



## Who is the real Buffy Sainte- Marie?

Buffy Sainte-Marie's claims to Indigenous ancestry are being contradicted by members of the iconic singer-songwriter's own family and an extensive CBC investigation.

By Geoff Leo, Roxanna Woloshyn and Linda Guerriero

Oct. 27, 2023

When Buffy Sainte-Marie strolled onto *Sesame Street* in 1975, she was making history.

The Dec. 9 episode was the launch of the program's efforts to present Indigenous culture to millions of viewers.

Sainte-Marie opened her backpack and showed off an array of Indigenous jewelry and beadwork to an eager group of children and adults.

“This is Cree Indian,” Sainte-Marie said, holding out a pair of beaded moccasins. “Cree Indians are my tribe, and we live in Canada.”

One little boy piped up. “My sister read me a story about Indians.”

“Was it a real story about Indians or was it a fairy tale?” Sainte-Marie asked, noting “some are just pretend and some are real.”

“I’m real,” she said with a grin.

***WATCH | Buffy Sainte-Marie on Sesame Street in 1975:***



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From the early days of her career, Sainte-Marie has claimed to be a Cree woman, born in Canada. She has also allowed herself to be celebrated as an Indigenous icon and success story.

In 2022, CBC broadcast a concert that was held in her honour at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, where Anishinabe musician ShoShona Kish told the audience: “Buffy Sainte-Marie has led the way for Indigenous music on this beautiful land since her first album.”

However, almost 50 years after stepping onto *Sesame Street*, the iconic singer-songwriter’s claims to Indigenous ancestry are being contradicted by members of her own family and an extensive CBC investigation.

Late last year, CBC received a tip that Sainte-Marie is not of Cree ancestry but, in fact, has European roots. She is the latest high-profile public figure whose ancestry story has been contradicted by genealogical documentation, including her own birth certificate, historical research and personal accounts — the latest chapter in the complex and growing debate around Indigenous identity in Canada.

- **Watch the full documentary, “Making an Icon,” from The Fifth Estate on YouTube or CBC-TV at 9 p.m. ET. It will also stream on CBC Gem.**

Indigenous scholars like Kim TallBear, a professor of Native studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and a member of Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, say it’s unacceptable for non-Indigenous people to speak for Indigenous people and take honours set aside for them.

“It’s theft of opportunities, resources. It’s theft of our stories,” she said.

For many years, Sainte-Marie claimed she was born on the Piapot First Nation near Regina.

For example, in the 1971 *Buffy Sainte-Marie Songbook*, which she wrote and illustrated, Sainte-Marie said: “When I go home to the Cree reserve in Canada where I was born, I usually spend a few hours of every day teaching the Cree language.”

In a 1986 interview with the Los Angeles Times Magazine, she said: “I was born on the Piapot Cree reservation near Craven, Sask.”

Then, her story goes, she was adopted by a Massachusetts couple, Albert and Winifred Santamaria, who raised her near Boston.

She has said later in life, she was reunited with her Piapot relatives and adopted into the community.

Sainte-Marie, whose music career took off in New York City’s Greenwich Village in the early 1960s, even wrote a song about her Saskatchewan connection.

“Take me back to where my heart belongs — Qu’Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan,” the lyrics say.



Buffy Sainte-Marie's career took off in the early 1960s in New York's Greenwich Village, where she performed her songs in coffee houses and mingled with other folk singers, including Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. (Phillip Harrington/Alamy)

But some members of Sainte-Marie's family believe her story is built on an elaborate fabrication.

"She wasn't born in Canada.... She's clearly born in the United States," said Heidi St. Marie, daughter of Sainte-Marie's older brother, Alan. "She's clearly not Indigenous or Native American."

That claim is supported by documents obtained by CBC, including Sainte-Marie's Stoneham, Mass., birth certificate. The investigation also shows that her account of her ancestry has been a shifting narrative, full of inconsistencies and inaccuracies.

In a Sept. 18 email to CBC, Sainte-Marie's Ontario-based lawyer, Josephine de Whytell, said: "At no point has Buffy Sainte-Marie personally misrepresented her ancestry or any details about her personal history to the public."

Any perceived inconsistencies CBC has found in Sainte-Marie's story, de Whytell said, "can be explained by the truth."

Sainte-Marie declined CBC's requests for an interview.

But in a video statement posted to Facebook Thursday, she reiterated that she is "a proud member of the Native community with deep roots in Canada" and said there are many things she doesn't know about her ancestry.



However, CBC's investigation found many instances over the years of contradictory statements from the singer regarding that personal history.

### **An Indigenous icon for 60 years**

Sainte-Marie rose to fame in the early 1960s. She launched her career alongside folk artists like Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell.

Her songs were covered by Elvis, Barbra Streisand and Glen Campbell, to name a few.

A New York Times article from 1963 described Sainte-Marie as “an Indian girl” who was “one of the most promising new talents on the folk scene today.”

*In this story, we use the word “Indian” when it is a direct quote from a historical publication or an interview and when it provides information that is key to understanding the story.*

The following year, she was named Billboard Magazine's best new artist of the year. The Brantford Expositor quoted her as saying: “My main aim is some day to be the world's best Indian girl singer.”

She is considered the first Indigenous person to win an Oscar, which she was awarded in 1983, for co-writing *Up Where We Belong* for the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman*. She's also the recipient of numerous Indigenous music awards, including four Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards, two Aboriginal Peoples' Choice Music Awards, four Junos designated for Indigenous people and four Indigenous lifetime achievement awards.



Sainte-Marie is known as the first Indigenous person to win an Oscar. In 1983, she shared the award with her husband at the time, Jack Nitzsche, for composing the best original song *Up Where We Belong*. (Ralph Dominguez/MediaPunch/Alamy)

Sainte-Marie has been named a companion of the Order of Canada, the country's highest civilian honour. In addition, her website says she has been awarded honorary doctorates from at least a dozen universities.

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in Sainte-Marie. In 2021, she appeared on a Canadian stamp.



Canada Post commemorated Sainte-Marie's legacy as one of the country's 'most successful singer-songwriters' with a stamp in 2021. (Justin Tang/The Canadian Press)

Last year, she was the subject of a travelling exhibit featured at Ottawa's National Arts Centre. She was also the focus of a five-part CBC podcast about her life and legacy and a one-hour concert televised on CBC that celebrated her leadership in Indigenous music.

Also in 2022, American broadcaster PBS and Canadian streaming service Crave aired *Buffy Sainte-Marie: Carry It On*, a documentary examining her influence as a champion for Indigenous people and their rights. It is the only Canadian production to have been nominated for a 2023 International Emmy.

Earlier this year, Sainte-Marie, 82, announced she was retiring from public performances because of health concerns, including arthritic hands and a recent shoulder injury.



In 1977, Sainte-Marie was invited by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to perform for Queen Elizabeth at a concert at Ottawa's National Arts Centre. (The Canadian Press)

## A birth certificate comes to light

A simple Google search shows that virtually every available source says Sainte-Marie was born on the Piapot First Nation in Saskatchewan.

But that was contradicted late last year when a tipster provided CBC with a copy of what appeared to be Sainte-Marie's birth certificate, obtained from a small town hall in Massachusetts.

