

## Painter eyes Pierce City for LawCo sample

By MELONIE ROBERTS

A broad swish of paint on the canvass, an abstract blob that resembles nothing familiar. Some shadows added, a bit of contrast touched lightly here and there, and before long, images start materializing right before your eyes.

Such is the art of Billyo O'Donnell, the Warrenton native who has made it his self-imposed mission to capture scenes from all 115 counties of Missouri.

At present, O'Donnell is working on his vision of county

71, Lawrence County, the former Lawrence County Bank, located at Commercial and Walnut in Pierce City.

"This is a beautiful town," O'Donnell said, blending a variety of colors on his palette to create the exact shade he was seeking for the majority of the background color. "I like the way they've laid the streets out, and the character of the old buildings."

The building is rich in local history, harking back to its origins in 1892, when it was the

See PAINTER Page 2



Eyeing one of Lawrence County's great architectural treasures, the 1892 Lawrence County Bank above, painter Billyo O'Donnell at right renders this Pierce City scene as his county sampling.



## Painter

second bank built in Missouri after the beginning "the Panic," a vague reference to the post-Civil War economic crisis. It started out as the "Banking House of Allen and Brother." In 1873, L.L.L. Allen took in partners and it became a corporate operation, the Lawrence County Bank. The first president of the incorporated Lawrence County Bank was Jacob Linzee, the town's first mayor, for whom Linzee Boulevard is named. It is notably the oldest (former) bank in Pierce City.

After the demise of Allen, the later owners were arrested in 1924 and prosecuted for taking deposits to pay off other depositors when they knew the bank was insolvent.

None of the history of the bank is that important to this artist's vision. He sees only the graceful Italian architecture, curving arches of the upper story windows, the steeped rooftop a rusty red against a blazing blue spring skyline, the shadows of the historic bandstand blending in the late afternoon sun with the pavement of Commercial Street. The background of the Peirce City First National Bank creates a backdrop to reflect the playful beams of the waning sun.

"This is a really important time to be painting," O'Donnell noted. "The anniversary of the signing of the treaty authorizing the Louisiana Purchase from France and when Lewis and Clark were commissioned to conduct their expedition. I look to the historical, geological and natural landmarks of the state, things unique to certain areas, for my paintings."

"For example, the bootheel is famous for its azaleas, and Charleston is famous for its tobacco farming. The tobacco from that area is the only tobacco royalty in Europe would use."

O'Donnell admits that he has blended the best of both worlds, capturing some scenes that have remained the same throughout the ages, and some that have changed.

"I've been painting Missouri for a year and a half," he said. "I'm holding the paintings until the series is complete."

O'Donnell noted that his goal is to hold an exhibition of all of the paintings, publish a book, ("I've already got a publisher interested in the project"), and then having the exhibition tour the state, and the auction the paintings.

O'Donnell has been named one of the 50 top landscape painters nationally, and has been approached by PBS for a 13-episode series on being one of the

country's top 13 leading open air painters.

"I've also been invited to Biennale, Italy, for an exhibit of artists representing 50 countries," he said. "It's one of the largest exhibits in the world."

The Haggin Museum, Stockton, California, has also approached him for participation in the exhibit *From Sea to Shining Sea*. The museum selected 50 of the nation's leading landscape artists to capture "America."

"This is a really exciting time for me," he said. "The paintings should be finished up this year." He is responsible for providing three finished canvasses for the exhibition.

Of his technique, O'Donnell is as open as a blank canvass.

"I get a good, solid image," he said. "Usually just one. I use the Titan method, and just start painting. No sketching beforehand. I catch all of the large shapes, then go back and put in the smaller shapes, and then break it down into smaller shapes and finally add the fine details. You paint the suggestion of the whole thing and then bring it all together."

He uses oils on canvasses because, "they give me time to move things around."

Just showing up, a stranger in town, painting a building or a landmark, or whatever captures the essence of what he wishes to portray, is sometimes as interesting as the work itself.

"I meet all kinds of people," he laughed. "Some of them think I'm a captive audience. That's the worst. They're the ones who usually talk about politics, religion or world conspiracy. I can usually talk to people about anything but what I'm doing. And then I get stumped."

"This has been a fun project for me," he continued. "I get to go out and paint from life. Anyone can take a photograph and paint from it all day long. But this is a day in my life. There is only one day that's going to be like this. These paintings allow me to document my life, where I was, what my emotions were. I feel more alive."

O'Donnell isn't at a loss for upcoming projects, either.

"My next goal is to paint the Missouri River," he said. "There are 532 miles. That's a big, long chunk of river. I plan on getting a boat, travel and paint the river."

"I always have ideas," he said. "But, when I see something I want to paint -- I go paint it."