

Copeland's hidden village: where faith and family still come first

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In Copeland's hidden village, faith and family still come first.

Despite her best attempts to run away from home, Casey Henry never got very far. The first time she set off on her own was as a small child. After arguing with her mom, she grabbed a few items and stomped down the block. Unfortunately, there really wasn't anywhere to go.

As a resident of tiny Copeland, a 10-square mile hamlet hidden away off State Road 29 next to Big Cypress, every person in the neighborhood knew Henry. Each neighbor was more than happy to scoop her up and deliver her back to her mom. So, when Henry saw a ladder propped against a house she climbed up onto the roof. It just so happened that her dad — a handyman — was up there, installing new shingles. Within the hour, she was safely back at home.

The second time was when Henry was a young woman. She moved, following love, to Riverside, California. They packed the car and drove across the country. Just a few weeks later, Casey was headed back east again — high-tailing it home to Copeland.

“It was just total culture shock,” she said. “There were people everywhere. I went from living in a place with like max 500 people to living in a place with 500,000. I said, ‘I think I need to go home, I need my mom.’ ”

That was the last time she ever thought about leaving. On a recent Sunday afternoon, sitting in her family's newly refurbished trailer, the 27-year-old appeared as content as could be. A batch of chocolate chip cookies was plumping up in the oven and a country crooner promised love and bliss on the radio. Beneath a wall of family portraits, her 6-month daughter — wearing a snuggly pink onesie — picked through a mountain of toys.



Gracie Goff hands Barbara “Babs” Daniels a tissue while the two chat outside their homes on Swain Street in January in Copeland. Daniels is one of the few Copeland residents that was living there when it was mainly a worker residency for Lee Tidewater Cypress’ logging operation in 1940s through the late 1950s. She said the men would work all day, then families would sit on their porches to play music and socialize after. (Scott McIntyre/Staff)

Next door — which is no more than 15 feet away, her older daughter was playing at Henry’s parents’ house. “To me, family is everything,” said Henry. “We love to hang out with our families. That’s what’s important to us.”

In many ways, Henry’s trailer and her warm family life are the perfect metaphor for the town of Copeland. When you hang the left off State Road 29 and enter Jane’s Scenic Drive, things look pretty rough. Most of the homes that were built here in the 1940s have been traded in for trailers — many have boards in the windows and car parts in the front yard. From the outside, Henry’s trailer, too, looks like it has seen better days.

But it’s a classic book-by-its-cover judgment scenario. Examine life in Copeland and — like a good book stuck with bad cover art — you might just find yourself enthralled and wanting to stick around for a while.

Hard times, good people

“God is good,” bellows Pastor John Gilmore in his deep baritone voice.

“All the time,” returns the chorus of parishioners seated in the pews at the Copeland Baptist Church.

“God is good,” he repeats for good measure.

“All the time,” they return in one strong voice.

It’s a smaller attendance day today, maybe just a dozen or so, but that doesn’t faze Gilmore. He’s just as energetic about teaching God’s word whether he’s preaching to 12 or 200.

The Florida sunshine streams into the little white country church as Gilmore leads the group in prayer.

The building its faithful sit in was constructed back when the lumber business was booming. At its peak — before World War II, when the need for waterproof lumber was high — this town housed around 1,500 people, its own power plant and a general store.

But then the demand for cypress weakened and the Lee Tidewater Cypress Logging Company slowed production. Layoffs began. But the neighborhood had begun to feel like home to its residents. Many wanted to stay but worried about their future. Then, like now, on this sunny Sunday, the citizens of Copeland bowed their heads and prayed that the Lord would come to their aid. And he has, said Henry’s father, 57-year-old Rocky Hendrickson. His parents moved here when he was just a baby, not long before the lumber operation shut down. Somehow he and his family have always made things work. “My dad was in construction, my mom was a waitress; a lot of guys were working on Marco, where things were picking up. They either worked over on 41 or at the ice plant in Everglades City or you were a commercial fisherman,” Hendrickson said. “I’ve done plumbing, run dump trucks, heavy equipment, had a handyman business — mostly working with my hands. I always knew, though, that if the bottom fell out I could live off the land.”

He adds: “I remember when it used to get slow in the summer we’d go to Louisiana, where we had a gig set up collecting gator eggs. We always had something. If you had work and you knew someone that needed it, you’d help him out.”

Copeland still very much works this way. After church, the group gathers outside for a picnic. At first, a few of the old-timers are worried about having enough food — the entire community has been invited, although not everyone has been assigned a dish to bring. Pastor Gilmore doesn’t seem concerned. “If we invite everybody, God will provide the food,” he promises.

A tent goes up on the lawn and folding tables and chairs are assembled. Dishes are arranged on the buffet line. And then a parade of pickup trucks pulls up. This was the onslaught the organizers were afraid of — you can visibly see them glancing over the spread, wondering if there will be enough. However, as the doors open and the denizens of Copeland pile out of the cars, it's clear that Gilmore is right. These trucks are loaded to the roll bars with more food than the tiny town could ever possibly eat in one sitting. The buffet runneth over.

Two needs, two offers

The group sit down beside buckling plates of black-eyed peas and macaroni salad and bow heads as Gilmore says grace. He asks God to bless everyone in the town — even those who have never set foot in his church, even those who didn't come today, especially those who need help.



Rev. John Gilmore watches his daughter Hannah, 7, play with his son Nathan, 4, after Sunday mass concluded at Copeland Baptist Church (Scott McIntyre/Staff)

After grace he asks if anyone knows where he can get a cheap refrigerator. A neighbor's fridge has broken and Gilmore is on a quest to find a replacement. Immediately folks chime in with offers to help — a few offer to store whatever food is still edible, and someone lends his truck for the trip to the junkyard or the thrift store. Someone else mentions that their fridge is on the fritz, too, and an amateur mechanic at the other end of the table shouts up an offer to come take a look at it.

In Copeland, a place where unemployment and poverty are high, it's not unusual to be down on your luck. It is, however, unusual to be down on your luck for long: Your neighbors literally won't let you be. After Casey Henry drove back across the country from her failed California experiment, she arrived back in Copeland with almost nothing.

"I'd gotten rid of everything. I didn't have measuring cups or pots or anything," she remembers. Her family and her friends came to her rescue and helped her get back up and running. "If you ever need anything, you just ask," she says.

That's one of the reasons Henry plans to bring up her two girls in her cozy trailer by the swamp. She's just steps from her childhood home, her parents, her childhood best friend and her fiance's family. Most nights her six-year-old daughter insists on running across to her parent's trailer to say good night to her grandparents.

Hendrickson loves the nightly ritual — but he’s loved almost everything about his life in Copeland. “Growing up, everybody wants to leave, wants to get out,” he says. “But then I got to thinking, everything I love to do is here. Everything I love is within 15 miles. The city life can be a great life, but I don’t know that life. I got six children, four grandbabies — six if you count step-grandkids, a pond in the yard and a rock pit over there. To me, that ain’t all bad.” What Hendrickson, Henry, Gilmore and all the residents of 34137 know is that, while life may not be perfect, when you live in Copeland, God is good — all the time.