That record said Beverly Jean Santamaria, who started going by the name Buffy Sainte-Marie early in her music career, was born in 1941 in Stoneham, Mass., north of Boston, to Albert and Winifred Santamaria — the couple Sainte-Marie claimed adopted her.

Mother, father and baby were all listed as white.

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SEAPER SAGAMORE  
TOWN CLERK

**OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY**  
DIVISION OF VITAL STATISTICS  
STANDARD  
CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH

REGISTERED No. 389

NAME: **Beverly Jean Santamaria**  
MOTHER'S MAIDEN NAME: **Winifred Jean Santamaria**  
DATE OF BIRTH: **February 20, 1941**  
PLACE OF BIRTH: **New England San. & Hosp., Stoneham, Mass.**

FATHER: **Albert Santamaria**  
MOTHER: **Winifred Jean Santamaria**

RESIDENCE: **Maple Road, Stoneham, Mass.**

RACE: **White**

CITY OF BIRTH: **Boston, Mass.**

STATE OF BIRTH: **Mass.**

DATE OF BIRTH: **Feb. 20, 1941**

PLACE OF BIRTH: **New England San. & Hosp., Stoneham, Mass.**

Signature of Clerk: **Maria Sagamore**

Seal of the Town of Stoneham

Sainte-Marie's birth certificate showing she was born Feb. 20, 1941, at New England Sanatorium and Hospital in Stoneham, Mass. Her parents, Albert and Winifred Santamaria are both listed as white. (Town of Stoneham)

Sainte-Marie's story fits an all-too-familiar pattern, said Métis lawyer Jean Teillet of Vancouver.

She said that for decades, non-Indigenous people have been falsely claiming Indigenous ancestry and using those claims to take opportunities and honours for themselves that were created for genuine First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.

- ***Editor in chief Brodie Fenlon explains how, when and why CBC News investigates claims of Indigenous identity. Read his [latest blog post](#).***

She points to high-profile examples such as author Joseph Boyden, former judge Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond and professor Carrie Bourassa.

"They've all become stars in their field," said Teillet, who in 2022 completed a comprehensive study called Indigenous Identity Fraud for the University of Saskatchewan.

"They're taking that opportunity from a real Indigenous person.... It's prestige, it's money, it's grants and awards and positions and work that they would never have gotten otherwise," she said.



In 2018, Sainte-Marie won the Juno for Indigenous music album of the year for *Medicine Songs*, one of many awards she's won that are designated for Indigenous musicians. (Ben Nelms/Reuters)

Given the doubt cast upon her ancestry by the birth certificate, CBC decided to investigate Sainte-Marie's ancestry claims.

That review, examining genealogical records and media stories along with interviews with some members of her family, confirmed the facts presented in Sainte-Marie's birth certificate.

It also uncovered a letter that some family members believe shows the lengths to which Sainte-Marie would go to silence those questioning her story.

Heidi St. Marie remembers the moment her father, Sainte-Marie's older brother, received a threatening letter from his sister and her high-powered Los Angeles attorney.

"It blew up my whole world," St. Marie told CBC.



Heidi St. Marie holds the letter she says her father received in 1975 from a lawyer for his sister, Buffy Sainte-Marie. (Roxanna Woloshyn/CBC)

### **'She didn't know who she was'**

Sainte-Marie was raised by Albert and Winifred Santamaria in the town of Wakefield, Mass., along with her elder brother, Alan, and a younger sister, Lainey.

Albert's parents were born in Italy, while Winifred's mother and father were of mostly English ancestry.

The family changed its name from Santamaria to St. Marie "because of anti-Italian prejudice that developed during the Second World War," according to a 2012 biography — *Buffy Sainte-Marie: It's My Way*, written by Blair Stonechild.

Mentions of her in the local newspaper show that from an early age, Sainte-Marie was active in the arts, performing in dance and piano recitals and choirs.



**WATCH | Buffy Sainte-Marie's childhood captured on video:**



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277163075772/>

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277160515703/>

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277101635927/>

*Buffy Sainte-Marie: An Authorized Biography*, written by CBC Music associate producer Andrea Warner in collaboration with Sainte-Marie in 2018, outlines a variety of stories Sainte-Marie says she heard as a child.

“She didn’t know who she was or where she came from,” the biography says.

“I was told that I was adopted. I was told that I was just born ‘on the wrong side of the blanket.’ In other words, one of my parents was my parent and one wasn’t. I was told that we were part-Indian, but nobody knew anything about it,” she is quoted as saying.



Beverley Jean Santamaria, later known as Buffy Sainte-Marie, grew up in Wakefield, Mass. (Submitted by Bruce Santamaria)

In the biography, she goes on to suggest that sort of uncertainty is common among Indigenous people.

“So many of us were either taken away to residential schools, or some other school, or we were adopted out or we got lost in the system, or we were otherwise ‘bleached,’” she said.

Sainte-Marie’s 2012 biography suggests she was put up for adoption after her biological mother died shortly after giving birth to her near the Piapot First Nation.

The Britannica website says her Cree mom was killed in a car accident.

In 2022, PBS reported that “she was taken from her family against their will” as a result of the “cruel and racist” practice in Canada known as the Sixties Scoop.

This is a claim Sainte-Marie also made in a 2018 interview with National Public Radio in the United States, when she was asked to describe her own adoption.

“In Canada, we had something that, sometimes, a little bit later referred to as the ‘Big Scoop’ where Native children were removed from the home,” she said. “They’re assigned a birthday. They’re assigned kind of a biography. So, in many cases, adoptive people don’t really know what the true story is.”

The Sixties Scoop is widely recognized to have started in 1951. Sainte-Marie was born in 1941.

While Sainte-Marie has claimed she’s Cree, born on the Piapot First Nation, CBC hasn’t found any reference where she has directly identified her biological parents.



Sainte-Marie, born Beverly Santamaria, graduated from Wakefield High School in Massachusetts in 1958. (Wakefield High School 1958 yearbook)

In a report in the Ottawa Citizen in 1966, she was quoted as saying: “My real mother wasn’t in a position to keep me, but I always knew who she was and that I could go back to the place of my birth when I wished.”

Yet the very next year, the Montreal Gazette quoted her as saying: “I don’t know who my real mother was.”

Teillet finds this shifting narrative suspicious. While it’s not uncommon for people to get some facts about their early life confused, Teillet said “the whole story is not usually completely inconsistent, like ‘I knew my parents,’ ‘I never knew my parents.’ Right?

“That’s two things that can’t live together.”

In a phone conversation in September with Sainte-Marie’s younger sister, Lainey, 75, CBC asked if she recalled her parents ever suggesting that her sister was adopted. She said no, adding that the first time she heard that claim was when Sainte-Marie was in her early 20s.

CBC has found no indication that either Albert or Winifred St. Marie, who are both deceased, ever publicly commented on Sainte-Marie’s ancestry claims.

### **‘No Indian blood in her’**

The first published mention of Sainte-Marie’s claim of Indigenous ancestry that CBC could locate came in the March 19, 1961, edition of the Springfield Republican, a newspaper in Springfield, Mass. It mentioned an upcoming concert involving “Miss Buffy Sainte-Marie, an American Indian girl.”

In November 1963, Sainte-Marie was quoted in the Wakefield Daily Item, saying that she was “half-Micmac by birth.” That’s the earliest reference CBC discovered in which she has been directly quoted claiming Indigenous ancestry.

