

Calgary

After 60 years, a DNA test may have uncovered a secret identity, solved a cold case and reunited a family

Mervin Sinclair vanished in 1958, but his family is learning he may have lived under another name for decades

[Sarah Rieger](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jul 05, 2021 4:00 AM MT | Last Updated: July 5



Jilayne Davidson holds a photo of Mervin Sinclair, who was last seen in 1958. His cold case may soon be solved — after Davidson took a DNA test and discovered Sinclair may have been living under an assumed name until his death. (Helen Pike/CBC)

Mervin Sinclair's missing person poster doesn't tell the viewer much.

It doesn't say he loved to sing and play guitar, or that he learned to box from his dad, who was forced to attend residential school and taught his boys to protect themselves with their fists.

Or that Mervin's little brother Ralph searched for him until his death, posting handwritten pleas for information on bulletin boards across B.C. and Alberta.

Here's what the poster does say: Sinclair was slim, five feet, nine inches tall, with a shock of thick, dark hair.

His expression is hard to parse — maybe serious, brows furrowed over a nose that was broken at least once. There's a hint of a smile, one corner of his mouth slightly drawn back as he stares into the camera.

Sinclair, a Cree man from George Gordon First Nation in Saskatchewan, was a private with Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. Over the Easter weekend in 1958, the 23-year-old was seen hitchhiking from Calgary back to Canadian Forces Base Wainwright, a training facility in central Alberta.

Now, more than 60 years later, his family has uncovered information that might close Sinclair's cold case — and shed light on what happened to their loved one.

The disappearance

Members of the Sinclair family share different versions of the events leading up to his disappearance, but the core of the story is always the same.

Darlene Sinclair, his sister, said she was told a commanding officer made sexual advances toward Mervin.

"That was not an uncommon thing ... happening to native people. I can believe that because I've watched it," she said. "I guess Mervin turned him down ... my father was a boxer and he taught the boys how to look after themselves physically, because we were Native people living off the reserve."

That's also how Mervin's brother Ralph recounted the story decades later to a reporter with the Dawson Creek Daily News.

"The two settled the score with their fists, 'and the corporal came out second best,'" Ralph told the paper.

CBC News reached out to the light infantry for records of Sinclair's time in the military. The regiment passed the inquiry on to the Department of National Defence's public affairs office, which has yet to send a response.



A news article from Dawson Creek, B.C., in the mid-2000s details the family's ongoing search for Mervin Sinclair. (Submitted by Jilayne Davidson)

Family members said after that encounter, Sinclair returned home for the Easter holidays, where he drank heavily. He told his siblings he was scared of repercussions, either from superior officers if he returned to the base or, as a young Indigenous man, the circumstances he could face in military prison.

It's not known if he made it back to the base. That weekend in 1958 was the last his siblings heard from him. He was declared AWOL from the army shortly after. Darlene said the army later mailed a bag of Sinclair's bloodied clothes home, fuelling further speculation and pain.

Over the years, Darlene would sometimes think she'd caught a glimpse of her brother, maybe as the handsome lead singer of an opening band at a concert or in the stands at the rodeo.

Roger (Podge) Sinclair, Ralph's son, said his dad searched for Mervin until his death in fall 2020.

Then, this year, Podge got a phone call from a woman named Jilayne Davidson that seemed to promise some kind of closure.

Mervin Sinclair ... or William Baca?

Jilayne Davidson never knew her biological father.

Her mom shared a few facts: his name was William Baca, he said he was Cherokee from Oklahoma and his parents were named Nora and Victor.

"That was the truth, as she knew it," Davidson said.

Davidson said her mom told her Baca refused to get married but would never give a reason why. Her mom eventually tired of the secrecy — when Davidson was about a year old, her mother left Baca in Hope, B.C., and moved to Calgary, where Davidson was raised by her stepfather.

In August 1980, when she was a teenager, Davidson learned from a family friend that Baca had died in a car crash.

