A Banjo on Her Knee—Part I:  
Appalachian Women and America’s First Instrument  
by Susan A. Eacker and Geoff Eacker

In an article titled "In Praise of Banjo-Picking Women" published over 10 years ago in the pages of the Old-Time Herald, Mike Seeger noted that in his fieldwork with "old-timers" in the Southern mountains, he had been told that their fathers and mothers played the banjo before the turn of the 20th century. Seeger went on to ask, "Why do we not have accounts of this—either visually or in the literature?" This article is a long overdue affirmation of Seeger’s findings and a response to his question.

Since I teach women’s history, I was intrigued by the idea of uncovering some of these invisible banjo women. Geoff makes 5-string banjos and plays clawhammer style, but most of our record collection and our knowledge centered around male banjo players. It was only after we began our research that we learned that most of these men had learned to play from a female relative. This list is exhaustive but a partial account includes the following:

Ralph Stanley learned to play clawhammer style from his mother, Lucy Smith Stanley.  
"Grandpa" Louis Jones took his first fiddle lessons from Cynthia May Carver, a.k.a. "Cousin Emmy," from Lamb, Kentucky.  
Northwestern North Carolina banjoist Clarence "Tom" Ashley (who popularized the tune "The Coo-Coo"), learned to play clawhammer banjo in 1905 (at the age of eight) from his Aunts Ary and Daisy. National Heritage Fellow and banjo player Morgan Sexton of Linefork, Kentucky, got his first lessons from his older sister Hettie.  
And Earl Scruggs’ two older sisters, Eula Mae and Ruby, both played the banjo and surely taught their younger brother a tune or two.

The fact that so many well-known old-time male musicians have been inspired and influenced by a female in the family should force us to rethink the ways in which banjo music in Appalachia has been promulgated and preserved. While this might strike a sour note with some, the evidence suggests that it was women who have historically kept old-time music—especially banjo and ballads—alive in the hills and hollers of the Southern mountains. (As case in point, consider the fact that when British ballad collectors Cecil Sharp and Maude Karpeles made their foray into Eastern Kentucky, Western North Carolina and the Virginias in 1916-17, approximately 75% of the 968 tunes they collected and later compiled as English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians were sung to them by women.)
Historical evidence and photographs clearly document the fact that middle-class women in the Northeast were swept up in the banjo craze of the late 19th century. With the advent of mass-produced instruments by S. S. Stewart, Fairbanks, and Cole, banjo manufacturers in the 19th century consciously and successfully shifted the cultural appeal of the instrument away from its association with the oftentimes bawdy minstrel or medicine show and into the hands of those middle-class women and men who could afford a store-bought banjo constructed with elaborately engraved metal rims, inlaid ivory and mother-of-pearl fretboards and heads, and intricately carved heel stocks. Banjo clubs for men and women sprang up in Ivy League colleges. In 1893, the famed artist Mary Cassatt even used the image of the banjo in her painting "The Banjo Lesson," which depicted "the modern woman" of the late 19th century as a genteel young mother strumming her instrument while her attentive daughter gazes over her shoulder. Ironically, what had originally been an instrument invented by slaves along the Eastern seaboard now was a signifier for white, liberated women of middle-class America. Even the most popular model of the early 20th century, the "Whyte Laydie" by A. C. Fairbanks, was given its name in obvious reference to its intended users—white, sophisticated women and men of means.

Yet, the common folk in southern Appalachia had surely been picking the banjo long before this mass appeal began. How the banjo got to the Southern mountains is still a matter of speculation. In fact, the topic has inspired the literary equivalent of "dueling banjos." Some banjo scholars claim that the down-stroke style of playing was picked up by mountain whites directly from slaves. Others see the Civil War—which brought together blacks and whites in both grey and blue—as the mode of transmission. In addition, the minstrel show, especially as it traveled down the tributaries of the Ohio into Eastern Kentucky and Western Virginia in the early 19th century, probably exposed many rural Appalachians to the instrument.

The fact that 19th-century Appalachian women banjo players have remained invisible may be because mountain women and men were largely isolated and on the bottom rung of the economic ladder. As social historians can attest, the marginalized leave few records, which may help to answer Seeger's question of why such accounts are hard to come by. When "our contemporary ancestors" (as they were called by outsiders) were "discovered" in the mountains in the early part of the last century, part of their supposed quaintness lay in their musical culture. Ballad collectors like Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles, Olive Dame Campbell, and the numerous women who started rural settlement schools like Hindman and Pine Mountain in Southeastern Kentucky, were keen on establishing a Celtic connection between Appalachians and their Northern European ancestors. To this end, they sought after unaccompanied ballads with British bloodlines. The banjo was not a link in their musical canon and mountain men and women were discouraged from playing this indigenous instrument, while encouraged to pluck the dulcimer, erroneously thought to have come from Great Britain. (Kentuckian Jean Ritchie, singularly responsible for popularizing the dulcimer during the folk revival, told us in an informal interview that her family considered the banjo a "low instrument."

