

The Story Behind the Name

by Gerard Baker, Yellow Wolf

Editor's note: Gerard Baker, Yellow Wolf, is Mandan-Hidatsa and retired as an Assistant Director of the National Park Service. Gerard along with his wife Mary Kay own and operate the Grave Yard Creek Ranch near Miles City, Montana. They raise Scottish Highland and Angus cattle. The Maah Daah Hey Trail Association is proud to have Gerard and Mary Kay as Life members.

Maah-Daah-Hey in the Mandan language simply means "Grandfather", however it is the meaning from the Mandan Culture perspective that one needs to understand to see how and why this name fits the "Maah-Daah-Hey Trail." Here is the story:

I was a National Park Service (NPS) Ranger at both the South and North Units of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. I served in both seasonal and permanent capacities. (I retired from the NPS after 36 years having spent most of my years serving in western National Parks, finally ending up in Washington D.C.) I did a number of duties which took me out on a lot of trails and roads in both units, including the Maah-Daah-Hey, which at that time was another trail in the Badlands that sometimes was used to run the buffalo that escaped into the neighbor's wheat field back into the Park on horseback and sometimes it was used to just hike and do many other tasks for the NPS.

I grew up on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation near a small town of Mandaree on our cattle and horse ranch in a household that spoke Hidatsa, Mandan and English. My mother was an Hidatsa and a bit of Sahnish, my father was mostly Mandan and was a fluent speaker of the Mandan language. As my mother was an Hidatsa, we lived in a matrilineal household, understanding of course that most of the Mandans had been killed off during two Smallpox Epidemics in the 1700's and 1800's, and a host of other diseases and such throughout the generations so that most of the Mandan had died off.

I believe my father was one of the last few people that could speak Mandan fluently. I remember when other speakers would come and visit, I loved to listen to them, really not understanding a single word, again with Hidatsa spoken the majority of the time. I came to love to listen to my dad when we went riding on our cattle herd and other ranch duties that would bring my dad and I together, it was at these times when he would speak of Maah-Daah-Hey and what it meant. He told of the Mandans and of stories that he heard when he was growing up with his Mandan Grandmother, Many Growths. After thinking, listening and remembering these stories, Maah-Daah-Hey was a great fit after I was asked by my friend Curt Glasoe if I would name the trail. I would also talk a lot of this area with my riding buddy, the late Morris Tarnavsky as we would put the miles on running cows.

I was asked what this trail is and what it meant to many, many people throughout the ages that utilized it one way or another. As today, it was mainly used to get someplace, but the early users, like the ones today, can, maybe feel not only the trail but the many spirits that are there. I am sure in the very early days the Mandan people, be it a hunting party, a war party, or the entire village traveling all or parts of this

trail. I hope like many users today, they would go to bed with the sounds of the Badlands and each morning wake up and say a prayer with the early morning for the day.

The Mandan Tribe lived in earth lodges along the Missouri River but, according to oral history I have heard, would hunt and go on war parties far to the West, no doubt using this trail. The Mandans were a trading and Agricultural Tribe and the hub of the Northern Great Plains before the Smallpoxes came. They lived in earth lodge villages which were fortified by cottonwood planks about 10' high. As many as 15 plus family members could live in each lodge, plus a favorite hunting or war pony.

All family members played a role within the tribe and these groups were organized by Clans and Societies. The Clans were an age grade, based on learning and the responsibilities of each specific clan, and the Societies served as the social groupings within the tribe. One would be born into your mother's clan and you would remain a member of that clan for life, whereas the Society as an age-grade organization would be inducted into their first "learning" Society and as one grows older, your Societies would change depending on many things, even dreams could have an effect and outcome of this. It is within this concept where the name "Maah-Daah-Hey" or "Grandfather" appeared for me.

In this family structure no matter how young or old you are, you are either a Grandfather or you always have a grandfather. As an example, in our family structure your mother's brothers are not your uncles, but your grandfather and that is their role. We have many Grandfathers and they are all the same, each of them can fill that role, a role of your main support, an individual where you can always go and they will make you feel so much better, but can also be hard on you, to make you learn, so Maah-Daah-Hey, "Grandfather" is one whom you learn from, like the trail you could go to it and walk and listen. If you listen with all your spirit you not only hear but you learn. The "Grandfather" symbolizes many things to many people, as does this trail. It is a place where you can wake up to the early morning sounds of the animals of the Badlands as one would have many, many years ago, and today you may still hear the sounds, feel the feelings. You may be lucky to wake to an early morning Thunder Storm, along with Maah-Daah-Hey it has its own power, and again you listen and feel the Grandfather.

This name not only honors the Mandan Tribe, but honors this Trail and what it represents, a get-away, a place to pray, a place to watch the activity of the Badlands, a place to feel the afternoon heat and the morning cool, but most of all it is a place where you can go and be with MAAH-DAAH-HEY.