A profile in Look Magazine in December 1964 said Sainte-Marie was “born of Cree Indian parents” and adopted by Albert and Winifred Santamaria.

That reference caught the eye of Arthur Santamaria, Sainte-Marie’s paternal uncle.

“After reading the story,” he told the Wakefield Daily Item in a Dec. 4, 1964, story, “I thought I should come down and tell you the truth about Buffy. She doesn’t sound in this magazine story like the girl who grew up here.”

He told the paper that, contrary to the Look article, Sainte-Marie "has no Indian blood in her" and "not a bit" of Cree heritage.

**Not Really Like That**

## **Buffy's Story Called Build-up**

The current issue of Look Magazine has a story about Wakefield's folk-singing Buffy Ste. Marie, but most of it is press agency, according to Buffy's uncle, Arthur St. Marie.

"After reading the story," he told the Item. "I thought I should come down and tell you the truth about Buffy. She doesn't sound in this magazine story like the girl who grew up here and went through the schools here, and if people believe what they get from the press agents, they'll get a wrong impression."

First, said Buffy's uncle, she was not born in Sebago, Me. as written. She was born here, in Wakefield, at 24 Prospect st.

Second, he said, she has no Indian blood in her. The story of Buffy told in professional circles is that she has some Cree Indian heritage. "Not a bit," says Uncle Arthur.

Then there is in the magazine story a comment that a song Buffy wrote and sings about the effects of codeine on a user come from personal experience. Buffy never used codeine or even smoked cigarettes, her uncle testifies.

"This business that she had to be high on codeine before she could write her song is poppycock," he snorted.

"And she doesn't use peyote, either," as the story relates, he exclaimed.

"If people read this story and believe it, they'll wonder what kind of a person Buffy has become since she left town," he worried.

At one point the magazine story relates that Buffy sometimes joins her Indian "brethren" and chews peyote, a form of narcotic of the Southwest.

"This is all part of the professional build-up," Arthur told the Item. "They're really pushing her and they're talking about her really hitting it big. I don't know. Maybe she'll do it, but the competition for the top spots is terrific."

Buffy is doing very well though. Her albums are among the most popular of all the folk singers'. She now is working in New York and is to make a trip to Europe to sing and play soon.

Also she should be on the former Steve Allen TV show soon, the show now being run by someone else.

Buffy is a graduate of Wakefield High School and the University of Mass. where she took a degree in philosophy.

Her musical career started as an amateur venture, then one night she sang a song or two in a New York club. A manager heard her, she sang some more, and her career was launched.

In 1964, Sainte-Marie's uncle Arthur told a local newspaper that 'she has no Indian blood in her' when a feature in Look Magazine said she has Cree heritage. (The Wakefield Daily Item)

In an interview with CBC earlier this year in her Phoenix, Ariz., home, Heidi St. Marie said the rest of the family did not believe she was Indigenous.

"Nobody except for Buffy ever talked about Buffy being adopted," St. Marie, 58, said.

Bruce Santamaria said his family told him Sainte-Marie's claim that she was adopted was incorrect.

"We were told flat out that she was my Uncle Albert's child," he said.

Despite the family's concerns, his aunts and uncles followed Sainte-Marie's career with passion and were proud of her, Bruce Santamaria, 61, said.

"She was a really talented musician," he said. "And she was also authentic in her support for the Native Americans. She really cared about them. She was a voice for them."

He said the family believed her claim to Indigenous ancestry was some sort of publicity stunt.

Whispers began to swirl that Sainte-Marie had threatened family members, including her own brother, with legal action or worse if they publicly questioned her ancestry claims.

"I remember those stories growing up ... 'Don't talk about it. We don't want any trouble.... Let her do what she wants to do because we don't want to lose our house. We don't want lawyers coming and suing us for defamation,'" Santamaria said.

***WATCH | Sainte-Marie's cousin remembers family warnings not to talk about her:***



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277125187997/>



## **A shifting world view**

Sainte-Marie's career began just as the hippie movement was emerging across North America. It was characterized by a rejection of Eurocentric culture and an embrace of Indigenous spirituality, according to Teillet.

"The hippies are in the process of throwing out the traditional churches and adopting spiritualism, and they reach out to Indigenous people to adopt some of their ways."

In a 1967 interview with the Berkeley Barb, an underground newspaper in Berkeley, Calif., Sainte-Marie is reported to have expressed annoyance with this trend.

"It doesn't make any sense to me — these kids, trying to be Indians," she is quoted as saying. "They'll never become Indians."

According to Sainte-Marie's 2018 biography, her studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst led to a paradigm shift in her world view.

"Studying philosophy and world religions reinforced her church-less spirituality as well as the connection she'd always felt between herself and something that is bigger: the earth, animals, ancestors and life itself," the biography says.

She began spending time with members of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), an organization made up primarily of Indigenous law students.

"The group offered her a chance to meet people who were a lot like her: young, college educated, politically charged and ready to make a change," the 2018 biography says.

In the early 1960s, Sainte-Marie travelled to Oklahoma with members of the NIYC. She said she witnessed racism.

"There were signs in windows: 'Help wanted, Indians need not apply,'" she told her biographer.

Over the decades, she used her fame to fight for Indigenous rights.

In the late 1960s, she established a foundation that offered scholarships to Indigenous students. In the early 1970s, she reportedly paid hundreds of

dollars every week to supply water to Indigenous protesters who had taken over Alcatraz Island. In the 1990s, her Cradleboard Teaching Project developed Indigenous curricula for schools.

“Do you really think you can save the Cree culture?” a Los Angeles Free Press reporter asked her in 1967.

“I can save the culture,” she is quoted in reply.



Throughout her career, Sainte-Marie has spoken out on Indigenous issues, including in 1981 during a rally in Edmonton where she urged Indigenous people to continue their fight for rights. (Dave Buston/The Canadian Press)

### **Indigenous persona ‘greatly elevated her career’**

Sainte-Marie’s growing fame in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with a critical moment for Indigenous issues in the U.S., said Prof. Kim TallBear.

“This is a moment when you see Native issues are beginning to come more into the public consciousness, as you see these red power and Black power social movements ... where people that have been silenced for so long are suddenly in the news.”

TallBear said Sainte-Marie's "long black hair and this kind of exotic sort of image she's cultivating," combined with her claim of being Indigenous, "greatly elevated her career and her visibility."

"I'm not saying she's not talented," said TallBear. "But she is very much this representative image of a Native American singer."

***WATCH | Sainte-Marie performs on CBC specials:***



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277101635927/>

Media reports during her early career credited her rising fame in part to her Indigenous heritage claims.

"Buffy's Indian extraction and her adoption by the Cree nation has inspired a great interest in the music of her heritage and her repertoire reflects this interest," said the April 15, 1964, edition of *The BroadSides of Boston*, a prominent folk publication of the day.



Sainte-Marie performed on numerous television shows, including *The Johnny Cash Show* in 1969, when she played her mouthbow alongside the famous country star. (BC Photo Archives/Disney General Entertainment Content/Getty Images)

## Algonquin, Mi'kmaq or Cree?

When it comes to Sainte-Marie's claimed Indigenous ancestry, newspaper and magazine references reveal a story full of inconsistencies and contradictions.

Early in her career, she was referred to generically as "an American Indian."