But if Cecil Sharp and other "ballad catchers" had strayed from the settlement schools and small towns that served as headquarters for their fieldwork, they would have found the banjo being picked in the mountains as sprightly as spring ginseng! And if you dig deep enough into manuscript and photographic collections,
scrutinize liner notes, and listen to field and commercial recordings and oral recollections, the sound of women banjo pickers still resonates through the years, as far back as the late 19th century.

African-American banjoist Elizabeth "Babe" Reid, born in North Carolina in 1910 and cousin to Etta Baker, learned to play from her mother, Mattie Moore. The latter was certainly playing the banjo before the 20th century. Hobart Smith of Virginia once told an interviewer that he learned to play the banjo in 1904—at the age of seven—and that his mother and father both played before he was born. Other late 19th and early 20th-century female tailors include Gertrude Evans of Calhoun County, West Virginia, (who died in the late 1920s at an advanced age) who taught famed fiddler French Carpenter how to play several tunes, including "Walkin' in the Parlor." Virginia Myrtle Wilson ("Aunt Jennie"), born in 1900 in Logan County, West Virginia, learned to play banjo at the age of nine. She was taught to play by an older woman named Delphine Maynard, who according to Wilson, "could play the banjo and dance just like anything and I wanted to be just like her." In a conversation with us, Eastern Kentucky fiddle player J.P. Fraley, at the time 77 years of age, remembered that his mother played the banjo. Both Stella Wagoneer Kimble, born in 1892 in Sparta, North Carolina, and her older sister Pearl Wagoneer, played a two-finger old-time banjo style typically found in Western North Carolina. Ada Lee Stump Boarman played the banjo, according to her son Andy Boarman, who was born in 1901 in Berkeley County, West Virginia, and who made and played mountain banjo. Kelly Clay Sears, born in 1907 in Chatham County, North Carolina, learned his first banjo tune, "Catfish," at the age of nine from his mother.

Finally, a poster titled "250 Years of Old-Time Music Around Galax, Virginia," (purchased at the Blue Ridge Institute of Ferrum College in Virginia) details the names, dates of birth and death, as well as the instruments played by musicians in the area. Among the more than two hundred names listed are many women, the earliest a banjo player named Julia Reece Green (1842-1911), is credited with playing the banjo and the accordion.

Another reason for the historical invisibility of banjo women is no doubt related to the fact that it was at one time considered improper for women to play an instrument associated not just with men, but with immorality. For if the fiddle was once considered "the devil's box," the banjo was certainly a son of Satan. One woman identified in this study was told by her father that "nice girls don't play the banjo." Appalachian women banjo players in the past were also stymied by the additional burden of not playing in public, either preferring or being coerced into keeping the instrument in the privacy of their homes or front porches. Still, by the 1920s, some women in the Southern mountains came down off their porches and began to play in public.

Samantha Bumgarner was probably the first Appalachian banjo player of either sex to cut a commercial record. In 1924 she traveled to New York City where she recorded 10 songs for Columbia Phonograph Company, playing frailing-style banjo on six of the tunes, including "Shout Lou" and "Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss." Her April 1924 recording was made only one month after OKeah records had produced tracks by Fiddlin' John Carson and his Virginia Reelers, considered the first "hillbilly" recordings to be commercially marketed in the United States. Thus not only should Bumgarner be considered the first "banjo-pickin' person" to record and reach a mass audience, but one of the earliest Southern mountain musicians to make it to the
studio as well.

Samantha Bumgarner was born in the Western mountains of Jackson County, North Carolina, in 1880. Apparently, her father forbade her to touch the fiddle but she would "sneak out and play" it anyway. By the age of 15 she had become an accomplished banjo player, picking on a homemade instrument made from "a gourd with a cat's hide stretched over it and strings made of cotton thread waxed with beeswax." (Note that she was playing her homemade banjo before the turn of the last century.) Apparently, her father didn't mind that his daughter had taken up the banjo, for he eventually bought her a manufactured model. Bumgarner played at the first Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina in 1928, an event organized by musician and Appalachian musicologist Bascom Lamar Lunsford. It was here in 1936 that 16-year-old Pete Seeger would hear his first five-string clawhammer banjo, being played by Samantha Bumgarner no less. Seeger, of course, went on to become the country's most influential promoter of the five-string banjo during the folk revival movement of the late 1950s and early 60s. Surely, Samantha deserves some credit for being his initial musical muse. Although she never received critical acclaim, Bumgarner was obviously an inspiration for other women in the Southern mountains, who would emerge a decade later as some of the nation's most popular entertainers.

