



# Malicious Prosecution

*The agonizing ordeal of Charles and Heather Maude,  
thanks to our federal government.*

*By Patricia Aiken*

**T**he criminal prosecution and persecution of Charles and Heather Maude, young ranchers in South Dakota, finally came to an end on April 28, 2025, when U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins made the announcement that the criminal charges were being dropped and their case dismissed.

But it ain't over. The Maudes still have to deal with the fence issue, and that may involve a civil lawsuit, but it's still unclear what actions will be taken.

The Maudes' ordeal began with an alleged anonymous hunter complaining about a "No Trespass" sign on one of the fences on their 114-year-old ranch. Their spread consists of 4,000 acres of private and 760 acres of permitted graze land. The Maude family has continually managed those 760 acres since 1910 through the inception of the U.S. Forest

Service. The area surrounding Charles and Heather's deeded land in Caputa, 20 minutes southeast of Rapid City, borders Buffalo Gap National Grasslands, and that alleged complaint led U.S. Forest Service patrol captain Jeff Summers and special agent Travers Lunders to their front door on March 29, 2024.

"They said there might be an issue," Heather says, "and that we needed to call our district ranger and set up a meeting." The couple immediately took down the sign in question and began to negotiate in good faith for a common-sense solution. "There are two sides to the Forest Service," she continues. "You have the management side that begins with your district ranger. In our case, that's Julie Wheeler who's based in Hot Springs. The management side works with the allotment owners to fix, resolve and improve any issues that are discovered. The special agents are the

investigative and law enforcement side of the Forest Service."

On May 1, they met with Wheeler and Lunders, but not before doing some research. "Based on Forest Service records, the fence line was put up in 1950. That's the first time in our documentation that shows any fences listed, and we have a slew of them."

Have some blood pressure medicine handy. The 25 acres in question are in the 760-acre allotment that the Maudes pay to use. They have never had any problems with the Forest Service about it, not one infraction. They are up to date on their grazing fees and completely in good standing.

"We suggested that we perhaps trade our acres on their side of the fence for their acres on ours, because the fence is in practical location. It's not that we purposely did a taking. It is that this is rough, difficult country to fence, with around 20 of our private acres on their side and around 25 of their acres are on our side. We want people to know that the allotment acres were included in our grazing permit, and we paid to use them every year, and that payment was accepted."

At this point in the meeting, Travis Lunders became pretty aggressive.

"It hit me that he was trying to get us to admit guilt to something when there wasn't any. It was very odd to both Charles and I when Lunders told us during the March 29 meeting that he started on the west side of our allotment. That's where the no trespassing sign was that he said an alleged hunter turned in as a complaint. We have yet to see that. But then he said that he went down, through and across everything we own. He complimented us on a spring we developed and run through some rubber tire tanks. He complimented that entire system, which is 100 percent private property. He ended up over on the east side, where he also determined that fence was potentially not on the line."

Lunders then asked: "How would you feel if your neighbor just came onto your property and did whatever they want?" Heather answered first, and said: "Well, this isn't that situation, this is nothing new." And he asked it again and Charles replied, "That doesn't make sense to me because this is not that situation." Then special agent Lunders repeated his question a third time.

"That's when it hit me that he really wasn't seeking a resolution," Heather says. "He was trying to entrap us into saying something that would cause guilt. And so I just turned it around and politely asked him, 'Do you



mean, what would I do if our neighbor did what you have done to this point and trespassed all over our property without my permission?”

As any good Bolshevik committed to the Communist Manifesto knows, the first tenet is to Abolish Private Property. So Travers Lunders took exception to being reminded of the Maudes' private property rights and went so far as to accuse them of “infringing on his rights.” As various agencies have done to others, such as the Hage and Bundy families in Nevada and the Hammond family in Oregon, Lunders' response was, “Well, if you want to make it hard for me to cross your private property, I will make it hard to impossible for you to cross public property to get to your



PHOTOS COURTESY MAUDE FAMILY



private land.” The Maudes let that roll off since they were talking about public land.

At that point, Julie Wheeler reeled the meeting back in, explaining there were three resolution options available, all of which required a survey, which can take several months to over a year to complete. From there she asked when the crop needed to be harvested. She was told July 1 and promised, “We will have a resolution path in place by the time that crop needs to be harvested.”

It was agreed an early June meeting would occur on the allotment to determine a direction for resolution and to show the property to Julie, who had never been there.

Trading acreage requires a survey to know

“acres to acres, who’s going to write a check for the difference.” Five days later, Travis Lunders showed up with a survey crew.

“We still haven’t seen the results of that survey,” Heather says. “He drove out and staked out across this planted hay barley field on what they determined to be the property boundary line. That’s when we reached out and began calling our congressional delegates. We called our sheriff and multiple elected officials. Sen. Mike Rounds’ staff came on board and agreed it was interesting and odd and they’ve helped us ever since.”

Calls to Julie Wheeler gave Charles and

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Charles’ great-grandfather William Maude. ▶ Grandpa Walter Maude, with Charles and one of his sisters. ▶ Heather, age two, aboard Brownie and under the watchful eye of Willie, the border collie. The Hamiltons have ranched this property since the 1930s. ▶ Lyle and Kennedy with the hogs. Can you find Lyle? Hint: he’s on the left. ▶ Charles, age 10, with his first Chester pig. ▶ U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins made the announcement in Washington, D.C., on April 28, 2025, that criminal charges were being dropped and the Maude case dismissed. Four Maudes look on. ▶ The fenceline dispute is centered around this barley hay field. The tall trees behind the men is where Charles’ great-grandfather was photographed in the buggy. CENTER: Nine-year-old Lyle shows his 4H Simmental heifer. OPPOSITE: Charles, Heather, Lyle and Kennedy.

