

Lafi and Juliana “Jo” (Sloan) Miller

A love story, a feud, and ties to 100 years of Livermore history

By Linda Bell

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When Lafi Miller decided he wanted Juliana “Jo” Sloan to be his bride, he didn’t consider the obstacles for one moment. Her family, an intertwining network of old ranch families — Sloans, Swans and Robertses — had already threatened to do something drastic if he ever came around courting Jo again.

But when Jo spent eight months recovering from polio in a Denver hospital before her 21st birthday, he saw a chance to act. He sneaked a Baptist minister into the Catholic hospital, and together with the help of a few nurses and two friends to act as witnesses, he and Jo were secretly married in the fourth floor sun room.

If their honeymoon had to be in a hospital, so be it, according to Jo and Lafi Miller. Now they’ve been married almost 61 years, have two children, nine grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.

“I remember we lied a little about the timing when we finally had the nerve to tell Jo’s parents,” said Lafi. “We’d already been married a few months, but we told them we’d just gotten married when Jo was about to be discharged from the hospital.” Her parents tried to have it annulled, Lafi remembers. They wouldn’t let Jo go back home to get her things, and they threatened that if Lafi ever came near there he’d be carried off.

“But then they got over it pretty fast,” said Jo. “While Lafi was serving in the military during World War II, my young son Dennis and I would stay with them on the ranch for extended periods of time. When my folks had their 50th wedding anniversary, they had it in our dance studio in Fort Collins.”

So why all the fuss? “I think they thought I just wasn’t good enough for their daughter,” said Lafi. “Although I’d come to Fort Collins with my parents at the age of 4, there just wasn’t enough known about my family for the Sloans.”

Jo and her sister Sylvia grew up on the vast Sloan ranch along the North Fork of Rabbit Creek which belonged to their father, John Arthur “Art” Sloan. Their mother was Julia Swan Sloan, and her mother, Eva May, was a Roberts. These three families represented some of the most prominent pioneer stock in the Livermore area. The Robertses arrived in the area in 1874, the Sloans in 1880, and the Swans originally settled in the Pleasant Valley area of Bellvue in 1871.

“I am the only one of my immediate family still living in the area,” Jo said. “My sister went to Canada and has since died, our son Dennis lives in Arizona, our daughter Rene is in Berthoud, and all the others have either moved away or passed away.”

Jo said she has come almost full circle now, since she and Lafi built a house in Red Feather Lakes in 1973. The property, previously owned by Lady Moon, was purchased from Wesley Swan, her uncle.

When the Sloans first arrived in the area in 1880, they bought a ranch on what is now the Swanson Ranch in Red Feather Lakes. “My grandmother used to call it Sunny Slope,” said Jo, “but it’s had other names.” Her great-grandfather, William A. Sloan, came to Colorado in June 1880 and was killed the following December when a tree fell on him. He left a widow, Martha, three grown sons — Lemuel, Will and Samuel — and four daughters. Samuel was Jo’s grandfather.

“We had some great times growing up on the ranch,” Jo said. “I remember that my sister and I had Shetland ponies and we did a little trick stunt riding on them. We’d take them some distance away from the barn and then practice our stunts as they headed back to their stalls. My Dad thought we were great, and one summer we entered our trick riding event in the Red Feather Lakes rodeo. But we hadn’t counted on there not being a barn to lure them. When we got in the middle of the arena and were ready to do

our tricks, those ponies just stood there! My Dad tried to get them to move, but they just wouldn't."

Jo remembers being foolish but lucky out on the ranch. Once when their folks had gone to town and Jo and her sister were alone on the ranch, they watched a small bear cub climb a tree. They wanted their folks to see it and had heard that if a person tied an old coat around the tree, the bear wouldn't like the scent and would climb down over it.

So that's what the girls did, never thinking there might be a sow bear around to protect the cub. "We were lucky though, we never saw the mother," said Jo. "We watched the cub climb down right over the coat. Then we watched it all afternoon, overturning large rocks and eating the ants or bugs it could scoop up on its paw."

Jo said they never saw elk growing up, although there were some deer around. Her father saw a cougar once, but bobcat were more common. "We used to have sawmillers on the place from time to time," said Jo, "and I think they used to eat a lot of venison." The sawmillers, who paid the rancher for the right to timber land for posts and ties, had a little shanty town with a store not far from the Sloan place.

Jo's father built a schoolhouse on the ranch for his children and a few others, hiring a teacher named Ora Sivers. After Jo and Sylvia finished the eighth grade curriculum, they went to live in Fort Collins during the school year in their own apartment. Their parents timed their schooling so that the sisters would be in the same grade, even though Sylvia was a year and a half older.

Jo recalls two bad floods on the ranch, after she was grown. "In either 1941 or 1942 there was a very bad summer hail storm which dammed up the creek, and the water and piles of hail came into the house and out-buildings. Lafi helped Dad clean up after that one, which badly warped the oak flooring," she said. Two or three years later, the entire chimney foundation shifted out away from the house in another bad flood. But the house is still standing.

Jo, in spite of her bout with polio, was able to help Lafi manage and teach at their own Fort Collins dance studio, Miller Manner Dance Studio, for 35 years. They taught square dancing, round dancing, ballroom and some ballet, jazz and acrobatics. "Since the 1970s, I started suffering from what they call post-polio syndrome," Jo said. "I overused my good muscles, and now my weaker ones can't take over."

Although she sometimes uses a cane, Jo Miller still walks with the gracefulness of a dancer alongside her long-time dancing partner, Lafi Miller.