But over time, the references became more specific.

In March 1963, Florida's Fort Lauderdale News said she was "a full-blooded Algonquin Indian." That was echoed in a New York Times article in August of that year, which called her "a young Algonquin Indian girl."

Then, in October, the Detroit Free Press reported that "Buffy was born a Micmac (Mi'kmaq) Indian in Maine," adding that "her Micmac name is Tsankapasa, or Dark Fawn." Later that same month, the Boston Herald said she referred to herself as "half-Micmac by birth."

The first reference to Sainte-Marie being Cree that CBC could locate came in December 1963, when the Vancouver Sun referred to "Cree Indian folk singer Buffy St. Marie."

In the space of those 10 months, she was referred to as Algonquin, full-blooded Algonquin, Mi'kmaq, half-Mi'kmaq and Cree.

"It's immediately problematic when you see something like that," said Teillet.



Kim TallBear, left, is a professor of Native studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and Jean Teillet, right, is a lawyer who wrote a report for the University of Saskatchewan on Indigenous identity fraud. (Jonathan Castell/CBC)

As part of her report on false Indigenous identity claims, Teillet included a list of what she refers to as “red flags,” warning signs that might indicate someone isn’t telling the truth about their ancestry. One of those flags is shifting Indigenous identities.

Teillet said if those reports accurately reflect what Sainte-Marie told the publications, it is hard to understand how she could claim such dramatically different ancestral lines. She pointed out that the Mi’kmaq live on the East Coast, Algonquin people are from Ontario and northern Quebec and Cree people are primarily from the Prairies.

“It’s really difficult to believe that somebody could mistake being Cree for being Mi’kmaq,” said Teillet. “Those are so far apart that it’s a little bit ludicrous, right?”

### **The Saskatchewan connection**

In Sainte-Marie’s 2018 authorized biography, she claims to have reconnected with her Saskatchewan community, the Piapot First Nation, in the early 1960s.

While playing gigs in Toronto and hanging out at the Native Friendship Centre, she told friends that she had been born to an Indigenous family in Saskatchewan. Her friends said they believed she could be related to Emile Piapot, the son of the famed Cree chief of the Piapot First Nation.

“Emile and [his wife] Clara had reportedly had a daughter taken from the reserve around the time Sainte-Marie was born,” the biography says.

Wilfred Pelletier, one of Sainte-Marie’s Toronto friends, was organizing a powwow on Manitoulin Island in Ontario at that time. Sainte-Marie went to the event, where she met Emile Piapot.

The powwow was an annual event that drew Indigenous people from across North America.

In an Oct. 30, 1963, article in the Boston Herald, Sainte-Marie is quoted describing how she and Piapot met in the summer of 1962.

She said she was at the powwow performing “exhibitions of Indian dancing and singing.”



**WATCH | Buffy Sainte-Marie meets Emile Piapot on Manitoulin Island:**



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277160515703/>

According to a 1994 article in the Regina Leader-Post, Piapot “vividly” remembered watching her.

“After her performance, she called over to me and my cousin,” he told the paper. “She wanted us to give her an Indian name.”

He agreed to do just that and adopted her into his family.

“You can imagine how honoured I felt they had accepted me,” Sainte-Marie is quoted as saying in the Boston Herald. “My Cree name is Piyasees Kanikamut, which means ‘Singing Bird.’ I’m a recognized member of the reservation now.”

Later, in CBC’s 2022 podcast, she said “the Piapot family and me, myself, we have never known whether I’m related to them.”



Sainte-Marie, centre, with Emile Piapot, left, and Clara Starblanket, right, in the early 1960s. (Buffy Sainte-Marie/Facebook)

In an email to *The Fifth Estate*, some members of the Piapot family said: “Buffy is our family. We chose her and she chose us.”

They said Sainte-Marie’s adoption by Emile and Clara Piapot makes her part of the Piapot First Nation and that community acceptance “holds far more weight than any paper documentation or colonial recordkeeping ever could.”

“Every understanding of our spiritual practices, the history our grandparents shared with us and the traditions of the Cree refute your suggestion that our Auntie Buffy is not Indigenous or a member of our community,” they wrote.

However, Teillet has a different view, saying being adopted “doesn’t make you Indigenous.”

“It simply makes you a member of that family. It’s a very serious and lovely thing that they’re bringing you into their family and that gives you lifelong familial obligations, which are serious. But it doesn’t have anything to do with whether you’re Indigenous or not.”

***WATCH | A lawyer describes the effects of false identity claims:***



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277160515704/>

TallBear said it’s clear the Piapot family have long-standing personal relations with Sainte-Marie, but she agrees with Teillet that relationship doesn’t make her Indigenous.

“I don’t think anyone is probably going to disrespect their decision to continue claiming her as kin,” said TallBear.

However, she said, Sainte-Marie’s ancestry claims went well beyond her adoption by the Piapots.

“That does not contradict or make up for five decades of fabrication of one’s story of origin, one’s childhood, the disavowal of one’s biological family,” said TallBear.



Sainte-Marie, left, performs at a benefit concert on the Piapot First Nation north of Regina in 1975. (The Canadian Press)

### **'She had no birth certificate': biography**

The search for the facts about Sainte-Marie’s origin story has had one central challenge: finding clear documentation.

On the first page of his 2012 biography about Sainte-Marie, author Blair Stonechild wrote: “It has been impossible to locate definitive information on Buffy Sainte-Marie’s earliest days.”

The most glaring missing piece: “She had no birth certificate.”

In an interview with the Rogue Folk Club in January 2017, Sainte-Marie said she had asked a Cree lawyer friend to find her birth certificate. Though the search was unsuccessful, Sainte-Marie said they learned “that six years of birth records were destroyed at the hospital that would have been servicing Piapot Reserve at the time in Craven.”

According to the Saskatchewan government, it has “no record of a hospital operating in Craven, Sask., in the 1940s or since.” It also said that since the 1920s, birth records were stored in secure government facilities, not in town halls or on reserves.

“We are also unaware of any records destroyed by fire or flood, or missing for any other reason,” the province said in an email to CBC.

In her email to CBC, Sainte-Marie’s lawyer said many adoption records were destroyed by Canadian governments.

CBC asked the Saskatchewan government if any adoption records, dating back to the 1920s, have gone missing.

“No. All adoptions that occurred within the province of Saskatchewan have an adoption record on file with the Ministry of Social Services,” the government said.

During a 2022 interview, Sainte-Marie told CBC Q host Tom Power her adoption records are inaccessible.

“The records are sealed. You don’t get to find out anything.”

***WATCH | Buffy Sainte-Marie speaks with CBC Q host Tom Power:***



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277103683794/>

However, Saskatchewan’s Ministry of Social Services told CBC that since 2017, adult adoptees can easily access their birth records.

Kim TallBear said it’s very common for pretenders to claim “there was no documentation. The documents all burned in a courthouse fire or they burned in a house fire.”



However, TallBear said Indigenous children were, in fact, often better documented than non-Indigenous children because of the onerous rules imposed on them.

“We have to be well-documented so the settler state can manage ... Indian Affairs, so it can manage land allotments, so it could manage residential schools,” she said.

### **‘Hey, I want this birth certificate’**

In the fall of 2022, freelance journalist Jacqueline Keeler was excited to sit down and watch the documentary about Sainte-Marie on PBS.

