

# Woman's music and mountains endangered

Clark Miller

**BIG OTTER (AP)** — Sylvia O'Brien lives alone with her plastic flowers, banjo and high-powered rifle two miles — but a hundred years — from Interstate 79.

The 78-year-old self-described hillbilly is one of the few remaining old-style banjo players in sparsely populated Clay County. She has no electricity or car and, as she's quick to point out, "no bills at all."

Her view of the world is as gentle and old-fashioned as the "clawhammer" style of banjo playing which she picked up at "midnight dinners" through the years.

"All of us music-playing folks would get together every other week or so and play until midnight. Then we'd bring out the food," she said. "After that, we'd commence playing again for another two or three hours."

Clawhammer banjo playing looks deceptively simple.

With a slapping motion of the right hand, O'Brien plays the melody by striking one of the lower four strings with the back of the fingernail of her index finger. She says the next step is the one that keeps many would-be players from learning the technique. With the same downward motion of the right hand, O'Brien uses her thumb to pluck the shorter, fifth string of the open-backed banjo to add a lonesome, droning sound.

To listeners more acquainted with the strident ring of bluegrass banjo, clawhammer style offers a pleasant surprise.

When O'Brien plays one of her favorite tunes, "Minnow On A Hook," on the banjo her late brother made out of 1956 Buick parts, the tune played in the old style takes a soothing, melodic tone that sounds just right accompanied by the crackling of a nearby wood stove.

"People say this is about the oldest way of playing the banjo that there is," she said. "I don't know nothing about the music other than that I can play it. It's just a gift of talent."



UPI photo

**Sylvia O'Brien's clawhammer banjo style is distinctive and in danger of dying out.**

But the two main loves in O'Brien's life — traditional music and the steep Dead Fall Mountains that surround her home — are threatened with extinction.

Only a few hardy souls interested in learning clawhammer banjo playing venture up the rutted path to her hollow. Most of those people have heard of O'Brien through her performances at the Vandalia Gathering, sponsored every Memorial Day by the state.

The midnight suppers and old-time square dances don't happen as often as before, and O'Brien says fewer young people are learning clawhammer banjo and fiddling.

Her land also is endangered.

O'Brien says a North Carolina-based coal company owns the coal rights on her 260 acres and plans to begin strip mining.

"It's really got me worried. They say you can't stand in the way of progress," she said. "But these Dead Fall Mountains are my home, and I love to be in them. I hope they'll at least leave the home site."

Twice, O'Brien has lived outside of West Virginia. She lived two years in Montana after she was widowed, and during the last eleven months of World War II she moved to Baltimore, Md., where she worked as a cook for shipyard workers.

But she said there was never any doubt in her mind about returning to central West Virginia.

Most of her life has been spent living with her brother, Jenes Cottrell, in the rough-hewn house on the family farm. When Cottrell, a well-known banjo player, died in 1979, O'Brien was left alone.

Although her house is just 100 yards from power lines, O'Brien agrees with her brother's notion

that electricity only brings trouble.

O'Brien's strong attachment to the hills and hollows of Clay County carries over to the area's wildlife. "You might call this a wildlife preserve," she said, pointing to a bare spot not far from her house where she feeds wild turkeys and keeps a salt block for deer.

She protects "her" animals.

"Last year a man came here and shot three times," she said. "When I told him I didn't want anyone killing my squirrels, he just answered me back, saying 'you kiss my ...' So I told him, 'now you just wait a little bit, and I'll do that very thing.' Well, I just made a beeline for the house and got my high-powered rifle. I sent two 'kisses' toward him, and he never asked for any more."

Her knowledge of the outside world is limited. She reads no newspapers, watches no television and doesn't even have a battery-powered radio.

Is she curious about the rest of the world?

"No, not too much," she said. "I know that there's all kinds of confusion in the world — even murder. But like the song says, 'It's all of their troubles, and none of my own.'"