Virtually all of the women banjo players who came to national attention in the 1930s were from Kentucky. For women in the mountains, marriage or music provided the only viable alternative to an isolated and inevitable hard-scrabble existence. Three women in particular—Cynthia May Carver ("Cousin Emmy"), Lily May Ledford, and Laverne Williamson ("Molly O'Day") all chose music as their mode of escape. Cynthia May Carver (1903-1980) was born in Lamb, Kentucky to a sharecropping family that raised tobacco. As early as age eight, Cynthia worked in the fields, staking, stripping and curing Kentucky's principal cash crop. Although the work was arduous, young Cynthia entertained her family in the fields by crooning, clowning around, and creating musical skits. She once told an interviewer that she "thank[ed] God that He gave me the talent and the good common sense to get out of there. . . ." Like Samantha Bumgarner, her first instrument was the fiddle, and in 1936 she became the first woman to win the National Old Fiddlers contest in Louisville, Kentucky. While she became proficient playing 15 instruments, including the saw, she began her career in West Virginia as a banjoist with Frankie Moore's Log Cabin Boys in the mid-1930s. By 1938 she had formed her own band, called the Kin Folks, and toured in a Cadillac with four other women players. Cousin Emmy's banjo playing has been described as a hard, fast-driving eastern Kentucky frailing style. Her stage presence was apparently electric, as she danced, strutted, and strummed just as she had in the tobacco fields years ago. Even over the radio, her dynamic style surged into the airwaves. Playing on WWVA in Wheeling, West Virginia in 1937, she caught the attention of a young Louis Jones, later known as Grandpa Jones. In his autobiography, Everybody's Grandpa, Jones stated that "her five-string picking fascinated me to the extent that I would follow her around the studio to watch and listen. I worried her so much that she finally said, 'Okay, I'll show you how it's done.'" He went on to note that it was "sad that such people are hardly ever mentioned in books on country music by these so-called experts."
Cousin Emmy and her banjo not only caught the ears of Grandpa Jones, but those of over 2.5 million listeners as well when she was hired by radio station KMOX in St. Louis, Missouri in 1941. Her visual presence was captured on celluloid when she did two movies in Hollywood: Swing in the Saddle (1944) and the Second Greatest Sex (1955). In 1947, folklorist Alan Lomax included her on his field recording Kentucky Mountain Ballads. On the collection she played banjo and sang "Pretty Little Miss Out in the Garden," as well as "I Wish I was a Single Girl Again." During the 1960s, her musical career was resurrected when she toured Europe with the New Lost City Ramblers.

Like Cynthia May Carver, Lily May Ledford (1917-1985) was also born in a remote region of Kentucky, in an area so inaccessible that it was called "Pinch-'em-Tight" holler, located in the Red River Gorge in the east-central part of the state. All of her 11 siblings fought over the family banjo, crafted out of green hickory with a groundhog-hide head. Apparently, it was her mother who didn't approve of Lily May's banjo picking. As she noted in her autobiography Coon Creek Girl, by the age of eight she had "learned to steal out the banjo and hide way up on a hill behind a big rock where Mama couldn't hear me and where I pretended not to hear her hollering for me to do chores."

At the age of 12, Lily May stole away for good, leaving the hills for the highway north. After winning a fiddle contest in Kentucky, she caught the attention of promoter John Lair, who wanted her as a regular on his radio show in Chicago. Lair would become Lily May's manager throughout her career with the Coon Creek Girls, the first commercially successful all-female Appalachian string band in the United States, which lasted from 1936 until the breakup of the Coon Creek Girls in 1957. According to Ledford, Lair, the consummate image-maker, tried to control all aspects of Lily May's public persona. "In the long old-fashioned dress and high top lace shoes that Mr. Lair had me wear, I felt like an old lady and not at all pretty. Mr. Lair discouraged my buying clothes, curling my hair, going in for make-up or improving my English." Like many of her female predecessors, Lily May preferred the fiddle, yet Lair also insisted that she "stay on that banjo from now on and let the fiddle be incidental, for we've plenty of good fiddlers, but that banjo is what you'll make it on." Ledford replied that she would "rather fiddle" because she didn't "know many banjo songs." Even though she lost that battle, she had her own ways of subverting Lair's attempts to control her. In spite of his instructions, Lily May "did a little fixing up... and would not wear my hair pulled back in a bun except on stage."

