

### 3. Jo's Upbringing

Helen Josephine Osborne was born to Mary Pearl Oak Miller and Dallas Jonathan Osborne on July 7, 1906 in Denver, Colorado. The circumstances that brought the Osbornes to Denver from Ohio were not unique. Many were sent to the high dry lands of Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico for their health. Dallas had a lung disease that was then called "consumption," now known as tuberculosis. The Osbornes first chose Las Vegas, New Mexico, where they invested in the sheep and wool business. However, after the failure of this venture, they moved to Denver, Colorado, where Jo was born, the third of four children born to Pearl and Dallas Osborne. Dallas lived until 1913, when his daughter Jo was 6 years old, and his youngest child, Ruth (Bobbie), was only four. It is sad to note that likewise his mother, Nancy C. Osborne, died when Dallas was just six years old.



L-R clockwise: Jo, with the biggest bow, Dal, Alberta, Bobbie

Jo wrote:

*I started out as a disappointment! The third child was to be a boy born on July 4<sup>th</sup>, and I turned out a tiny girl baby and made a belated arrival on July 7<sup>th</sup> [1906].*

*My name—thereby hangs a tale: Though we were in no way related, it so happened that another family by the name of Osborne lived in our block. My mother, out strolling with her now three-months-old baby, met the other Mrs. Osborne out perambulating her new infant. In a few moments of 'baby' conversation they discovered what had happened, and it was almost unbelievable. Both the babies had been born on the same day and both had been named Helen Josephine, and both had the surname of Osborne!*

*All through my school years the other Helen was my bug-a-boo! As might be expected we were constantly explaining which Helen we were. My namesake was beautiful to look at, but not as beautiful to know. She was very early the possessor of the ugly thing called a 'bad reputation.' It became increasingly embarrassing for me as I went into my teens to suffer the mistaken identity which I was frequently subjected to. In high school I found myself in the office on two different occasions having to convince them that I was not the Helen Osborne they really wished to expel.*

*Judge Lindsay of the Juvenile Court informed my mother one day in no uncertain terms that I was to report the following day to the court. This was the straw that broke the camel's back! That evening at the dinner table Mother issued the ultimatum, "I am changing Helen's name; henceforth she is to be called Jo and we will start here and now." And so I became Jo, and I almost hate the name of Helen.*

Jo recalled her earliest memories in a video-taped interview done when she was 82 years old:

*Grandfather Miller: This is my very first memory. I couldn't have been much more than two and a half. We had a great big baby buggy called a perambulator. Grandfather put Bobbie, who was the baby, in the buggy, and put me in with her, and took us for a walk. And I can remember how humiliated and embarrassed I was to be in that great big baby buggy with that baby! And he took us down by Wyman School, which was the first school I went to, where there was a little penny candy store. And he wheeled us into the candy store and he told me then that I could select some candy. I was so embarrassed that I wouldn't even select the candy. And he kept trying to tempt me by saying, "Don't you want this? Don't you want a candy banana? Or don't you want a penny's worth of those little black licorice babies?" He tried everything under the sun, and I just wouldn't answer him. I can still remember my great embarrassment to be in that baby buggy with the baby. Finally he had to take over and select the candy for me and when he did, I wouldn't even eat it, I was so angry about being in that big old buggy with that baby!*



Right: Grandmother & Grandfather Miller, 1902

*Grandmother Miller was the dearest thing in the world. She loved kids, and she used to hold me on her lap hours at a time, and would tell me stories and just anything to entertain me. She was so patient and so dear. I can remember going in and saying, "Grandma, how 'bout telling me a story?" And no matter what time of day it was, or how busy she was, she would stop everything and I'd sit on her lap and she'd tell me stories by the hour. Mostly bible stories, or stories about her childhood or about how they would walk to the church.*

