Brian Spellman: Is that your maiden name?

Mildred Walker: Yes.

BS: Hello, I am Brian Spellman at the School of Fine Arts at the University of Montana. With me today is Dennis Kern, curator of our permanent art collection, and Mildred Schemm, who, under her maiden name of Mildred Walker, has written 13 books, including four about Montana: The Curlew’s Cry, Unless the Wind Turns, If a Lion Could Talk, and one of my favorite books, Winter Wheat. You know I feel that Winter Wheat is one of the best evocations of early-day life in Montana that I have ever read.

MW: Thank you, it’s amazing.

BS: It’s a beautiful book.

MW: It’s a good one.

BS: Mrs. Schemm is a friend, was a friend, of Fra Dana, the widow of Ed Dana, who ranched down on the Montana-Wyoming border between Harden and Sheridan around the turn of the century. Fra Dana was one of the major contributors to the University of Montana’s permanent art collection, and we are fascinated to have the opportunity to speak to Mrs. Schemm about her experiences with Fra Dana.

Dennis Kern: One of the things that I noticed in going through our records about the acquisition of the Dana collection is that Fra didn’t tell us very much about herself at all. She basically said that she was born, and that she lived, and that she painted a little bit, and that she was ready to die.

MW: That sounds very like her.

DK: I would, I guess today, I’ve prepared a few questions that perhaps you could fill us in a little bit about her as an artist, as a person, and how she felt about the west as an artist, and some of her associations with other artists. How did you come to know Fra Dana?

MW: I can’t think where I met Mr. Dana but I met him first. My husband was Fra Dana’s doctor, and I didn’t meet her until she was already bed set, and I don’t suppose I saw her more than ten or twelve times, but she was the sort of person that made a tremendous impression on you right away. It was a great experience for me. Of course I’ve never forgotten her. She was rather...
small, exquisite, very fastidious woman, and it was always hard to connect her with a ranch. And yet, I think the ranch was very vitally important to her, more than she admitted in her painting. But I don’t know any facts of her young years.

DK: I see.

BS: How did she come by the name Fra? Do you know that? I guess the story that I have heard is that she was named after her grandfather, who was named Frank, and Fra way short for Frank, and I just wanted to confirm that with you.

MW: It fitted her, I think.

DK: Did she ever mention her interest in art and how she came to be interested in being an artist and her early experiences at all?

MW: Not how she became interested. I gather that she was, one of the interesting things about meeting such a dominant personality so late in life is two; you look at each other exactly as you are, and you don’t really go back very far, or forward, there was no forward for her. That in itself makes the meeting, perhaps, more vital to both of you. My husband suggested that it might be nice if he had spoken to her. It might be nice for me to drop in because the days were long, and I wasn’t staying more than a few minutes. She was in an apartment in Great Falls. So I meant to do this but I’m sure I overstayed time. And she said, “Don’t go.” So, that was the beginning of many times that I ran in there.

She talked about her painting right away. She talked with considerable bitterness about living on a ranch in Montana when you wanted to paint, and though she insisted that she go to Paris once a year. It was one of the conditions of her living on the ranch, I came to think. She warned me about living in Montana. I wanted to write. She did tell me about studying with Mary Cassatt. I think that was in Paris, and Mary Cassatt’s telling her that she had real talent, but that if she wanted to get anywhere, she must be ruthless, and it was absurd, a crime, for her to be held down to a ranch. At one time, I was writing, trying to write a novel about a woman living in Montana, and Fra said, “Take this journal that I kept on the ranch, and read it, and get an idea.” It was an amazing thing to do, I think. It was a day-to-day sort of journal in which she would rail against spending the whole day seeing to meals, overlooking things on the ranch, taking care of one of the cowboys, having to entertain some very dull cattle buyers, make their beds, and feed them.

She, in an entry, starting saying, “Why should I spend my life between the various, the two boundaries of the ranch, doing this, when I want to be painting? I want to be with painters.” She felt one of the cruelest things about living there was the isolation and the not being able to talk to other painters, let alone great painters who would help her. She felt a great deal of bitterness. I had lived in a, had a rather secure childhood, and had grown up with idea of loyalty; whatever was your place, your town, your family. I can’t tell you how startling this
attitude was for me. I was writing a rather form, realistic novel of family, and rather scathingly she said, “You see they have no bite, they have no fire?” That sunk in.

DK: This was in the 1950s, the early 1950s.

MW: Yeah, ’40s and ’50s, I left Great Falls in ’55.

DK: So we’re talking 30, 40 years ago. She must have been a very dominant personality to stay with you for so long, to remain so clear in your mind.

MW: Oh yes, her eyes could burn. All this, you now, was when she was in bed.

