



The Immaculate Heart Church in Bad Heart, cost \$450 to build in 1954 and is the only historical straw bale building in Canada.

Until the mid-1950's, the Bad Heart district was without a church, with local residents attending Roman Catholic, Anglican and United Churches in the Teepee Creek district just to the southwest. At the time, one of the most energetic Roman Catholic priests in the region was commuting from over 50km away. This was the Redemptorist Father Francis Dales C.Ss.R. , who, as a trained architect, had just designed a new \$70,000 church in Sexsmith. He had also constructed, and would design and construct other public buildings, the work being either volunteer or undertaken by young teenagers at a small wage. To complete his projects, Father Dales often salvaged lumber from demolished buildings; scrap metal from demolished vehicles and farm equipment was also recovered and sold. As his parish included Bad Heart, Father Dales decided in the early 1950's, that it was time for a church of the right persuasion to be built there. As always, the major problem was financing as all Roman Catholic churches relied strongly on local support, and the people of Bad Heart were hardly in a position to fund a new church as they were relatively few in numbers and anything but wealthy; work bees and salvaged lumber would not be enough. Father Dales however, had learned that in eastern Canada, certain farmers had built cattle sheds out of straw bales. Father Dales submitted a design to the Vicar Apostolic of the Archdiocese of Grouard-McLeannan, Bishop Henri Routhier, who approved the plan, with a personal advancement of \$500.00 to it's fulfillment.

In the summer of 1954, work began on the soon to be famous rye straw church at Bad Heart. Before long, word spread of the unique venture, which was completed in **about six weeks**. Eventually, even the Toronto Star Weekly did a story on the church and its builder. All work of course was volunteer, while fixtures and furnishings were salvaged from other churches in the region; the pews from the old Roman Catholic church in Sexsmith.

The church was built by first constructing an X shaped frame into which rectangular bales of straw were stacked to form the insulation and the wall structure. Developed in Nebraska in the late 19th century, straw bale construction is hailed by many modern environmentalists as the foremost in sustainable building practices. Straw, a natural by-product of wheat farming, is abundant in farming communities which cover the majority of the Peace Country. Building with straw bale insulation creates a productive use for what would normally be considered a waste product, reduces lumber costs of construction and has an R-48 insulation value. The natural, non-toxic nature of straw and its breathability make for better air quality inside the building as well. Building with straw bale insulation certainly makes sense in the Peace Country. Perhaps it is now time for the North to follow the lead of Father Dales.

In March 2009, the Bad Heart Straw Church was designated a Provincial Historic Resource. Its significance lies foremost in its representation of the ability of people in remote rural areas of the province to find ways of adapting what they have into useful purposes. The building is also important in being directly associated with Father Francis Dales, the ebullient architecture priest who designed and built many structures in the region and elsewhere, including several churches, St. Mary's School in Sexsmith, and the Anglican Speke Hall in Grande Prairie.