



BILLYO --- Missouri artist Billyo O'Donnell paints a scene looking down Beaver Branch to where it flows into Indian Creek, near Dabbs Greer Town Hole Park in Anderson. (Staff photo, Peck)

'Just painting my heart out'

by Rick Peck

It was a sight you don't see every day. And just maybe, it takes such an unusual sight for us to actually see what we do look at everyday.

A white bearded man, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, standing in front of an easel along Jefferson Street in Anderson with paint brush in hand is not an everyday occurrence.

But the view down Beaver Branch to where it flows into Indian Creek is. But it shouldn't take Billyo O'Donnell and his eye for beauty to remind us of that fact.

"You have a spectacular county," said O'Donnell as he works to get the purple of a just budding redbud and the brilliant yellow of a forsythia on canvas. "I thought this spot says something about the community. I would explain it mathematically, but it just spoke to me."

O'Donnell is working on a project that has him painting a scene from every county in the state; all 115 of them. Two-

thirds of the way into the project (60,000 miles and a year and a half) he made it to McDonald County.

"This is my first time in the this county," said O'Donnell. "and I will be back."

O'Donnell is a plein air (open air) painter.

"All of my paintings come from life on location," said O'Donnell. "I have no interest in shooting a photo and going home and doing a painting."

"I paint in the freezing cold and the heat, but the most aggravating is the wind," says O'Donnell as he reaches for his easel after a spring gust. "I am having a blast; just painting my heart out."

Kids on bikes stop by and look in amazement as the scene comes to life before their eyes.

While I look out across Beaver Branch and Indian Creek, O'Donnell works on an old house sitting high above the water. Just an old house that I have driven by thousands of times, but O'Donnell brings out features that I have never noticed.

"Look at the windows and how close they come to the eve and to the porch," said O'Donnell.

O'Donnell made his way through the county from the south, travelling Highway 90 from Jane to Noel. An obvious choice for a painter would be the bluffs at Noel, but maybe that is why they were not selected, and plus the fact he had painted bluffs along the Osage River as part of this project.

Ask a dumb question, and you get what you deserve. How long does it take to do a painting?

"About 40 years of my life," quipped O'Donnell before narrowing the time frame. "Anywhere from one sitting or sometimes I've gone back three or four times. A sitting can be from a few minutes to almost all day."

O'Donnell hopes to have his collection of the paintings that feature the historical, geological and unique places across the state of Missouri published in the future.