BS: Did she every talk about her association with J.H. Sharp, and Alfred Maurer, and William Merritt Chase, people who she had studied with in art school?

MW: She talked about Sharp, and I think Sharp came down several times and lived on the ranch. That’s when he did his painting on the ranch. There was one wonderful entry about their having been snowed in for weeks, and she felt exceedingly that it was extra burden, hideous, and then finally they were able, by going over Carolyn Road, to get to Billings. She described, she should have written too, she described their first meal in the hotel in Billings, and they had strawberries. She described the taste of the strawberries on her tongue and her teeth, sheets put on the bed by somebody else, hot water, going into a store and buying something. She had a great love for the tales of life.

DK: It sounds like she could be as poetic as she was visually artistic.

MW: I think she could. Of course, to be a painter I’m sure you have to be a sensuous person. The same thing is true in her conversation.

BS: Did she talk at all about her traveling? I know that she did travel extensively at times, and I guess I’m curious as to where she went, and the kinds of things that she would select for her collection.

MW: I don’t know that.

BS: You don’t, okay. Did she paint at all while you knew her?

MW: Not when she was ill. I don’t believe she could. I don’t think she had too much strength. If I saw her clinging, getting tired, I left.

BS: Did she have her collection on display, where she lived?
MW: She had many paintings. It was a small apartment in Blackstone. She didn’t talk about them, except Sharp’s.

DK: We are very fortunate to have in our collection two portraits of Fra Dana, one by William Merritt Chase and one by Alfred Maurer. We have several other paintings by Maurer, all of which came to us from Fra Dana.

MW: I know she had a great many paintings, I always wanted to go to the ranch because I imagined it to be looking like a ranch on the outside and inside to be like Lavin’s cave. I don’t know whether it was or not. She loved richness and beauty.

BS: Was she involved in any of the public art projects around Great Falls while she lived there?

MW: I wouldn’t know but I don’t think so. She was really sick.

BS: Do you know how long she lived in Great Falls by any chance?

MW: No, but I don’t think many years. I think she died while she went to Mayo from Great Falls and so I didn’t see her again.

BS: Did she ever mention anything of specific interest that she had as a collector, did she point to certain objects in her collection besides her paintings?

MW: No, curiously, we talked either about the ranch, Montana, or trying to do, trying to paint. She was very generous to talk to me about writing. I think we talked entirely about these things, how you made your way, how you worked in isolation, and what things you didn’t get mixed up with or let touch you. I want to go experience more me in my stage.

DK: Well of the paintings by Fra, we have, including a portrait of her sister.

MW: Yes.

DK: And a portrait of one of the ranch hands, Old Ratch.

MW: That I remember hanging in her apartment. I went right in to her room, and that was hanging in her room, her sister was. And she was fond of some of the ranch hands. I understood her to tell me about wanting a bridge over the little creek, drawing the plan, and then directing the building of the, whatever you call the frame, or cement. I think she herself poured some of the cement. She was very proud of it, very interested in it. Then she would talk about the ranch. She could become just as vivid and interesting as though she loved it.

BS: She was a real Montana ranch wife.
MW: Oh yes, she was. I think she helped Dana with everything, every undertaking. It was a real love-hate relationship, I think, and a love-hate relationship with Montana. She’d rail out at it, and then she’d tell me about the colors of the brush and that sort of thing.

DK: How did the community perceive her as an artist?

MW: She didn’t come there until she was ill, and I don’t think anyone thought anything about her.

BS: I presume that the people around the ranch, or outside of the ranch in Bighorn County, or northern Wyoming, of course would have known that she was a painter, but did she ever talk about community, like any interaction?

MW: No.

DK: It sounds like she was a rather quiet and reserved sort at the same time.

MW: I think she was preoccupied with the ranch when she was there. She may have painted steadily. See, I don’t know that. She had no patience for things, trivial things that took your time. I’m afraid I don’t know quite a bit.

BS: Well, when was she painting? For some reason, it seems to me that it was around the turn of the century, maybe that’s much too early?

MW: I don’t believe so. She was quite a bit older than I at the time I knew her. So that would take her back.

BS: When we talk about her taking a trip to Paris every year, it’s not as if she could just go to the airport, and half a day later be in Paris. It was quite a trip.

MW: Yes, but I think after a winter at the ranch, that was bamagillia.

BS: Heaven, yes.

MW: And colorful streets, different kinds of people from all environments.

DK: Paris has that effect on many of us.

MW: Yes it does. She was very impatient of growing bourgeois spirit in Montana. The colorful days were going, and what was settling in? I know that because I was, as I was saying, trying to write about Montana, and we’d talk about it. She was amazing to give me so much time.