Keeler, who is Yankton Sioux and a member of the Navajo nation, has become a lightning rod for criticism because of her focus on exposing what she calls “Pretendians” — pretend Indians.

While watching the film, alarm bells went off for her. She said Sainte-Marie’s explanation of her birth and her childhood was rambling and imprecise, without any documentation.

“I’m just like: ‘Wait a minute. This is just like those stories I hear Pretendians tell,’” said Keeler. “She has an adoption story which has no proof.

“It just sounded fake.”

That prompted Keeler to dig into genealogical records and found mention of Sainte-Marie on the Massachusetts birth index.

She asked her colleague Doug Buchholz, a New Hampshire-based researcher, if he could help. He told her the index reference wasn’t good enough to know for sure.

“You have to see the physical record,” he told her.

So he called the Stoneham town hall.

“Hey, I want this birth certificate. Her name is Beverley Jean Santamaria, born on Feb. 20, 1941. Do you have that record?” he asked.

They had it, and \$22 US later, so did he.



In the centre image, Buffy, 5, and her brother Alan, 9, are featured in a newspaper's 'local youngsters' series in 1946. (The Wakefield Daily Item)

### **‘100% certainty that this is the original birth certificate’**

CBC travelled to Stoneham, Mass., three kilometres from Sainte-Marie’s childhood home, to see the birth certificate she has claimed for years doesn’t exist.

Town clerk Maria Sagarino showed CBC the secure vault that contains all Stoneham birth certificates.

She flipped through a 1941 binder until she reached Feb. 20 — certificate No. 49.

She pulled Sainte-Marie’s original, handwritten birth certificate from its clear plastic sleeve. It was signed by Dr. Herbert Land — the same doctor who delivered Sainte-Marie’s sister, Lainey, in 1948. He certified that Sainte-Marie was born at 3:15 a.m. to Albert and Winifred Santamaria.

“This is the original that came from the hospital,” said Sagarino, who has worked at the Stoneham town hall for more than 20 years. “There’s no refuting this because it’s in my custody from my files in my vault.”

In her email to CBC, Sainte-Marie’s lawyer said: “Research has also revealed that children adopted by parents in Massachusetts were commonly issued new Massachusetts birth certificates with the name of their adoptive parents.”

CBC asked Sagarino if that happened in this case.

She said no.

“It doesn’t appear that she was adopted in any way, shape or form,” Sagarino said.

She said if Sainte-Marie had truly been adopted from Saskatchewan, the file would contain her legal adoption records and proof she entered the United States.

Instead, her file only contains an original Stoneham birth certificate.

“If you were to look at all the other ones in the book you would see the same thing,” she said. “They’re all set up the same way with the same information because it is a template.”

Furthermore, she said, as each certificate is registered, it is given a number and filed in chronological order.

***WATCH | Town clerk Maria Sagarino explains the birth record:***



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277104707947/>

So if Sainte-Marie was truly born in Saskatchewan on Feb. 20 as her 2018 biography indicates, and weeks or months later adopted into Massachusetts, it would be difficult to explain how birth certificate No. 49 sits neatly between baby 48 born on Feb. 18 and baby 50, born Feb. 24.

“I can say absolutely with 100 per cent certainty that this is the original birth certificate. Beverly Jean Santamaria was born in Stoneham, Mass., at New England Sanatorium and Hospital on Feb. 20, 1941,” said Sagarino.

That’s consistent with several other documents obtained by CBC.

In a life insurance policy taken out for her in 1945, her mother swore that Sainte-Marie was born in Stoneham in 1941.

The 1950 U.S. census says nine-year-old Beverly was a white girl, born in Massachusetts to the St. Maries.

When Sainte-Marie's older brother, Alan, enrolled in the military in 1956, he filed a statement of personal history in which he certified, on penalty of fine or imprisonment, that his sister was born in Stoneham, Mass., in February 1941.

Even Sainte-Marie herself confirmed that she was born in the United States.

In March 1982, she signed a marriage certificate making her union with Hollywood composer Jack Nitzsche official. On the certificate, obtained from the County of Los Angeles, Sainte-Marie certified that she was born on Feb. 20, 1941, in Massachusetts to Albert and Winifred St. Marie.

**CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH**

PLACE (CITY OR TOWN) NO. New Eng. San. & Hosp. STREET 3rd WARD (If birth occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME instead of street and number) 3rd

Mother's stay before delivery: In hospital or institution 3 hr. In this community 3 hr.

2 FULL NAME OF CHILD Beverley Jean (If child is not yet named, make supplemental report, as directed)

3 Sex F 4 (Twin or Triplet?) Births 5 Born ALIVE or STILLBORN alive 6 Date of Birth February 20 1941 (MONTH) (DAY) (YEAR)

3a Color W 4a (If plural) Births (If so, born 1st, 2nd, or 3rd?) 1st

7 FATHER FULL NAME Albert Santamaria 13 MOTHER MAIDEN NAME Winifred Irene Kenrick PRESENT NAME Winifred Irene Santamaria

8 RESIDENCE, NO. Maple Road STREET Maple Road 14 RESIDENCE, NO. Maple Road STREET Maple Road CITY OR TOWN No. Reading STATE Mass. CITY OR TOWN No. Reading STATE Mass.

9 COLOR OR RACE white 10 AGE AT TIME OF THIS BIRTH 31 (YEARS) 15 COLOR OR RACE white 16 AGE AT TIME OF THIS BIRTH 23 (YEARS)

11 PLACE OF BIRTH Boston Mass. 17 PLACE OF BIRTH Boston Mass. (CITY OR TOWN) (STATE OR COUNTRY) (CITY OR TOWN) (STATE OR COUNTRY)

12 OCCUPATION Electrician 18 OCCUPATION Housewife

19 I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child who was born at the hour of 3:15 P.M. on the date above stated. The information given was furnished by Mrs. A. Santamaria, related to this child as Mother

SIGNATURE OF ATTENDANT AT BIRTH Robert Land M.D. (Name) (Physician, parent or other, etc.)

ADDRESS NO. Bow St., No. Reading DATE Feb. 20, 1941

FEB 21 1941

**MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE**

GROOM PERSONAL DATA: NAME BUFFY AGE 41 YEAR End 2-1977 17a LAST BARRING ORDER BY DIVORCE 17b CITY OR TOWN STUDIO CITY 17c COUNTY LOS ANGELES 18a HIGHEST SCHOOL GRADE COMPLETED 13 18b BIRTHPLACE OF GROOM ILLINOIS 18c DATE OF BIRTH FEB. 20, 1941 18d BIRTHPLACE OF GROOM ILLINOIS

BRIDE PERSONAL DATA: NAME BEVERLY ST. MARIE AGE 41 YEAR End 1973 20a LAST BARRING ORDER BY DIVORCE 20b CITY OR TOWN KATRA 20c COUNTY MASSACHUSETTS 21a HIGHEST SCHOOL GRADE COMPLETED 16 21b BIRTHPLACE OF BRIDE MASSACHUSETTS 21c DATE OF BIRTH FEB. 20, 1941 21d BIRTHPLACE OF BRIDE MASSACHUSETTS

