers their first opportunity to gauge the impact of livestock traffic at LeBeau over a twelve-month period. Shipping activity included a late-season train of twenty cars bringing two-year-olds for the Turkey Track and eleven cars of mixed slaughter cattle headed for South Saint Paul, Minnesota, in July. A month later, two carloads of horses moved out to South Saint Paul, and then the fall rush began. Doubleheaded trains of twenty to thirty cars left daily taking Turkey Track steers consigned to Chicago Union Stock Yards. At the end of September, M&StL's passenger agent Anson B. Cutts accompanied Murdo Mackenzie and other Matador officers and directors who had come to LeBeau aboard a special train to inspect local operations and witness the first twenty-two carloads of Matador cattle dispatched to Chicago. Shipping ended on 16 November when the Turkey Track, Diamond A, and Matador each sent a trainload. In the aggregate, twelve thousand animals were billed out in 1908, with approximately the same number received; the estimated gross

value was $1 million. For the M&StL, the activity meant about one thousand carloads. The Matador accounted for only twenty percent of the total, having sent most of its animals via the Milwaukee at Wakpala, fourteen miles west of Mobridge. Prospects were excellent for a much greater move of Matador cattle through LeBeau in 1909, however. If projections held true, wrote Edward McBride of the Phenix, "LeBeau will lead all other cities in the United States in the number and value of its livestock business."  

The Matador Company had reason to be pleased with its Dakota operations. Matador managers knew, and grudgingly admitted, that northern ranges produced better gains of greater quality and that four- and five-year-old steers from South Dakota graded better at Chicago than range beef from Texas. That fact meant greater profit. Moreover, Matador's reputation for quality was enhanced by five ribbons won in competition at Chicago in November 1908. Its prize-winning show animals had traveled east over the M&StL line from LeBeau.  

Expectations were great in LeBeau as 1909 dawned. In January, the Matador received fifteen hundred sacks of cottonseed for livestock winter rations, but business on the railroad was slack until the shipping season began early in May. During that month, 5,670 animals in ninety-three cars arrived during one week, but in June, fourteen trainloads of twenty-five cars each arrived in just seven days. Before the run was over, forty-five thousand head were branded, run through dipping tanks, and transferred to the other side of the Missouri aboard the Scotty Philip. In the fall, a like number of animals would be loaded for transport eastward, most of them to Chicago commission houses.  

If ever the sun shown brightly on LeBeau, it was during the summer and fall of 1909. In a firm statement of confidence, the M&StL appointed J. F. Knight its livestock agent, making LeBeau his headquarters. At the same time, Akaska Real Estate reported active sales of quarter sections of land in the country between LeBeau and Lowry, its neighbor to the east; the opera house was about to open; and ten-foot-wide sidewalks were in place on Main Street and on Railroad Avenue to the depot. Moreover,
there were rumors that the M&StL would bridge the Missouri River and push on west. While such stories were epidemic throughout the age of railways, and many—perhaps most—were idle gossip or wishful thinking, those regarding LeBeau were based on fact. Officials for the M&StL confirmed in early spring 1909 that the company intended to extend itself to a point near the Wyoming boundary above Belle Fourche in anticipation that the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, or at least a large part of it, would soon be thrown open to non-Indians.19

Predictably, LeBeau was abuzz. From the office of the Phénix, Edward McBride had already declared it the metropolis of Walworth County, while Thomas Way eagerly proclaimed LeBeau the “Front Door to . . . Homestead Lands.”20 Meanwhile, M&StL locating engineers were setting stakes to the west. Before the end of July, surveyors had reached a point one hundred miles west of LeBeau, and bridge-building materials littered the waterfront. “This paper stated several weeks ago that bridge work would be in full blast at this point before the snow flies,” exulted McBride. “When you see it in the Phénix it is true.” Indeed, M&StL engineers had gained authorization to bridge the Missouri, and construction quickly began. Surely, McBride concluded, the presence of the bridge gang meant the M&StL actually intended to go all the way to the Pacific, with branches to the Black Hills and elsewhere. The editor was hardly alone in advancing the idea of the M&StL as a road to the coast, and LeBeau was not alone in its euphoria over the prospect.21 Watertown expected to profit to an even greater extent should the M&StL persist westward. With that thought, its leaders chartered a special six-car “good will” train to LeBeau late in July. The jaunt was great fun and a prelude to even greater events.22

One month later, President William Howard Taft signed legislation opening 2.6 million acres of land on the Cheyenne River and Standing Rock reservations. LeBeau was designated as one of six registration points for a lottery to determine who would win the opportunity to file for the thousands of new homesteads. That fact alone would have been adequate to ignite a local celebration, but LeBeau was also approaching its second