*I also remembered my father coming home with a box of candy for Mother. And he said, "I'm going to let one of you children give it to her." And I thought surely I would be the one chosen to give her the box of candy. But he said, "No, it should be Alberta, because she is the oldest." Or he said, "No, it should be Bobbie because she is the baby." And he gave it to one of them to give to her. And I didn't get to give her the box of candy. And I was just broken hearted because I didn't get to give Mama the box of candy.*

*I remember that we used to sit at the dining room table and it was a great big table and my father would sit at one end. I presume that grapefruit hadn't been in common use at that time, but the maid would bring in a peeled whole grapefruit. Father would take a little sharp knife and take a section of it and he would take the membrane of the skin off each little section and then he'd put it on a plate and then he'd hand it down. And one by one we'd get a little section of grapefruit and as he would finish he would pass a plate down, and then another. I can remember how long it would take. I would wait and wait and wait for a little hunk of grapefruit.*



The Osborne family about 1910

*I was only six when Mother had to suddenly assume the responsibility of both father and mother. My scholarly, good, gullible father died suddenly one night with a heart attack, [resulting from advanced tuberculosis] leaving my lovely young mother with four children to rear.*

*Father, a struggling ministerial student, met and married my young, very protected, wealthy mother while they were both in college [in Hiram, Ohio]. Father as a minister was most successful. As a financier he was awful! His godliness got in the way. He sincerely believed and trusted every man and therefore was the swindler's dream come true. Mother's money was like sand seeping through the egg timer, and it slowly eked away.*

*I was a strange little child. I was not liked very much by other children and I was afraid of them. Consequently I spent much time alone. I felt I was disgraced because I did not have a father and I would tell all sorts of prevarications trying to explain his absence. He was on a trip, or he was in the hospital, anything but the fact that he was dead. Children are conformists in an exaggerated sense, and suffer when they feel they are different in any way.*

*Some of my early memories are of Father's library. It was a huge room with a fireplace at one end over which hung a very large picture of a forest fire. On two sides were open book shelves that extended to the ceiling. Once in a great while tucked among all those books of theology, law and classics I would find in some obscure place, as if hiding from its aristocratic neighbors, a meek book begging to be read by a long-legged, black pig-tailed, skinny, searching little girl. Never will I forget my thrill and joy the day I discovered Elsie Dinsmore, unprotestingly crammed back of the eye-seeing row of books—she would be!—waiting for some little girl to haul her out. Mother always knew when I became 'icky sweet' and too angelic that I was again "en rapport" with Elsie. The day I struck it rich and found Little Women, Little Men and Jo's Boys—well, all the church bells on earth were ringing!*

*Sunday evenings were our music evenings. We all had to gather in the music room to listen as mother played the piano. We took turns choosing the selection. Brother always chose a march; Alberta and Bobbie's tastes would vary; I always would choose "Melody in F," or "Rustles of Spring." Sometimes it was a bit difficult to sit for two hours, but I know that is where was first instilled my love of music, and where mother first subtly taught her children to be discriminatory in their musical tastes. Once a year Mother took us to the opera. I was dreadfully bored.*



The Osborne's first home, Tiffin, Ohio

*We always had to dress for dinner which was served in four courses and was an occasion. Even when Mother did her own cooking and serving we still made a ceremony out of dinner. After Father died Mother sat in his place and served. I will never forget that picture. Mother sat very straight and dignified with her white hair—it had turned white quite early—piled high on her head looking every inch the aristocrat which she was.*

*As I went through the toothless, tonsil and adenoid, and crush stage, it became very evident that I didn't exactly fit the family pattern. I didn't like private schools; I was forever bringing home some waif; I couldn't be spanked—it made me ill. Mother said, "Jo is my little black sheep, but she's such a nice shade of black."*

*Our summers were fun. The day school was out we went to our summer home in Pinecliff, Colorado. There we hiked, played tennis, waded and danced our summers away.*

*Adolescent years included the things in most girl's life that seemed very important: dances at Colorado University, College of Mines, Colorado College and Aggies with the accompanying fluff-fluffs and gee-gaws that are such fun. I was called upon to make those tremendous decisions not unusual in a young girl's existence: whether I should accept a date with a Beta, though he was too short, or be squired by an ATO that was tall!*