AFFIDAVIT OF BRIDE AND GROOM: WE, THE BRIDE AND GROOM NAMED IN THIS CERTIFICATE, EACH FOR HIMSELF, STATE THAT THE FOREGOING INFORMATION IS CORRECT TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF THAT NO LEGAL OBJECTION TO THE MARRIAGE NOW TO THE ISSUANCE OF A LICENSE TO ADOPT THE SAME IS KNOWN TO US, AND HEREBY APPLY FOR LICENSE TO MARRY

LICENSE TO MARRY: 23a SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO BEFORE ME ON 3-5-82 23b DATE LICENSE ISSUED 3-5-82 23c EXPIRATION DATE 6-5-82 23d COUNTY OF ISSUE OF LICENSE LOS ANGELES 23e COUNTY CLERK JOHN J. CORCORAN 23f DEPUTY K. MacFarlane

WITNESSES: 24a SIGNATURE OF WITNESS [Signature] 24b ADDRESS OF WITNESS-STREET ADDRESS 7055 Woodrow Wilson Dr. 24c ADDRESS OF WITNESS-CITY OR TOWN AND STATE Los Angeles, Cal. 90028 24d SIGNATURE OF WITNESS [Signature] 24e ADDRESS OF WITNESS-STREET ADDRESS 12201 VALERIE ST 24f ADDRESS OF WITNESS-CITY OR TOWN AND STATE Van Nuys, CA

CERTIFICATION: 25 I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE ABOVE NAMED BRIDE AND GROOM WERE JOINED BY ME IN MARRIAGE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAWS OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Two days after the marriage, Sainte-Marie personally signed her marriage certificate with composer Jack Nitzsche in 1982 that says she was born Feb. 20, 1941, to Albert and Winifred Santamaria in Stoneham, Mass. (County of Los Angeles)



STATEMENT OF PERSONAL HISTORY

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the certification at the end of this questionnaire before entering the required data. Print or type all answers. All questions and statements must be completed. If the answer is "None," so state. Do not misstate or omit material facts. Since the statements made herein are subject to verification. If more space is needed, use the Remarks section, item 20, and attach additional sheets if necessary. The information entered herein is for official use only and will be maintained in confidence.

1. (Print) FIRST NAME—MIDDLE NAME—MAIDEN NAME (If any)—LAST NAME  
ALAN KENRICK ST. MARIE

2. STATUS  
CIVILIAN ☒ MILITARY OR ACTIVE DUTY

3. AKA(S), NICKNAME(S), OR CHANGES IN NAME (Other than by marriage)  
24A PROSPECT ST. WAKEFIELD, MASS.

4. FORMER NAME(S) (Other than by marriage)  
24A PROSPECT ST. WAKEFIELD, MASS.

5. DATE OF BIRTH (Day, month, year)  
28 AUG 36

6. PLACE OF BIRTH (City, County, State, and Country)  
BOSTON, MIDDLESEX, MASS., USA

7. RACE  
CAUC

8. HEIGHT  
6'8"

9. WEIGHT  
164

10. COLOR OF EYES  
BLU

11. COLOR OF HAIR  
BLOND

12. SCARS, PHYSICAL DEFECTS, DISTINGUISHING MARKS  
24 SCAR—LOWER LEFT PALM

13. DO YOU HAVE A HISTORY OF MENTAL OR NERVOUS DISORDERS? ☐ YES ☒ NO ARE YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ADMITTED TO THE USE OF MARIJUANA OR BARBITURATES? ☐ YES ☒ NO ARE YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN A CHRONIC USER TO EXCESS OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES? ☐ YES ☒ NO IF THE ANSWER TO ANY OF THE ABOVE IS "YES"—EXPLAIN IN ITEM 20.