M&StL officials planned to continue their line west of the Missouri in 1909. Here, workers excavate the right-of-way approaching LeBeau.

birthday, giving the town double reason for holding the 16–17 September bash that featured dancing, fireworks, three brass bands, athletic contests, cowboy sports, and "Doe Fisk’s Great Railroad Shows." As part of the festivities, M&StL provided "excursion trains and cheap rates." 23

Meanwhile, work continued on the M&StL bridge, and the stock-shipping season began. LeBeau, however, was preoccupied with preparing to greet the throngs who were expected to arrive to register for the fourteen thousand quarter sections of land across the river. 24 "The great majority of all applicants will register at LeBeau," Edward McBride freely predicted, reasoning that the town was the nearest railroad station to most of the reservation. "Visitors [can] step from the train and view the promised land 20 minutes later," he exclaimed. 25 All of this excitement was made to order for the M&StL’s imaginative Anson Cutts, who urged that the 1909 lottery would surely be the "last chance to get 160 acres of land free." 26

23. Ibid., 2 Sept. 1909.
Cutts authorized special trains and excursion rates to both LeBeau and Aberdeen (one of the other registration points) for the registration period, 4–23 October. In the end, attendance at LeBeau was just over three thousand, less than McBride and Cutts had hoped for, while Aberdeen thronged with more than fifty thousand aspirants expecting to have their numbers drawn. Close to 80 percent of the lottery winners came from elsewhere in South Dakota or from surrounding states, many of them from areas to the east served by the M&StL.27

Cutts saw the country west of the Missouri as an extension of the “New Empire”—the James River Valley and beyond—that the M&StL had tapped with its line from Watertown. Promotional articles in Dacotah Magazine did not differentiate between the east-river and west-river regions, billing all of South Dakota as “a country blessed by God and one now being developed by man with Divine consent and assistance.”28 Other boosters chipped in, contending that the undulating Moreau River Valley west of the Missouri from LeBeau was blessed with “rich black loam underlaid with clay” and appeared to be “well adapted for diversified farming” of the type found in eastern South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois.29 A more cautious observer, however, noted that “every region has its drawbacks” and predicted that there would be casualties. Nevertheless, he persisted, while the “weak will fail and be weeded out,” the strong would make “the desert places bloom” and “receive the reward always reserved for those who stick.”30

Balderdash, sneered cattlemen. Land west of the Missouri had grass that no steel plow should ever overturn. The semiarid country, simply stated, was unfit for agriculture. However, Theodore Roosevelt, with whom many thought Murdo Mackenzie and other cattlemen had a sweetheart deal, was no longer president, and William Howard Taft had taken the side of the more numerous “sodbusters.” Most of the large leaseholds would be extinguished over time, and cattlemen would be compelled to look elsewhere for huge tracts of grassland.31

The cattle culture had been good to LeBeau, but a hinterland to the west—opened up by an M&StL extension and populated with durable farmers—offered the possibility of greater business volume on a less seasonal basis and, best of all, the prospect of long-term stability. While the ebullient Thomas Way had predicted a population of three thousand for LeBeau, an even more sanguine prognosticator, seeing the site as a “big distributing center,” thought twenty-five to thirty thousand more likely. It was not to be.32

Several elements conspired against LeBeau, among them the turn of events at the Matador Land & Cattle Company. In 1909, Murdo Mackenzie had transferred management of the Matador’s South Dakota opera-

tions to one of his sons, Dode. The “blue-eyed, sandy-haired Scot,” one associate recalled, was “as likable and fine a young man as ever lived,” adding as a serious caveat, “while sober.”33 Young Mackenzie found too much time on his hands after the 1909 shipping season ended and turned to drink and games of chance, to no good end. Having become an irresponsible drunk, he was shot and killed in a LeBeau saloon on 11 December. Despite their boss’s faults, Matador hands took umbrage at his death, a grudge that deepened when the killer, Bud Stevens, was acquitted. They boycotted LeBeau ever after. More importantly, no Matador cattle ever again entrained at LeBeau.

A few months later, a fire on LeBeau’s Main Street quickly tore through most of the business district. Ugly conflagrations were not unusual in frontier towns made of flimsy false-front buildings, but this one was particularly suspicious. The fire hose had been cut; so had telephone and telegraph lines. More bad luck followed when another fire hit LeBeau some weeks later. No arsonist was ever caught.34

The lusty river town tottered uncertainly into 1910 as ill fortune stalked the place. The previous August, editor McBride had reported in passing that the M&StL locating crew had returned to LeBeau after logging 115 miles surveying and setting stakes in the Moreau River Valley. The news seemed to mean little, especially since two piledrivers had been dispatched to the bridge site. At the same time, however, Milwaukee crews had been spiking down rails to Trail City from a point just west of Mobridge on that company’s new west coast line. One route then continued on to Isabel, and the other proceeded south over the Moreau River and west to Faith—essentially preempting the M&StL west of LeBeau. A full-page advertisement in the Phenix taunted local readers, inviting their interest in a town-lot sale at Faith, promoted as the terminus of the Cheyenne branch of the Milwaukee Road. The M&StL, meanwhile, had quietly disbanded its locating crew and removed the piledrivers and