Jo and Bobbie as teenagers

*Suddenly it all became rather silly and unimportant. I met a boy who dwarfed all the other boys in my thinking. This lad represented everything I had never known in my other beaux. He came from a large, poor family, and had been working since he was fourteen, finishing high school at Opportunity School at nights. He was very serious, hard working, stolid, and mature—perhaps too much so, having assumed much responsibility too soon.*

*By this time our family finances were reaching a low ebb. The truth was that after sending brother and sister east to college, the sand was running too low in the egg timer to send me. It was decided that I would work a year and then go to college. The plan however, was interrupted in the mid year by my marriage to my serious, quiet, enormously kind Earl. It has been a very happy marriage in a quiet, unspectacular way. We have grown together some way much as two halves of a peach.*

The rest of Jo's first autobiography is continued in the chapter "Family Life," but there is more about her early life in a paper she wrote for a university educational sociology class in 1959 entitled "Formative Influences:"

*When pondering the factors that have influenced my life it is soon evident that early influences have been the most formative and lasting one. The rather staid and uncompromising standards that have prevailed in my life are the result of the strict, dignified, unbending atmosphere of a minister's home. That influence, though somewhat modified through the years, is still manifest by the repugnance felt when observing something that is contrary to that early teaching.*



*Mother was stately, aristocratic and cold. [She] taught the children not by words but by feeling tones. To feel disapproval was a terrible thing and to be avoided at all costs. That forced early awareness created a sensitivity that has remained. This sensitivity, though too pronounced, has created an insight that produced empathy and appreciation and understanding and the power to be sensitized to many things that many people are not aware of. It has given profoundness to my life.*

Left: Pearl Miller Osborne

*Any religious bent I may have was instilled not by my minister father but by my grandmother [Miller]. The broad concept of religion which seems to more nearly meet my needs was the product of observing with disgust Grandmother's very fundamental religious convictions. My love of children and my patient tolerance of them was absorbed by watching [her] and by imitation through the early years the kindness, playfulness and never-ending patience of this same grandmother. This love of children and the desire to be of service culminated in my entering college at the age of forty-two, in order to teach.*

*The quiet, somber atmosphere that always prevailed in our home has been one of the factors that make it imperative that there be some quiet, somber, alone periods in my life. By the same token this influence brought the realization that there must be some gay, jovial times in a home also, and as in most things in life, one must strive for a balance. This realization carried on into my own family and in our home as we attempted to create an atmosphere of balanced quietness and serious interludes with gaiety and lightness. This thing of formative influences carries on into the generations.*

*Reading has made a magnificent contribution in influencing my life. The first thing I can remember are books—hundreds of them all over the house. Vivid is the memory of climbing up on a small chair I had placed on top of the library table to extract a volume from a high shelf in father's library. I experience the same thrill and excitement today when I browse through library stacks. In that early bookish atmosphere was born an appreciation and love for books that grew into a profound love of literature that has been the most important inanimate influence in my life. As quite a young girl I would discriminate in my reading. There was no issue made of books not to be read. It was merely the exposure to good literature and I found myself bored with the tawdry and easy-come-by type of literature very soon. This book-lined-wall house culminated in my becoming a professional book-reviewer in my late twenties. [She was well-read even into her 90's.]*

*Money—or lack of money—played an influence that I see manifest in my life. My mother was a wealthy girl who married a poor struggling, idealistic minister who had no business acumen whatsoever. Consequence: money lost in poor investments, a huge home, three cars, chauffeur and maids, and NO money.*

*Growing up, the determination to not experience financial dependence became almost an obsession. Too often did I hear my mother subject herself to the indignity of asking Grandmother for money. My son said to me the other day, ‘Mother, all I’ve heard for years has been “Security—security,” I’m not going to let it become that important to me!’ So you see, he will probably branch out the other way. A strange thing—these formative influences!’*

