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# NOTES FROM THE FIELD

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## Challenges of Winter Surveying in Maine

By: **Dave Hughes**

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### **The Facts:**

I love Maine.

My wife, after her first visit here back in 1986, insisted that we move right away from our farm in St. Louis, Missouri. St. Louis was a wonderful place, but we were left there like seaweed at high tide after my mission with the U.S. Coast Guard was over (Aids to Navigation for the Mississippi River). I had summered in Maine my entire life and I too was ready for the move. Maine just has so much to offer! From its unique and unparalleled deciduous and coniferous forests, to its beautiful rocky coastline, with mountains, lakes and streams in between, Maine is a place that draws rugged individuals. That's why we're all here isn't it; the untamed natural beauty of this place. Most of us, however, do not work in the out-of-doors and so surveying in Maine offers an interesting perspective on its "untamed beauty" and sometimes redefines what it is to be a "rugged individual".

Like every season in Maine, winter represents unique challenges for surveyors. My guess is that most people would see winter as the most difficult season. It does have an obvious list of issues like . . . cold, snow and ice. But, winter is not without its benefits. Like every coin there are two sides here as well. Winter offers as many unique challenges as it does opportunities.

One of the best aspects of winter is that the trees that characterize our beautiful state are now leafless! With the leaves down we can see much greater distances with ease. This eliminates the hours of brushing line with machetes that must often be done. It is amazing how far into the woods you can see when the trees are bare. Seeing farther allows the surveyor to utilize the instrument more efficiently. The ability to see clearly helps with finding evidence of boundaries and monuments and theoretically save some time. With little vegetation in the way, iron pipes, stone walls, old wire, drill holes and other features seem to just "pop out".

Besides being one of our nation's most forested states, Maine may be one of the wettest. Many areas, in summer anyway, are impenetrable!

I have walked through marshes in wintertime that would be impossible in any other season. So, a longer line of site and easier going over vast boggy areas greatly improves our efficiency.

A snowless winter is often the ideal time to survey. But, we do live and work in the great State of Maine and as we all know those "snowless" winters are few and far between. Snow can really slow a survey down! Besides being difficult to just get around the most significant challenge presented by snow is our inability to find monuments and evidence in the field. That evidence is a critical component to any survey. We use metal detectors to help find iron pipes, but these tend to get disturbed and buried over time. It can be a challenge to find and dig out an iron pipe in warm weather but if that iron pipe is buried under 4" of earth and 24" of snow, we really have trouble finding it! We also look for other types of monuments such as, tree stumps, stone walls, drill holes in granite ledge and bits of old wire fence, to list a few. These features are very difficult to observe under a thick blanket of snow. There are many boundary surveys, particularly of larger wooded parcels, that are best surveyed without snow cover. Having said that, we do and must work all winter, and we are able to do a fine job. Surveys just take much longer. The balance, in this regard, is that real estate sales and construction projects usually slow down in winter, giving us the extra time necessary to complete our surveys.

### **The Truth (okay some whining):**

Now I'll be a bit more honest. Surveying in wintertime is not always wonderful. Recreational snowshoeing is to working in snowshoes as a "roll in the hay" is to stacking hay bales! Here is how it goes:

First, we strap on the snowshoes and march around the property trying to get our bearings. We search for monuments, but finding monuments in the snow is difficult. Ahh, the metal detector goes off! So, we take off the snowshoes and dig for 15 minutes only to find another soup can! When we do find monuments, (and we always do) we must set the instrument up to locate them. So, we put the snowshoes back on and head to the truck. We haul the equipment back, but, we can't set up on top of snow. So we dig out a nice 7' diameter hole to set up the total station. But, we can't run the instrument with snowshoes on, so, again, off they come (on – off – on - off throughout the day). Then we jump down into the hole and begin the task of measuring. But, the rod man is taking so long to drag herself through the snow between

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shots that we, at the instrument, begin to freeze from standing still. So, in frustration, we scream at the rod man to hurry up. She is not too happy; it is cold. So she gets surly, and walks even slower! Well... you get the picture.

### **The Reality:**

Winter can be a great time to order a survey. The need for surveying services does not disappear entirely during the winter months, thankfully. Most of us enjoy all of the seasons Maine has to offer, and being the rugged individuals we are, we are happy to be out of the office, even in the worst of weather. Happy Surveying!

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NATIONAL SURVEYORS  
WEEK!

### **Land Surveying Term of the Month:**

Horizontal Distance – to be defined in next month's newsletter!

Can you think of a surveying question you need answered or have always wondered about? Shoot over a quick email or give us a call... we'd be happy to help!