Heather more pause that there was a bigger issue brewing. They wanted to know why they weren’t involved in the survey. That’s when Julie volunteered that she wasn’t in charge of Travis, that he “stove pipes” up to D.C. “When Julie stopped responding to our emails and wouldn’t take our calls around June 10, we knew something was up.”

On June 24, Lunders and a second Forest Service law enforcement employee showed up unannounced at the Maudes, armed, in bullet proof vests, and served them with separate indictments. No one has ever heard of a married couple being sued separately, but it was a



calculated decision made somewhere between Hot Springs, S.D., D.C. and U.S. Attorney Allison Ramsdell that would force the Maudes to shoulder the expense of two attorneys. Making the case even more bizarre is Heather and Charles being placed under a gag order, whereby they couldn't discuss the case with each other. And to torment them as parents, they were told to make arrangements for their children. Federal courts have a better than 95 percent conviction rate, and they could have been jailed at the first indictment hearing, or at the time of conviction, had they gone to trial.

"It was a difficult conversation to have with Kennedy and Lyle," Charles says, "to let them know that they may be going home with someone else. But they handled it as well as any seven- or nine-year-old could. We had to come up with a conservatorship agreement and name a guardian in the event we were sent to jail because there was no way we were leaving any of those strings untied where our children were concerned. One of the unsung heroes in our situation is assistant fire administrator at Pennington County Fire Service, Val Newman, who wrote the conservatorship agreement for us between when we were indicted and our initial court appearance."

The Maudes aren't wealthy urban folks who decided to try their hands at ranching. They are both fifth generation. Charles was 17 when he purchased his grandfather's place after he passed away. He was by his grandfather's side from the time he was a small boy, picking up all the knowledge and wisdom the old man was laying down for him. Charles was distinguished in 4-H and FFA and went on to South Dakota State University. He loves farming.

Heather was raised in Wyoming on her parents' sheep and beef cattle operation. She went to college for animal science and agriculture communications on a livestock judging scholarship. When grocery store shelves were emptied during Covid, their Farm to Fork business at the Black Hills Farmers' Market skyrocketed, taking it from part- to full-time. They are looking forward to having this episode behind them and getting on with farming and ranching for the future.

In addition to Sen. Rounds, Wyoming Congresswoman Harriet Hageman has been

fighting for the Maudes from Day One of this insane ordeal. Their attorneys strongly suggested the Maudes go on a media blackout, since everything they said could and would be used against them. Heather's colleagues at *Tri-State News* where she writes a column—edi-

**"The Maudes are in good standing with the U.S. Forest Service to this day. That fenceline was put in long before they were even born and they've never had a report against them, ever."**

SHAD SULLIVAN, COLORADO RANCHER AND CHAIR OF R-CALF USA'S PRIVATE PROPERTY RIGHTS COMMITTEE



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*Heather with the Rolling Meat Department, aka the Maude Meat Truck. AT TOP: The Maudes in South Dakota's Badlands, with no complaints against this family for close to 100 years.*

tor Carrie Stadheim and former content and digital editor Maria Tibbetts—joined forces with Rachel Gabel from *TheFencePost.com* to become the press secretaries for the Maudes. Heather's parents, Tom and Randi Hamilton, courageously engaged with the national media and joined forces with Charles' parents, Marion and Jackie Maude, and their grandchildren to host South Dakota legislators for a tour of the allotment in early April 2025.

Eyes in the West have been focused on

this case. A conviction would have been a very dangerous precedent to private property rights all across the country. So the world was watching when Ag Secretary Rollins announced the dismissal from the steps of the USDA.

"It was a whirlwind," Heather says. "We branded on Saturday, learned on Sunday that we were going to D.C., planned on Monday, and flew out Tuesday." Public Lands Council executive director Kaitlynn Glover graciously scheduled meetings and press for them while they planned the actual trip. Heather says, "One of the coolest things is the ag world as a whole recognizes this for what it is and they back us. It was incredibly refreshing to see us all set aside the things that we passionately fight about for good reason and support our family in this fight against good and evil. We're incredibly thankful for that. We hope the entire ag world, the individuals, the organizations, every entity sees this as a win and sees the part that they played in it."

Washington rolled out the red carpet for the Maudes. "NCBA generously offered their conference room as basecamp, cooled us off with water, and played hide and seek with the kids. Rep. Hageman, Sen. Rounds, and Department of Interior associate deputy secretary Karen Budd-Falen all rearranged schedules to make time to meet with us. Our children got to vote in the U.S. Capitol with Rep. Hageman and meet a lot of people high up in our government." Everyone they met with was focused on resolving the issue and realized it was not a policy issue. "It was about right and wrong," Heather concludes.

Will the wounded beast slink off to nurse its wounds or rear its head for another attack? If the latter, Charles and Heather's faith, family, and friends, even the ones they've yet to meet in person, will be there to support them in receiving justice. ■

*Patricia Aiken loves justice. She says that the Maudes' ordeal has motivated the USDA to open a portal for other potential victims of the lawfare that's gone unaddressed under the Biden regime, previous administrations and current situations. They can submit their experiences at [www.usda.gov/lawfare](http://www.usda.gov/lawfare).*