The problem mentioned above—money—was much on the mind of the Osborne family. Pearl’s parents, Robert & Ruth Miller, had been successful at farming and raising cattle, having



Miller family 1886: L-R: Daniel, Mattie, Ruth, Abe, Robert, Pearl (see Appendix)

inherited a goodly sum from the Mercer grandparents, who had sold beef and pork to the Union army during the Civil War. When oil was discovered on the Miller farm, a huge fortune was realized. (See Mercer/Miller Family, by Ruth Maria Mercer Miller.) With this sum the Miller & Sons Bank was opened in Tiffin, Ohio. “This firm with its ready cash, coming to Tiffin in the financial crisis of 1893, found a grand welcome, and how many people and firms this bank helped to stem that tide will never be known, and its influence and aid to Tiffin and surrounding country cannot be overestimated.” Men of Northwestern Ohio, p. 11.

However, circumstances combined to thwart the Miller’s financial stability, including the death of their beloved son, Daniel, partner and chief financial officer in the family businesses, the country’s financial crisis of 1893 which was called the Panic of 1893 which left hundreds of banks, railroads, mines and other businesses in financial ruin. This was followed by the nervous breakdown of the head of the family, Robert Miller, the alcoholism and poor management by the remaining son, Abe Miller, the illness and death of Pearl’s husband, Dallas, who in trying to secure his family’s financial security ended by losing his portion of the Miller estate. Son-in-law, Will Cook, the husband of Mattie Miller Cook, was the only one able to protect his share. He and Mattie moved to Chicago. When Mattie died in 1922 Will married “a woman of means”, further distancing himself from the Miller family. However, his continued dealings with the family are evident in letters, including this one which was received after the Millers moved to Denver (in an effort to assist their widowed daughter, Pearl):

*Chicago, Sept. 12, 1924  
Mrs. Ruth Miller  
1611 Adams St.  
Denver, Colorado*

*Dear Mother,*

*It occurs to me that the deal you refer to is only another of the many deals I have heard Abe talk about in the past. If \$4500 would do you some real good I would feel very different about it. I think this \$4500 would immediately pass to someone else for back taxes, interest and expense of this kind, and in reality do neither you nor Father Miller any good. And in the end would work hardship to me.*

*In fact, I believe it would be the beginning of more to follow. Undoubtedly, Abe means well, but from past experience and the fact that he has had entire charge of your estate for the last twenty years, is sufficient proof that he is a poor manager. I do not feel that I care to have him manage any of my estate.*

*On July 23, 1921, I received a very urgent letter from Abe that he must have \$500 immediately and if I would send it to him he would return it in thirty days, and surely in sixty days. It has now been more than three years and I have never heard a word from him relative to interest or refund. This does not make me enthusiastic about advancing more money to him.*

*My brother’s eleven hundred acres, within seventy miles of Chicago, was considered worth \$200 an acre three or four years ago, but it is now impossible to sell any of it for \$50 an acre. And I feel that land within seventy miles of Chicago ought to be worth more than Colorado land..... I find plenty of trouble making loans in Chicago without going to Colorado where I know nothing of conditions.*

*Lovingly yours, W. Cook*

A sad note in the account book of Ruth Miller:

*Dec. 10, 1925 – I sold to Mr. Tanner my 23,000 shares for \$3,000 as the price was away down and nobody wanted to buy and I owed Abe \$5000. I had got him to take Dallas Osborne’s note to*

*pay Abe \$5,000 that I owed him. I said Dallas' note was good, but it proved worthless for he died. And I had to make it good to Abe and Abe had to have it now to save his furniture and to get started anew. I did not want to sell the Tungsten nor did Abe want me to, but we had to for war times had made our land worthless and we had mortgaged all we had to try to save our land... but this makes me bankrupt and have to depend on charity until Abe gets started and then he promises he will see I have plenty to live on and pay up Robert's funeral expense and coal bills.*

