COMMENTARY

Way down south

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I went way down south the other day with my wife and two boys to fish with the Black Redneck and his wife, Pansy. She grew up on the edge of the Big Cypress, in Copeland.

Mr. Burdie Baker drives a pickup truck studded with humor and wisdom and "usefuls," along with some unlikely recorded music — country, with an emphasis on Charley Pride and Hank Williams, Jr. and maybe Waylon Jennings.

Here was the Black Redneck's truck-bed inventory: two 5-gallon buckets, old clipping tools, hammers and screwdrivers, a good shovel, an axe, cane poles, scattered fishing gear, a secure tackle box with assorted line, bobbers, hooks, sinkers, needle-nosed pliers, knives, and swivels, a handful of .22 long rifle rounds scattered about, a cooler filled with ice and watermelon, old rags, a gas can half full, tin scraps, some wood, a grill, and a plastic chair for Pansy to sit on the bank.

Burdie wore one of his 25 or so cowboy hats, this one white straw, along with a sleeveless black T-shirt under overalls, one shoulder strap hanging loose. He had black ankle-high boots on his feet.

On the outside of his maroon pickup are lettered the words, "Black Redneck," along with "Honorary Mayor of Charleston Park," "Poopsie's Property" (that's his affectionate name for his wife), and "Now run, tell that."

The first two words of his enigmatic imperative appear on the left rear bumper, and the second two on the right.

A former wife or girlfriend, it seems, continually bullied Burdie by threatening to go tell his mother about his behavior.

In those days Burdie was an over-the-road truck driver, and he still drank buck, and smoked — two things he quit forever one day, by force of will. Burdie dealt with the bully by inviting her to go on ahead and tell anything she wanted to tell, to anybody she wanted to tell it to.

"'Now run, tell that,' I told her. And I'm still tellin' her, or tellin' somebody, anyway," he explained with a grin.

At nigh on 69, Burdie is still, indeed, telling the world to go on ahead and take its best shot.

In his front yard, amidst the many flowering plants and bushes he grows, near the cotton he raises just to remember how much he disliked picking it as a boy for a white farmer in Georgia, beside the old iron kettle his mother used to keep a stew for the homeless and hungry, posted in front of the collards and okra he raises for food, stands a small sign.

"Many illegal activities in progress. Enter at your own risk," it proclaims, proudly.

When we got to Copeland at 7:30 in the morning, on the thickly-wooded dirt lane where Pansy had grown up, the mosquitoes had settled in as official landlords. They seemed strangely oblivious to such Yankee-financed luxuries as Lee County Mosquito Control, 60 miles to the north. There, a few fortunate skeeters are kept around just for tourists to amuse themselves, but their countless brethren are murdered en masse.

Way down south, however, "the skeeters are still whistling Dixie," Burdie says.

Pansy's father and mother had raised six children in a shack no bigger than a large chicken coop, with water in the yard, an outhouse, and lot of country ways. We stopped at her old neighbor's house, and he gave the Bakers a carburetor, which Burdie threw into the bed of his pickup, along with everything else. "That's worth $4 up in Fort Myers," Burdie said.

The neighbor told us that some squatters were walking onto the acreage Pansy's parents had left to their children, and using a newly installed pipe, complete with Collier County water meter, for water. "They're taking showers and whatnot, too, 'cause they don't have water in their place, so you might see a water bill sometime," the man explained. "A big one, I expect."

No sir, the Bakers won't be seeing any water bill, big or small.

We drove down there to the end of the dirt lane, to the ground where Pansy's life began. She got out of the truck and pointed to some thick bushes. "That's where daddy kept the chickens," she said. "Over there's where the well was, and our house was right there."

Not anymore. Now there was just a Black Redneck standing tall in the green, a reaper come to reap. He got out of the truck while the squatters, two or three men and some women, watched stone-faced from a trailer across the road.

The 6-foot-tall pipe, with face-high meter, stood up out of the dense green flora like some sleek mutant weed, asserting the right of government, of unasked-for intervention, of progress and The Man.

But Burdie ignored all that. He snapped open the meter box, studied the wiring, and then — quick as a dancer in a deft spin —ripped it out with a pair of rubber-handled pliers. After that, he got a tool out of his truck and shut off the water.

When we got down to the lake, all of us set up and started to fish. Burdie and Pansy fish only with cane poles — a line tied to the end of a 16-foot pole, a hook equipped with a worm, and a bobber a few feet above.

Fish started jumping out of that water on the end of our lines like jack-in-the-boxes: peacock bass, as they call them, some smallmouth bass, some cichlids, and some bream, I guess, all bound for Burdie's grill.

The lake was clear and deep and still, its shoreline deserted. Way out, an osprey dropped into the water, while above it a swallow-tailed kite, black and white like all of us, choreographed its fancies in elegant flight across the pale blue belly of sky.

A cypress hammock, thick as a child's dream, stretched away to an endless horizon across the water.

Our little boys had no sense of what it meant to be white, and fishing with cane poles beside close friends who were black, and old, and who came from that other American country. The one where some country people — the black ones — had no civil rights, and nothing but what they could make of the earth and sky and their own great hearts.

What they could make of those things, apparently, was happiness, and a good fish fry. And the Bakers were willing to share such gifts, to share all of them, with us.

And that was something my sons understood perfectly, way down south. ■

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