

The Search for Beaver Island

My husband Paul is the local Field Service Technician for TDS Telecom, which means that on this island he is “the Phone Man.” He does not wear a uniform beyond the occasional TDS sweatshirt or ball cap, but he does drive a white TDS Telecom utility-body truck. In fact he drives five of them, or nearly so, but that’s another story. Many interactions between customers and whoever answers the TDS Customer Service number-- or between the local phone man and the higher corporate echelons at TDS Telecom-- involve some degree of explanation and indulgence, because the good folks who run the operation in Madison, Wisconsin don’t really have a complete mental picture of some of their more outlying districts.

Several years ago I took a call at our home (listed in the annals of TDS Telecom as the contact information for the local tech) from a nice lady in Wisconsin who asked for Paul. “Sorry, he’s out on a job right now. Can I take a message?”

“Perhaps you can help me,” she suggested. At this point I still did not know whether she had a work order for the phone man, or was going to try and sell me the improbably-bundled cable television, or needed advice on the latest iteration of the creative addressing used by Internet-seeking stermnen squatting above the trap shops on Harbor Point.

“Maybe I can help,” I replied.

“I need to know whether there is electricity on Beaver Island.”

Pause here for a moment of silence.

“Uh...where is Beaver Island?”

“It’s in your district. Island Telephone. We have a work order for an install there. I need to find out whether there is electricity at the address provided.”

That’s what they call it: “an install.” Perhaps this would be a good time to explain that TDS Telecom, Telephone Data Systems, is a nationwide crazy-quilt of a telecommunications entity made up of a great many small, non-contiguous telephone companies each of which once stood on their own corporate feet. For example, Paul the Phone Man on Matinicus reports up the chain of command through the two-man shop formally known as Warren Telephone, which served greater metropolitan downtown Warren, Maine. Island Telephone is a recently-created subsection of TDS containing the environs of Matinicus, Isle au Haut, Swan’s Island and Frenchboro, and quite a few over-the-water microwave transmissions.

At the time of this inquiry I had lived on Matinicus for easily 20 years, and had been in the area for most of my life. I had never heard of Beaver Island.

“What else do they call it?”

“Huh?”

“Is it possible that Beaver Island has another name? That name must not be what they call it around here.” I knew, for example, that the island we normally refer to as “Criehaven” is called Ragged Island on some maps, and the uninhabited “Little Island” off South Thomaston is technically listed as Eben Island. I assumed some similar confusion of localism and map designation.

“Saint James? Maybe Saint James County?”

This was not shedding a bit of light on anything.

“I am absolutely certain that there is no Saint James around here, and I don’t know where Beaver Island is, but it must be a very small island so there is probably no electricity. I’ll look on the chart.

“I don’t think it’s that small,” said the patient woman from TDS.

I was confident that I’d heard of every island with a full-time community in this area. It was a safe bet that I’d at least heard of every *electrified* island. Beaver Island must be some forgotten ledge-pile somewhere and likely one also called something else. There is a good deal of redundancy within the map of Maine—dozens of Mud Ponds, for example-- so it’s possible.

I dug out the Chart Kit and the DeLorme Atlas and carefully scrutinized the published names of every little islet, rock, nubble, outcropping, and hazard to navigation anywhere near the areas which I knew to be in TDS Telecom territory, specifically everything within wiring distance of Isle au Haut, Frenchboro, Swan’s Island, Stonington, Bass Harbor, and this place. Nothing.

“Hmm,” I ruminated to the TDS representative. “Beaver, Beaver... Beaver Island, Maine.” Then, a flash of insight. “Oh, by the way, you do realize you’re calling Maine, don’t you?”

“MAINE?!”

Uh oh.

“I’m talking about Beaver Island, MICHIGAN!”

We both got a decent laugh out of this. The similarity of state postal abbreviations may have been at fault, but more likely was the fact that under the auspices of TDS Telecom, in addition to Island Telephone in Maine is another cluster entity called Islands Telephone, with an “s,” centered in—you guessed it--Lake Michigan.

“Well, thank you,” said the lady from TDS, with a kindly Great Lakes lilt in her voice.

You betcha.