14. CITIZENSHIP  
A. YES ☒ NO ☐ B. NATURALIZED U.S. CITIZENSHIP (Date of Naturalization)  
N/A

15. IF DIVORCED, PARENTS CERTIFICATION (Date of Divorce)  
N/A

16. DATE, PLACE, AND COURT  
N/A

17. A. YES ☒ NO ☐ B. YES ☒ NO ☐ C. YES ☒ NO ☐ D. YES ☒ NO ☐ E. YES ☒ NO ☐ F. YES ☒ NO ☐ G. YES ☒ NO ☐ H. YES ☒ NO ☐ I. YES ☒ NO ☐ J. YES ☒ NO ☐ K. YES ☒ NO ☐ L. YES ☒ NO ☐ M. YES ☒ NO ☐ N. YES ☒ NO ☐ O. YES ☒ NO ☐ P. YES ☒ NO ☐ Q. YES ☒ NO ☐ R. YES ☒ NO ☐ S. YES ☒ NO ☐ T. YES ☒ NO ☐ U. YES ☒ NO ☐ V. YES ☒ NO ☐ W. YES ☒ NO ☐ X. YES ☒ NO ☐ Y. YES ☒ NO ☐ Z. YES ☒ NO ☐ AA. YES ☒ NO ☐ AB. YES ☒ NO ☐ AC. YES ☒ NO ☐ AD. YES ☒ NO ☐ AE. YES ☒ NO ☐ AF. YES ☒ NO ☐ AG. YES ☒ NO ☐ AH. YES ☒ NO ☐ AI. YES ☒ NO ☐ AJ. YES ☒ NO ☐ AK. YES ☒ NO ☐ AL. YES ☒ NO ☐ AM. YES ☒ NO ☐ AN. YES ☒ NO ☐ AO. YES ☒ NO ☐ AP. YES ☒ NO ☐ AQ. YES ☒ NO ☐ AR. YES ☒ NO ☐ AS. YES ☒ NO ☐ AT. YES ☒ NO ☐ AU. YES ☒ NO ☐ AV. YES ☒ NO ☐ AW. YES ☒ NO ☐ AX. YES ☒ NO ☐ AY. YES ☒ NO ☐ AZ. YES ☒ NO ☐ BA. YES ☒ NO ☐ BB. YES ☒ NO ☐ BC. YES ☒ NO ☐ BD. YES ☒ NO ☐ BE. YES ☒ NO ☐ BF. YES ☒ NO ☐ BG. YES ☒ NO ☐ BH. YES ☒ NO ☐ BI. YES ☒ NO ☐ BJ. YES ☒ NO ☐ BK. YES ☒ NO ☐ BL. YES ☒ NO ☐ BM. YES ☒ NO ☐ BN. YES ☒ NO ☐ BO. YES ☒ NO ☐ BP. YES ☒ NO ☐ BQ. YES ☒ NO ☐ BR. YES ☒ NO ☐ BS. YES ☒ NO ☐ BT. YES ☒ NO ☐ BU. YES ☒ NO ☐ BV. YES ☒ NO ☐ BW. YES ☒ NO ☐ BX. YES ☒ NO ☐ BY. YES ☒ NO ☐ BZ. YES ☒ NO ☐ CA. YES ☒ NO ☐ CB. YES ☒ NO ☐ CC. YES ☒ NO ☐ CD. YES ☒ NO ☐ CE. YES ☒ NO ☐ CF. YES ☒ NO ☐ CG. YES ☒ NO ☐ CH. YES ☒ NO ☐ CI. YES ☒ NO ☐ CJ. YES ☒ NO ☐ CK. YES ☒ NO ☐ CL. YES ☒ NO ☐ CM. YES ☒ NO ☐ CN. YES ☒ NO ☐ CO. YES ☒ NO ☐ CP. YES ☒ NO ☐ CQ. YES ☒ NO ☐ CR. YES ☒ NO ☐ CS. YES ☒ NO ☐ CT. YES ☒ NO ☐ CU. YES ☒ NO ☐ CV. YES ☒ NO ☐ CW. YES ☒ NO ☐ CX. YES ☒ NO ☐ CY. YES ☒ NO ☐ CZ. YES ☒ NO ☐ DA. YES ☒ NO ☐ DB. YES ☒ NO ☐ DC. YES ☒ NO ☐ DD. YES ☒ NO ☐ DE. YES ☒ NO ☐ DF. YES ☒ NO ☐ DG. YES ☒ NO ☐ DH. YES ☒ NO ☐ DI. YES ☒ NO ☐ DJ. YES ☒ NO ☐ DK. YES ☒ NO ☐ DL. YES ☒ NO ☐ DM. YES ☒ NO ☐ DN. YES ☒ NO ☐ DO. YES ☒ NO ☐ DP. YES ☒ NO ☐ DQ. YES ☒ NO ☐ DR. YES ☒ NO ☐ DS. YES ☒ NO ☐ DT. YES ☒ NO ☐ DU. YES ☒ NO ☐ DV. YES ☒ NO ☐ DW. YES ☒ NO ☐ DX. YES ☒ NO ☐ DY. YES ☒ NO ☐ DZ. YES ☒ NO ☐ EA. YES ☒ NO ☐ EB. YES ☒ NO ☐ EC. YES ☒ NO ☐ ED. YES ☒ NO ☐ EE. YES ☒ NO ☐ EF. YES ☒ NO ☐ EG. YES ☒ NO ☐ EH. YES ☒ NO ☐ EI. YES ☒ NO ☐ EJ. YES ☒ NO ☐ EK. YES ☒ NO ☐ EL. YES ☒ NO ☐ EM. YES ☒ NO ☐ EN. YES ☒ NO ☐ EO. YES ☒ NO ☐ EP. YES ☒ NO ☐ EQ. YES ☒ NO ☐ ER. YES ☒ NO ☐ ES. YES ☒ NO ☐ ET. YES ☒ NO ☐ EU. YES ☒ NO ☐ EV. YES ☒ NO ☐ EW. YES ☒ NO ☐ EX. YES ☒ NO ☐ EY. YES ☒ NO ☐ EZ. YES ☒ NO ☐ FA. YES ☒ NO ☐ FB. YES ☒ NO ☐ FC. YES ☒ NO ☐ FD. YES ☒ NO ☐ FE. YES ☒ NO ☐ FF. YES ☒ NO ☐ FG. YES ☒ NO ☐ FH. YES ☒ NO ☐ FI. YES ☒ NO ☐ FJ. YES ☒ NO ☐ FK. YES ☒ NO ☐ FL. YES ☒ NO ☐ FM. YES ☒ NO ☐ FN. YES ☒ NO ☐ FO. YES ☒ NO ☐ FP. YES ☒ NO ☐ FQ. YES ☒ NO ☐ FR. YES ☒ NO ☐ FS. YES ☒ NO ☐ FT. YES ☒ NO ☐ FU. YES ☒ NO ☐ FV. YES ☒ NO ☐ FW. YES ☒ NO ☐ FX. YES ☒ NO ☐ FY. YES ☒ NO ☐ FZ. YES ☒ NO ☐ GA. YES ☒ NO ☐ GB. YES ☒ NO ☐ GC. YES ☒ NO ☐ GD. YES ☒ NO ☐ GE. YES ☒ NO ☐ GF. YES ☒ NO ☐ GG. YES ☒ NO ☐ GH. YES ☒

**images expand** Historical and personal records belonging to Sainte-Marie and her family confirm she was born to white parents in Stoneham, Mass., on Feb. 20, 1941.

In an email, CBC asked Sainte-Marie for an interview about these documents.

“Ms. Sainte-Marie is entitled to a reasonable expectation of privacy about her personal genealogical and family history,” her lawyer told CBC in a letter.

### **Transition and turmoil**

By the mid-1970s, Sainte-Marie’s career was in transition. At the same time, behind the scenes, there was growing family turmoil and questions about her identity.

According to an article in the *Globe and Mail* in 1975, her long-term contract with her record label had ended the previous year, and she was trying to shift from folk music to rock, country and pop. However, she was having a tough time selling records and concert tickets.

Then *Sesame Street* came along.

According to a Children’s Television Workshop quarterly report, in early 1975, she began talking with the executive producer of the PBS program about how it “could best approach its first presentations of Native American Indians.” Sainte-Marie was to play a starring role.



Sainte-Marie took on a role on *Sesame Street* in 1975 when she led the program’s first presentation of Indigenous culture. (Everett Collection Inc./Alamy)

Around that time, Sainte-Marie's brother, Alan, a commercial pilot based in Denver, was in the midst of a letter-writing campaign.

He was writing to newspapers and publishers that were printing his sister's claim that she was Indigenous. Heidi St. Marie says she has these letters because Alan made carbon copies of important correspondence, a habit he picked up in the military.

"Buffy St. Marie was not born on a reservation.... She was born of Caucasian parents in Stoneham, Mass.," he wrote to the Denver Post in May 1972.

"To associate her with the Indian and to accept her as his spokesman is wrong."

### **A chance encounter**

In 1975, as Heidi St. Marie's father, Alan, was greeting passengers after landing a plane in New York City, he was surprised to discover that his sister was one of them.

What follows is Heidi St. Marie's recollection of what her father told her.

She said they were both thrilled by the encounter, noting that "at this point, there's no animosity between them at all." Sainte-Marie introduced Alan to a man travelling with her — a producer from PBS.

Weeks later, that PBS producer called Alan to confirm that he was, in fact, Sainte-Marie's biological brother.

Heidi St. Marie said the producer told her dad he didn't appear to be Indigenous. Alan had light-coloured hair.

Alan told the producer he and Sainte-Marie were white and shared the same parents. St. Marie said her dad didn't think much more about that call until Nov. 7, 1975, when a letter from a Los Angeles law firm arrived in his mailbox.

"This firm represents Buffy Sainte-Marie," said the letter from a lawyer who had represented the likes of the Rolling Stones and the Beach Boys.

"We have been advised that you have without provocation disparaged and perhaps defamed Buffy and maliciously interfered with her employment opportunities," the letter said. It said if he continued, Buffy would "spare no expense in pursuing any and all of her legal remedies."





Alan St. Marie was a pilot overseas in the U.S. air force before returning stateside to work as a commercial airline pilot in the early 1970s. (Submitted by Heidi St. Marie)

Inside the law firm's letter was an envelope addressed to Alan — a handwritten letter from Sainte-Marie.

"Alan, you no doubt remember your continued sexual abuses to me throughout my childhood," she wrote. "According to my memories and my childhood diaries, you are nothing but a child molester and a sadist."