BS: I’m sure that she found a great comfort and friendship in being able to speak with you.
MW: I've done very much with writing. She sometimes wished, or said, and I don't think she wished it, she had never married, that she had stayed in Pairs. She knew very many painters, great painters, and then to go to a place so far removed. And who knows, maybe it wasn't a great start.

BS: Well, there is that possibility. We have today quite an important artistic community in Montana, but there's always the temptation to feel complete isolation so far to the galleries in New York, or other artists, wherever they might be. And yet there's a real sense of community here among artists in all fields. I think a very vital artistic community.

MW: I think she would have liked now. I don't know the state of art, or art interest in Billings, do you?

DK: Today, or then?

MW: No, then. She must have painted vigorously from 1912, right in there.

BS: Well, right in her own area, of course, was one of the agents on the Crow Reservation, Fred Miller, who came to Montana as a professional photographer. He was one of few Bureau of Indian Affairs officials to be adopted by the Crow people as a Crow, and he was allowed into all of the teepees, and into many of the ceremonies, all of the ceremonies because he was considered one of them. They even gave him a Crow name. And he took his camera along, and left a wonderful legacy of photographs of life on the reservation at the turn of the century. So at least there was that kind of an artistic community in the area. He worked as well with Sharp and with a few others who came up.

MW: Have you been down to, around the ranch, and talked to people?

BS: Dennis has.

DK: There aren't many people that remember the Dana's. Carolyn Riebeth was one of the few, and she did tell us a little bit about the Danas as she had met them. Her father was also an agent on the Crow Reservation.

MW: They were great together because they were both quite witty.

DK: But it's beautiful country there and as an artist—

BS: Of course you're prejudiced, because Dennis is from Hardin.

MW: Oh well [Laughs]
BS: I’m prejudiced too, I’m from Billings. It is beautiful country.

MW: Well I’m from Great Falls [Laughs], so I have to hold up my part of the country.

DK: I remember Carolyn Riebeith telling me about the Danas going to New York sometimes during the winter, and sending back Christmas presents for the ranch hands, and how all of these things were selected with such great care and tailored to individual need. Did she ever mention the ranch hands, or talk about them specifically?

MW: Not specifically, no. I think by the time I knew her, Mr. Dana had died, I think. She was removed from that time.

BS: I wonder how much of her bitterness might have been because she was removed. It’s perhaps, even blacker in memory than it was at the time she was living there.

MW: It could be. I never felt it was terribly deep. I can’t explain it is a kind of balance.

BS: Well it could even be a result of the illness, if she’s confined to her bed after being a very vigorous person—

MW: No, I don’t think that. I think she was very bitter when she was young and probably back. See, I read these diaries, and that was, and I’m sorry that I don’t remember the date.

BS: Oh no, that’s quite all right.

MW: They were the ones that had regular diatribes against the limitation of her living.

DK: Where are these diaries, do you know?

MW: No I don’t. I wish I had kept one. No idea.

BS: They gave you quite an insight into life in those days.

MW: Yes, very much. For a person, of course, she was such a unique person that you couldn’t say they were typical.

BS: No.

MW: I never knew her when she was physically able of writing. I said I would be disappointed because I didn’t know very much.

BS: I haven’t been disappointed at all. I’ve been fascinated by this.
DK: This has really given us quite a bit of insight, especially her personality because we haven’t had anyone before who could reflect on her personality.

MW: It was a real one, very

DK: Other than the portraits that we have, you know, that are—

MW: She looks so much more pensive there then I ever saw her.

BS: And that portrait is quite different than the one we have by Alfred Maurer.

DK: Which we’ll show you today before you leave.

MW: Good, I’d like to see it, very much.

DK: Is there anything else that you could tell us about Fra Dana, just that you recollect as a person that would give us a little bit of a history of her as a painter, in terms of did she ever talk about major exhibitions or exhibits that she participated in?

MW: No.

DK: I remember a letter to, I guess it was Aidan Arnold, who was then a professor here when she was wanting to give her collection to the university. And in that letter she said that she was ill but that she had hoped shed be able to paint again. She said she was going to try in a week or so. Did she do any painting at all while you knew her?

MW: I don’t think so. My husband saw her when she was really ill, right at the end. But he thought she was bored up there and that was the only reason that he suggested that I drop in. I was welcome to talk very much, and her talk.

BS: Well, she was very fortunate, and we’ve been very fortunate that your husband suggested that.

MW: She was a great personality.

BS: Well, thank you very much.

DK: Yes.

MW: You’re welcome. I wish I had known more.

BS: Well with that then we’ll take a look at the exhibit, and we’ll show you the other portraits.
MW: Ok, I’d like that. Thank you!

BS: We’ll get unwired here, and then we can take a look around.

[End of Interview]