Lily May bought a Whyte Laydie and soon developed the same hard-driving Eastern-Kentucky frailing style that had characterized the music of Cousin Emmy. Whether that distinctive style was intact from the time she played as a young girl in the gorge or whether she was inspired by Cousin Emmy is hard to tell. Regardless, she took to the instrument with the same fervor as she played fiddle. She not only learned many banjo tunes but modified them in proto-feminist fashion, taking an old standard "Going 'Round the World," for example, and changing the lead-in line from "With a banjo pickin' girl" to "I'll be a banjo pickin' girl." She is purported to have written 40 new verses to the song, with lines like the following:

I'm goin' to Chattanooga and from there on to Cuba...
I'm goin' cross the ocean if I don't take a notion... I'm goin' to Tennessee, don't you try and follow me...

Like Cousin Emmy, Lily May Ledford was "rediscovered" during the urban folk music revival. At the invitation of Ralph Rinzler, she performed at the Newport Folk Festival in 1968 and toured with the Red Clay Ramblers in 1979. Shortly before her death in 1985 she was bestowed the National Heritage Award. Molly O'Day was born Laverne Williamson in 1923 in McVeigh, Kentucky, near the West Virginia border, in a holler so far back in the hills, as she once quipped, "that you had to break daylight with a sledgehammer, and the groundhogs carried the mail." Like the banjo-playing women before her, she left her home in the hills at a young age, after writing to ask a musician in Bluefield, West Virginia named Lynn Davis if he needed a female singer. Laverne had already made a musical name for herself on a nearby radio station in Williamson, West Virginia, where she played guitar in a string band that included her two brothers—one on banjo and the other fiddle. When Lynn Davis went to visit Laverne in her "little log cabin" in Eastern Kentucky, she was just 17 years old. Davis told us that:

"I heard a lot about her, you know, how she was singin'. And I had two girls—a sort of cowboy band; a Western type. And one of the girls got married and the other was going home. So she wrote me and asked if I would like to have a girl singer. So I went to see her in the little log cabin. When she walked out I turned flips. ... So her brothers came out and her mother and dad and we talked awhile. Her mother said, "Now she can't go at seventeen without her brother goes with her." So I hired her and her brother [fiddler "Skeets" Williamson]."

Molly and her band, The Cumberland Mountain Folks, which included her brother Skeets and Lynn Davis, began a regular radio program in Beckley, West Virginia, sponsored by Dr Pepper. Molly quickly picked up the banjo style and songs that had been a part of her everyday life in Kentucky, and her hard-driving frollicking style closely resembled that of Lily May Ledford, whom she had obviously heard through the radio. Between 1948-51, Molly O'Day and the Cumberland Mountain Folks recorded 36 sides for Columbia Records. In his book Kentucky Country, music scholar Charles K. Wolfe claims that Art Satherly, the legendary producer for Columbia, considered O'Day "the greatest female country singer ever."

Yet Molly was not only a great Appalachian singer, but a great banjo player as well. One of her most popular recordings, the old ballad "Poor Ellen Smith" gives aural evidence not just of her vocal ability, but her frailing banjo technique. According to Lynn Davis, at one time in London, Kentucky, she even beat the legendary Earl Scruggs in a banjo contest:

"Earl Scruggs, you know, he never did care about her beatin' him in a banjo-pickin' contest. He said it was
because she was a girl. Well, if you know Earl, he seldom ever smiles—very sober. Well Molly would get out and she'd just about go berserk pickin' the banjo 'cause she really put on a show. She would talk with her eyes and she just put in on."

(Scruggs was contacted about this apparent indignity, after an article concerning our research ran in the Huntington Herald-Dispatch. He denied the veracity of the story.)

Laverne Williamson and Lynn Davis were married in 1941, just before Laverne turned 18. Their marriage lasted until her death in 1987, but Molly O'Day's career was short lived, after she suffered a nervous breakdown in 1949 and turned her back on secular songs and the music business. After her 1951 recording session, she never appeared in public performances, unless it was in front of the congregation pastored by then Reverend Lynn Davis.

Lynn Davis explained to us Molly's reasons for quitting the business as follows: "She didn't want to be bothered with it. We even got a call from...Hootenany. They called us to be on that...[They offered us] thousands of dollars...We didn't go back into it at all." Even though her career was brief, Molly O'Day's voice and banjo playing were kept alive by Lynn Davis (until his recent death) through his daily radio program called "Hymns from the Hills" in Huntington, West Virginia, where Molly and Lynn lived most of their married life. While Cousin Emmy, Molly O'Day and Lily May Lecford all managed to achieve some fame, there are countless other women banjoists who still remain relatively obscure.

In the next segment of this article OTH readers will be introduced to some of these banjo women, perhaps for the first time. Given the growing popularity of a new generation of banjo women—like Alison Brown, Emily Erwin of the Dixie Chicks, and Gillian Welch—their foremothers, past and present, certainly deserve their rightful place in the history of Appalachian music.