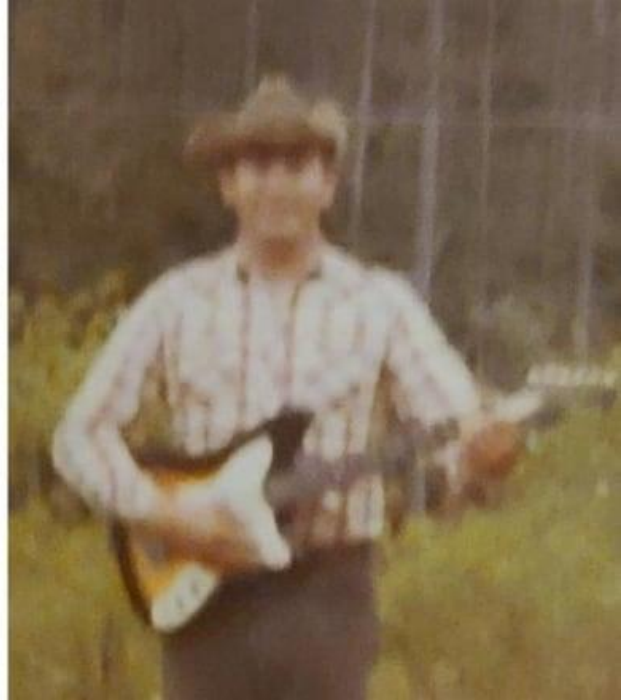
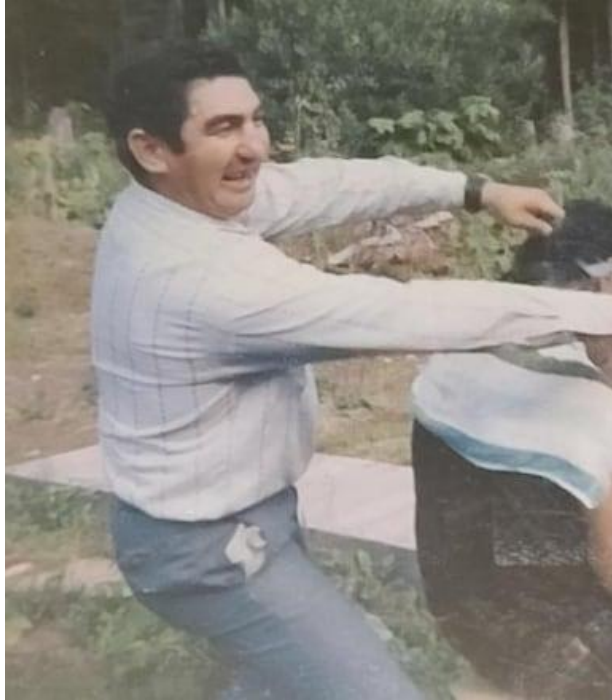
It was another decade before she started digging into her dad's story. Her mom is white, and Davidson wanted to learn about her Indigenous heritage.

She started with the crash. Davidson called an RCMP officer in B.C., who recognized the name Baca immediately. It turns out her father had another child.

William (Sam) Baca, who was named after his dad, returned from vacation to a message waiting on his phone.

"This constable said, 'Hey, I've got this kind of unusual request. This lady stated she's your long-lost sister,'" Sam said.

Unlike Davidson, Sam knew his father growing up. He was partially raised by his stepdad, but spent time with his biological father beginning when he was 11. It took him time to process that he had a sibling his dad never told him about.



William Baca is seen goofing around and playing guitar in photos likely from the late '70s. Family members believe they have uncovered DNA evidence proving William Baca is actually Mervin Sinclair, an Indigenous man who went missing in 1958. (Submitted by Jilayne Davidson)

The first time Sam met Davidson was when she flew out to surprise him at his home in Terrace, B.C., on Halloween.

"I kind of shut the door in her face. And everyone was like, what are you doing?" He said he opened the door again, took another look at her, and fell to his knees.

"I knew — there she is, my sister," he said, choking back tears.

Sam said he and Davidson talk about their father a lot. He's shared photos of their dad with her, and they've gone together to visit his grave in B.C.

Sam said his dad was a "happy-go-lucky person," the type to bust out a guitar or even an accordion on camping or fishing trips.

"She never got to meet him, whereas I did," Sam said. "She never had that kind of closure."

Davidson said she initially thought meeting Sam was all the closure she needed. But when she learned about genetic ancestry tests, she was curious to learn more.

A DNA match

In February, Davidson sent in a saliva sample to AncestryDNA. The test came back with a close match, likely a cousin, named Cory Robinson.