This was followed by a stinging letter to Ruth Miller from Will Cook:

*Chicago*

*December 14, 1925*

*Dear Mother,*

*I am advised that you have sold your 12,000 shares Tungston stock to W. L. Tanner. This sale gives Mr. Tanner the absolute control of the company and leaves me as a minority stockholder, which, of course, is not a very pleasant position to be in.*

*Will you kindly advise me what Mr. Tanner paid you for the stock as he has asked me what I am willing to sell mine for. Your immediate reply will be appreciated very much.*

*With love, W. Cook*

No wonder Jo was frugal all her life! Having watched her mother, Pearl, and her grandmother, Ruth, the fear of penury was ever present. Living through the Great Depression of the 1930's after she and Earl were married, was also strong motivation for her careful money management. Jo and Earl, of course, helped maintain their own mothers during their later years, not to mention their generosity to their own children and grandchildren. Earl was particularly generous—with his opinions as well as with his resources.

A draft of an undated letter to her mother was found among Jo's letters. Perhaps it was a Mothers Day tribute to Pearl:

*[Dear Mother],*

*I have been complimented many times on the fact that I was a good listener. I have you to thank for that, Mother. You set the example. I remember distinctly how whenever there were guests in our home you always played the perfect hostess and listened with keen attentiveness.*

*Your walk: You have always carried yourself with the easy grace of a lady—a lady born to the purple.*

*I can never remember coming home from school and not finding you all cleaned up. Every afternoon you dressed as for guests. I can never remember in my life of seeing your hair uncombed, or your person in any way disheveled after noon. Always [you had] clean nails, beautifully groomed in every way. I never experienced as a child coming home to an untidy house. It was always cleaned. I was always so proud to bring friends home. Our house was always orderly.*

*I often wonder how you kept the house so systemized when there was not the natural order of the work-a-day world—having no man, husband and father having to live to schedule and time. But you kept wonderful order in our lives always.*

*Sayings that stand out: 'I don't want my girls to make mistakes. It's so easy, I know. I'm human myself.' 'Be clean, you may not have much, but you can keep clean.'*

*Our Sunday evenings were delightful when you used to play for us and cater to our preferences. Dal, boy-like, preferring marches, me the romantic Melody in F.*

*Stories that seem as a child to have impressed me most were stories pertaining to Tomboin, your cat; how terribly afraid, as a child, you were of gypsies; your college days—how on Sunday nights you bought dill pickles and ate them with bread and butter; and the stories about the old German hired man who always smelled of fertilizer.*

*Once in a while you would let slip some very nice little compliment, although adding by way of apology, “Now Grandmother would say it would make you vain to tell you this, but Helen, you do have a pretty mouth,” or “You are a pretty girl” (in a sort of apologetic tone like “I really shouldn’t say this but ...”)*

*Our meals were always superb. Never did we have thrown together meals. Always painstakingly planned, diligently prepared, wonderful food and Mother, you’ve always been a marvelous cook. The food was not placed on the table slipshod either. Always the dinner table was correctly set and the meal beautifully served. When I see you, it’s you—sitting majestically and lovely serving at the head of the table. I think, Mother, you were made to sit at the head of a table pouring tea, instead of the lot that life gave you that was decidedly not just pouring tea!*

*You gave us all a background that in any kind of company we were not too ill at ease. You did equip us all that we could meet life and not go down under it, realizing that whether it be a slap on the back or a sock on the chin, that if one had his balance it meant just about the same thing.*

*Now this I think perhaps is the most unusual and remarkable thing: I do not believe there is another soul who could have accomplished this as successfully as you did. You did not ever harp on what was gone, or what might have been. And with one that had had all the material things you had and but for the unwise doings of others, you could always have had; that is real greatness! You did not go back. What was gone was gone! You lived the philosophy [that] yesterday is gone, today is a new day. You did not waste time and energy blaming. I remember as a child mentioning this to you and you answered, ‘I try my utmost to keep a thing from happening, but when it is done, it’s done, and I bury it.’ You did not ever harbor prejudices, Mother. You were always and forever a lady, Mother, always!*