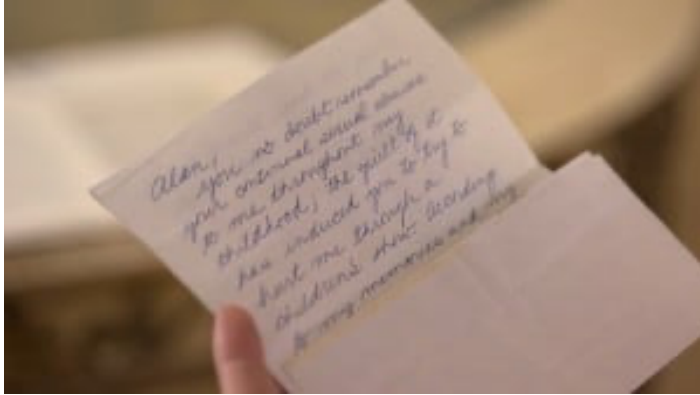
Then she made what appears to be a reference to *Sesame Street*.

"The guilt of it has induced you to try to hurt me through a children's show," she said. "If you ever try to hurt me again, I will explain the roots of your sickness to your employers and wife, and I will send the police after you."

In a letter to his mother, Alan described his reaction.

"I returned home from work to find the most vile letter I have ever read," he wrote. "Her wrath is connected to a conversation I had with a man from PBS in New York in which I denied she was Indian."

To verify Sainte-Marie wrote the letter, CBC turned to Docufraud Canada, which has expertise in handwriting analysis. It confirmed the letter matched other samples of Sainte-Marie's handwriting, including letters submitted by family members and a sketchbook entry known to be written by Sainte-Marie.



Heidi St. Marie says her father, Alan St. Marie, received a handwritten letter in November 1975 from his sister Buffy alleging he sexually abused her when they were children and the guilt of it induced him to hurt her 'through a children's show.' (Submitted by Heidi St. Marie)

### **Allegations of abuse**

One of the earliest references CBC was able to locate of Sainte-Marie alleging she was sexually abused was in a 1994 interview with author June Callwood, in her book *National Treasures*.

Later, in her 2018 biography, Sainte-Marie pointed her finger directly at her brother, Alan, saying his bullying expanded to “physical and sexual abuse.”

Heidi St. Marie said until the chance meeting on the airplane, her father’s relationship with Sainte-Marie was good. In letters, she invited Alan and the family to visit her in Hawaii and spoke fondly of him.

She said in her view, it’s noteworthy that Sainte-Marie didn’t begin explicitly and publicly airing her allegations against Alan until after his May 2011 death.

It’s not uncommon for survivors of sexual abuse to maintain cordial relations with their abusers or to wait to tell their stories. It’s not possible to know for sure which version of Sainte-Marie’s childhood is accurate.

Heidi St. Marie said she believes Sainte-Marie was trying to silence Alan through her allegations. And, she said, it worked.

In a letter from Alan to his father shortly after receiving Sainte-Marie’s letter, he said he had decided to back off. “If I pursue getting the truth out,” he wrote, “she has great sums of money and could tie up a case for a long time.”

**WATCH | *The full Fifth Estate documentary:***

<https://youtu.be/eMsqCWNCUc4>

### **‘Did she have to do it in red face?’**

On Dec. 9, 1975, just one month after Alan St. Marie received Sainte-Marie’s legal threat, she appeared on *Sesame Street* for the first time, backpack slung on her back.

She was greeted by a small group of adults and children.

“I’m just coming down from visiting my folks on a Cree reservation in Canada,” Sainte-Marie told them.

“A reservation? Are you Indian?” One of them asked.

“Yes,” Sainte-Marie replied.

Kim TallBear said growing up as an Indigenous child in the United States, she recalls watching Sainte-Marie on *Sesame Street* with pride.

“I watched that in school, you know,” said Tallbear. “Every little kid watched this, right? This is huge ... millions of people, not just in Canada, not just the United States, around the world.”



Sainte-Marie attends the premiere of *Buffy Sainte-Marie: Carry It On*, a documentary focusing on her life and legacy, during the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2022. (Unique Nicole/Getty Images)

TallBear said she travels widely in Indigenous circles across North America and she believes revelations about Sainte-Marie's ancestry will hit hard.

"You're going to hear people say, 'I've lost another hero,'" but she says because of Sainte-Marie's unsupported ancestry claims, she's "a flawed hero."

For more than a decade, TallBear has been studying and commenting on the "Pretendian" phenomenon. She hopes this revelation may be a turning point.

"This one should make it obvious that we have a real problem we have to address and that organizations and institutions and governments need to get on board and figure out how to stop this problem," she said.

"And if it doesn't happen after this case, then I don't know where we go."

Teillet said in hindsight, Sainte-Marie could have had a successful career without her claims to Indigenous ancestry.

"She's talented. She's wonderful. Did she have to do it in 'red face'?" Teillet asked. "I would argue that she didn't have to. She chose to do that."



Sainte-Marie, left, receives the Governor General's Performing Arts Awards' lifetime artistic achievement award from Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean in 2010. (Sean Kilpatrick/The Canadian Press)

### **'On uncertainty'**

In recent weeks, Sainte-Marie has backtracked from central claims she made through much of her career.

In the September letter to CBC, Sainte-Marie's lawyer, Josephine de Whytell, said the artist "has never claimed to know exactly where she is from."

That same month, Sainte-Marie told Canadian musician Jann Arden on her podcast that others, such as journalists, have become confused about her story and engaged in speculation.

"People tend to fill in the blanks, I think, when they don't know."

Sainte-Marie told her 2018 biographer that she has struggled with her identity for years and never really knew where she belonged.

"The conclusion that I finally came to is that I had been lucky to have two families," she said. "In each of those families, I may or may not be a blood relative."

Her video statement Thursday offered a similar message.

"I don't know where I'm from, who my birth parents are or how I ended up a misfit in a typical, white, Christian New England town," she said.

***WATCH | Buffy Sainte-Marie's video statement:***



<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2277066819827/>

The 2018 biography contains an interlude — a reflection by Sainte-Marie "on uncertainty."

In it, she talks about her life as one full of apparent contradictions.

“Discrepancies are something that I’ve lived with since I was very little. I learned early on that what was ‘absolutely’ true was not necessarily true for me.

“Think of the creative process of songwriting. On Tuesday, the song doesn’t exist. You cannot prove that it exists. But on Wednesday, all of the sudden, something exists that didn’t exist yesterday.

“A lot of things that have happened to me are not true on Tuesday, but by Wednesday, the world is different.”



In August, Sainte-Marie announced she was retiring from live public performances because of arthritic hands and a shoulder injury that 'have made it no longer possible to perform to my standards.' (Evaan Kheraj/Contour/Getty Images)

Editorial consultant: Michael Dick

*Top image: University of Massachusetts, Amherst 1962 yearbook; Evan Mitsui/CBC; Wakefield High School 1958 yearbook/Amedeo De Palma/CBC Graphics | With files from Diana Redegeld | Visual research: Leslie Morrison | Editing: Janet Davison*

<https://www.cbc.ca/newsinteractives/features/buffy-sainte-marie>

Geoff Leo, his CBC colleagues, Jean Teillet, and Kim TallBear have guts. And we must be grateful to them. How seductive it must have been for Buffy—that someone “Italian,” with a bit of Mi’kmaq mixed in perhaps, could look so “Indigenous” adds to this—once the gig got going and gained momentum. Once it did, how do you stop it? What Buffy knows at what level now might also be a factor. She probably believes her claims are true in a “spiritual” way in a realm that supersedes all else. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond could empathize.