Apart from wide concrete sidewalks, little remained of this section of LeBeau’s business district following the fire of 1910.

bridge timbers on the pretext that engineers had been unable to drive stable piling at the LeBeau crossing. More likely, M&StL managers recognized that the powerful Milwaukee had beaten them to the draw. They must have recognized, too, that the west-river country would support only limited rail service. For LeBeau, the decision had a simple consequence: the town would have no hinterland to the west. 35

LeBeau’s dwindling population stumbled on, finding few reasons for hope. The first range cattle consigned to the Turkey Track for 1910 arrived late in April, and M&StL officials told McBride of the Phénix that they anticipated the shipment of one thousand carloads of emigrant goods to LeBeau that season. One month later, however, an inspection train bearing railroad officials and eastern capitalists derailed three miles east of town. The event, while minor, was grimly prophetic. 36

Meanwhile, deep frowns appeared beneath the hats of South Dakota cattlemen. Their costs of operation had escalated alarmingly; “nesters”

had invaded the land west of the Missouri River; nature had turned on them with a vicious two-year drought in 1910 and 1911; and the federal government was poised to cancel leases as they came up for renewal. In 1902, 233,000 head of South Dakota cattle had been sent to market. In 1912, the number would be 126,000, falling to 97,034 in 1913. During the following year, the Matador lease would expire and that company would take its northern operations to Montana and Saskatchewan. Most of the other large outfits had already thrown in the towel or would do so shortly. The exception was Mossman’s Diamond A, including the old Turkey Track, but Diamond A cattle increasingly moved through Eagle Butte, a station on the Milwaukee branch southwest of Mobridge that Mossman described as a village of “unpainted buildings and painted women.” Maybe so, but its stock pens and chutes remained active, while those of LeBeau were mostly silent.

Circumstances were no better for the agriculturalists who had spilled so enthusiastically into the west-river country. They had clung to the delusion that the “humid belt” was working its way westward, ignoring warnings that the increased rainfall of the first decade of the 1900s was temporary. Instead of bounty, they found a domain that was either indifferent or hostile to the plowman. In 1900, 43,782 persons lived west of the Missouri River. The figure grew to 137,687 in 1910, but the devastating drought of 1910–1911 that lingered into 1912 hit farmers hard, reducing the west-river population to 120,151 by 1915. LeBeau suffered greatly as gloom replaced optimism and the town’s inhabitants left. George L. Shaw, who had gone into the hardware and agricultural-implement business in LeBeau in 1907, witnessed both its meteoric ascent and equally dramatic decline. “At the end of five years, in the fall of 1912, I borrowed $25 to get out of town,” he recalled. “The score stood as follows: Liabilities, $2,800. Assets, $1,300 in unsold merchandise, $50 in uncollected accounts receivable, a wife and expected child.

plus five years of business experience. It took me five more years to pay off my merchandise creditors in full.” Even so, Shaw looked back on the period without bitterness, viewing it as a transition “between the days of Calamity Jane and Wild Bill [Hickok] and the stability of the 20th century.”

LeBeau’s sputtering flame proved patently disheartening to M&StL managers who, late in 1911, cancelled all passenger service between Conde and LeBeau, thereafter offering only a tri-weekly freight plus a Sunday-only stock train out of the town after the shipping season ended. In March 1912, the M&StL responded to public outcry and temporarily re-instituted passenger trains, but it was clear that from the railroad’s point of view LeBeau was a bust. Cold eyes at company headquarters in Minneapolis looked closely at the line to LeBeau where, by the 1920s, only two families lived and gaping rows of basements and vacant concrete sidewalks bore testimony to a bygone era. In 1923, the 12.38-mile-long line between LeBeau and the closest active rail station at Akaska generated just $467 in freight revenue and $2 in passenger receipts against expenses of $7,939. On 12 September 1924, the Interstate Commerce Commission granted an M&StL request to abandon the segment, and dismantlers got at their melancholy business of tearing out the line to LeBeau, the westward-most piece of the M&StL’s modest empire.

In many ways, LeBeau was typical of other boomtowns in South Dakota and throughout the West. Full of optimism and energy during its wildly dramatic ascent, the town was ultimately unable to sustain itself and experienced an equally dramatic eclipse. In the end, Thomas Way’s “City of Promise” became instead the “City of Broken Promise” for those who had staked their fortunes on its success.