*It’s a wonderful thing for a child to feel pride in a parent, and I’ve always been so proud of you. You’re lovely to look at and lovely inside. I’ve always had the desire to show you off, you know. How I used to burst with pride when you came to school to visit, which you regularly did once a year.*

*You were very wise the way you handled the boy situation when I reached that age. I always had to bring the young man home for you to meet and then you allowed me to go. You were liberal, allowing me much freedom, but not too liberal. Some way you had instilled a deep sense of right and wrong and I wouldn’t have broken any confidence you had in me for anything on earth. You trusted me therefore I was trustworthy. I realize through their surroundings children do absorb things—just taking them in and building around them. Our clean home, beautiful pictures on the walls, always bookcases full of books, music, all that was absorbed by me, and probably accounts for my love and appreciation of books, music and art.*

*You encouraged us to develop our individuality and be creative because you were wise enough to never dictate just what we wore or how we acted, allowing us to express ourselves through clothes or what have you, and many times it must have been against your better judgment.*

There was probably an appropriate closing to this letter, but all we have is this undated draft, a truly wonderful tribute to Jo’s mother, Pearl. In 1994 when the family history her grandmother Miller had written Mercer/Miller Family by Ruth M. Miller came into her possession (upon her sister Bobbie’s death), Jo said that Grandmother Miller was the one who ran things in the family. When asked about her grandfather Miller, (the grandfather of the candy store incident) having had a nervous breakdown she said she was very much surprised when she read that. She remembered her grandfather as having been a very kind man. She recalled that he always dressed very properly. She used to have to go with him sometimes on the streetcar and she was always embarrassed by his tall silk hat which was very old fashioned even then. An incident she recalled took place in Denver once when her mother, Pearl, was driving. The car stalled on a hill and she had difficulty getting it started again. Grandfather Miller, “was so kind—he sweetly asked Mother not to be frightened.”

“Grandmother Miller was very bossy, but I loved her best,” said Jo. “I was the only one who wanted to sit on her lap and listen to her stories.” She added, “But she was too religious. She was just fanatic. She went to church every Sunday. No wonder all the rest of us turned away from it.” Jo said that Grandmother Miller always thought that if her son, Daniel, had lived they would have come through their financial struggles alright. But Uncle Abe, as Jo said, was a spoiled rich boy who became an alcoholic and squandered their money on worthless investments.

Jo also said that her father, Dallas J. Osborne, had a large responsibility for losing the money as well. He knew he had not long to live, as he was sick with tuberculosis, so he wanted to leave his family well-fixed, but instead left them almost penniless. Every investment he made turned sour and lost money. “He was a scholar and a preacher, not a businessman,” said Jo. A minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Dallas Osborne spent two years as the full-time pastor of the West Madison Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio shortly after his marriage to Pearl Miller. Jo kept a little book indexing his sermons (see Appendix).

The Osbornes had a much lesser influence on Jo’s upbringing largely because they were all in Ohio when their son’s family was growing up in Denver. Also, Grandmother Osborne, Nancy Caroline Moherman Osborne, died young, so of course his wife and children never knew her. Then, too, grandfather Albert M. Osborne died in 1915, just two years after his son’s death, so his grandchildren had limited contact there. However, there was a photo taken of him with his son & grandson, Dallas and Dal, during a visit with the family, about 1907 or 1908.



Grandfather Miller died just months after Jo and Earl married in 1925. Grandmother Miller died five years later, in 1930. Pearl Miller Osborne never remarried after her husband’s death. She lived to age 93 having been a widow for 59 years. Her daughter, Bobbie (Ruth), Jo’s younger sister, never married, and was her mother’s companion until Pearl’s death in 1972. Bobbie lived until 1994, dying at age 85. Dal also died at age 85, Alberta at age 88 and Jo at age 93. (For full family statistics, etc. see Appendix.)

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