

# THE TAXI DRIVER

## Merlin Berkey provides local area's only taxi service

By Emily Mentzer  
The Itemizer-Observer

DALLAS — A ride with Merlin Berkey is like a ride in a parade.

People along the way wave and smile, and he smiles and waves back.

"You meet a lot of people," Berkey said of being the owner of Polk County's sole taxi service, Squirrel's Taxi. "There's a lot of cool people out there."

In his six years driving a cab in Polk County — mostly in the Dallas area — he has kicked only one person out.

"It all depends on how much of a butt they're being," Berkey said. "I had one guy, every time he said something to me, he hit me. I told him to knock it off, and if he didn't like it, he could walk. So he walked."

Squirrel's Taxi started as a sort of community service — paid by donation. Berkey, whose nickname growing up was Squirrel, started as a designated driver.

He grew up as a logger, working at his family's operation since he was 10, and later working for Willamette Industries and then Weyerhaeuser. When the mill closed in 2002, Berkey, 54, said he didn't have much to do.

"There was a taxi here in town at the time," he said. "The bartenders said the taxi didn't answer the phone or didn't show up. I said, my phone's on 24/7."

As word spread about his reliability, he got more and more people using his services. Six years ago, he was told he couldn't drive anymore without a legitimate taxi license.

"There was a lady who came in and started up a taxi service," Berkey said. "They wanted to know if I wanted to go legitimate. I said sure, give me the paperwork. She (the competition) didn't last very long. Everybody knew me (and called me first)."

While his business started out accepting tips for being a designated driver, Squirrel's Taxi's clientele consists of much more than just drunks — though he does get his share of those.

"I didn't realize it until after I was done with it, but I have met a celebrity," Berkey recalled. "It was one of the Baldwin's brother's wives. I picked her up at the casino and took her to Lake Oswego."

Other customers just need a trip to the grocery store or bank — or



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Merlin Berkey takes a moment to enjoy the sun at Dallas City Park in between rides. He will often find a place to relax while he waits for his next call so he doesn't drive around wasting gasoline.



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Merlin Berkey takes people — mostly in Dallas — anywhere, from the grocery store and the bank to just providing a safe ride home.

home to Astoria after an evening at Spirit Mountain Casino. Berkey takes all kinds of people to all kinds of places. He takes people to doctor's appointments, but usually locally, not to Salem.

A trip to Salem to the doctor's — including wait time — can be ex-

pensive, he said. With wait time, it can cost about \$100, and Berkey doesn't deal with insurance.

"I take people to the store, shopping, drop them off, shop, pick them up later, bar people, take them to church," Berkey said. "It's a variety."

He says driving a taxi is just like driving a car — with passengers.

"Some are more interesting than others," Berkey said. "Some are more talkative than others. I've got a lot of regulars."

Allen Brewer is one of those regulars. He calls Berkey on paydays to take him from his work in Dallas to the bank and back.

"Merlin's always the nicest guy and great to talk to," he said.

Berkey takes people to the grocery store, or he will pick up some things for you.

If someone calls and needs some milk, for example, but can't get out to the store because of a disability or they're just too busy, he'll be happy to pick it up and deliver it for them, he said.

That doesn't take away from the times he is available to make the roads safer by driving someone home who has had too much to drink at the bars.

Some of his passengers are so drunk all they can say is, "Take me home."

"Luckily, I know where most people live, so if they get real hammered where they can't talk, at least I know where to take them," Berkey said.

That's true, most of the time.

"One time I had to stop at the cop shop and said, this is the situation," he recalled. "They looked her up and went through her purse and found her ID. I took her to the house, and she'd moved from that house and hadn't changed her address, so I ended up taking her to a motel."

Perhaps the most interesting passenger was a little colt sandwiched between his back seat and the driver's seat.

"It was interesting watching (the owner) try and hold (the horse) while we were driving," Berkey said smiling. "Good thing it didn't kick or nothing, or get up on the seat."

One thing is certain in the life of a cab driver: every day is different. The number of rides varies depending on the day or month. He averages 15 to 25 rides per day on a weekday, and 45 to 50 rides on an average Friday.

Wild card factors such as Halloween falling on a Friday — as it did last year — or New Year's Eve shoot those numbers up to 75 rides.

One wild card is weather. It takes a lot of snow to stop Squirrel's Taxi — more than 12 inches, in fact.

In February 2014, when Dallas saw more than 12 inches of snow fall in three days, Berkey ran his cab business through until 2 p.m. on that Sunday before declaring it unsafe.

"I had to shut down until Tuesday morning because I had to wait for the snow to melt," he said. "You hit a side street (in that snow) and had to park in the middle of the road, and have cars coming in both directions. It wasn't safe."

It was strange for him letting all his calls go to voicemail for so long. He doesn't shut down the cab service for any other occasion, not

### Meet Merlin

**Who:** Merlin Berkey, owner of Squirrel's Taxi in Dallas.

**Nickname:** Squirrel, given to him by his brothers as a child, named for Squirrel of Merlin.

**Age:** 54.

**Hometown:** Dallas.

**Of note:** Berkey will answer any call — as long as he isn't too fast asleep — but prefers to serve those in the Dallas area. Too often a call out to Monmouth or Independence has resulted in being stood up by the caller, wasting a good hour of his time.

**Need a ride?** Call Squirrel's Taxi at 971-240-1208. Pickup is \$3; \$2 a mile; and \$30 per hour wait time.

### Squirrel's Pet Peeves

**Being on the road all of the time, Merlin Berkey sees plenty of driving habits — good and bad. Here a few of the ones that bother him:**

- When drivers turn left onto Jefferson Street from Washington Street in Dallas and turn wide into the far lane. You're supposed to go into the closest lane to you, Berkey said.

- Driving in the fog without headlights.

- Misusing the center turn lane. "You can pull out in the middle and sit and wait, and then go," Berkey said. "(Instead), they sit there and wait until there's nobody coming in either direction. It's a little frustrating sometimes."

### By The Numbers

**146** Miles of Berkey's longest one-way fare. He once drove a man from Dallas to The Dalles. The customer didn't want to wait until the next day to take a Greyhound bus.

**\$100** Cost of a round-trip ride in Squirrel's Taxi from the Best Western in Dallas to Spirit Mountain Casino near Grand Ronde.

**76** Rides Berkey and his one other driver, who helps only when it is busy, gave on New Year's Eve, most of which were between the hours of 9 p.m. on Dec. 31, 2014, and 3 a.m. on Jan. 1, 2015.

even Christmas.

"My family knows I get a call and I'll be back — sometime," he said with a laugh.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

"Even if business was so slow I was down to one ride a day, I wouldn't quit because I would have to go find a real job, and I haven't done that in 13 years," Berkey said.



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The "squirrel" in Squirrel's Taxi is derived from a childhood nickname of Merlin Berkey, owner and driver. His brothers gave him the name, from the Squirrel of Merlin the wizard. The name has stuck.