Davidson looked at Robinson's family tree, and spotted two familiar names — Nora and Victor, which she had been told were her paternal grandparents' names. But the last name on the family tree was Sinclair, not Baca.

Davidson reached out to Robinson. His wife, Eileen Tann, shot a message back.

"She sent me this poster, saying, 'I think you might be the daughter of the missing Mervin Sinclair' ... When I saw that photo, I just hit the floor. I just somehow knew that was my dad," Davidson said. "I was shaking."

WATCH | Jilayne Davidson describes how it felt to learn her father's true identity:



On Easter weekend 1958, 23-year-old Mervin Sinclair was last seen hitchhiking from Calgary back to his army base. Now, more than 60 years later, Jilayne Davidson shares how she discovered information that might close his cold case: Sinclair is likely her father, who she knew as William Baca. 1:19
Tann had been doing genealogical research herself, and quickly figured out where Davidson likely fit in.

"I sent [pictures of William Baca] over to Darlene [Mervin's sister], and Darlene was like, 'Wow, he looks just like the Sinclair boys,'" Tann said.

After that, Davidson said things started to happen quickly. She learned about Sinclair's backstory — and found out that she had dozens of cousins who were excited to meet her and learn what happened to their missing relative.

Raven Sinclair, whose father, Raymond, was Mervin's brother, said when she and her sisters heard from Davidson, "we sort of all freaked out."

"It's been known in the family that Mervin went missing in the '50s. We all assumed that he'd been killed, either accidentally or murdered," Sinclair said.

Sinclair is a survivor of the Sixties Scoop and a professor of social work. She said when she reconnected with her Indigenous family and learned Mervin's story, it brought to mind the stories of other missing and murdered Indigenous people.

"I'm glad he lived. It's tragic he died in a car accident, but he wasn't murdered," Sinclair said.

She said it was a relief to realize Mervin had chosen to make a new life for himself, rather than having his life taken from him.

"It couldn't have been easy, because he came from a big family ... it would be nice to know a little more about it. Of course, we'll never get those answers."



Mervin Sinclair was last seen in 1958. Jilayne Davidson, pictured with Mervin's sister Darlene, has discovered a family she never knew, thanks to a DNA test. (RCMP, Submitted by Darlene Sinclair)

Davidson's currently working with RCMP to confirm that William Baca was Mervin Sinclair, and she said investigators told her DNA indicates she's related to the Sinclair family. Davidson provided CBC with RCMP emails detailing steps in the investigation.

Alberta RCMP spokesperson Fraser Logan said Sinclair's file remains a "very active" investigation but that it takes time to close a case involving decades of investigation, across multiple provinces, for an individual who has been dead for decades.

Until then, he can't confirm if DNA belonging to the man who was buried under the name William Baca matches the Sinclair family.

But Logan said no matter how old the cold case, police will investigate new information — and those looking for answers can consider submitting their DNA, like Davidson did.

"If you have a missing relative, if you're able to give up your familial DNA to the National DNA Data Bank, then we can always compare it to any remains that come in," Logan said. "It's a very powerful tool."

Finding closure

Once the match is official, Davidson hopes to have the name Mervin Sinclair engraved on her father's gravestone, so he can lie at rest under his true identity.

"I feel like I will have a great deal of peace to have this sorted out for my dad ... I just hope that, you know, some way, somehow, he knows that we found him, we know his story, and that we love him," she said.

The family may have a chance to meet before that happens. Podge said the Sinclairs are planning to return to the George Gordon reserve near Regina later this summer for a powwow and to honour Elders who have passed — including Mervin.

For Sam, the prospect of connecting with his found family — who he said have welcomed him with open arms — has been overwhelming.

"There's a lot of people that will never find answers they're looking for. Like my uncle [Ralph], who I found out he'd been looking for Mervin for the better part of his life ... [for me and Jilayne] to reconnect 20-some years later..." he said, pausing to take a deep breath.

"I'm glad that I could share this story and maybe bring hope to others: Don't give up, keep pushing, keep striving, keep looking for answers. There's probably a lot of people that are not as lucky as us to find their loved one ... we're so thankful."

Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/mervin-sinclair-cold-case-1.6089369>