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'Defending the walls' at Old Fort Niagara

BY OLD FORT NIAGARA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ROBERT EMERSON

Smallpox, the ague, scurvy, the Spanish flu. Old Fort Niagara has seen many such maladies come and go over the centuries. Most recently, the historic site has dealt with the impact of COVID-19. This pandemic forced the closing of the fort for a little over three months in 2020. When we reopened in July, there were strict safety protocols in place, including limited capacities on the fort grounds and in buildings. Attendance at the site dropped from over 200,000 in 2019 to just over 30,000 in 2020.

Old Fort Niagara is operated by the Old Fort Niagara Association, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1927. The association is dedicated to preserving the fort and educating the public about its role in the history of North America. The historic site is self-sustaining

with 80% of its revenue derived from ticket and museum shop sales. When attendance drops, as it has during the pandemic, the fort loses badly needed operating revenue. These revenues support critical maintenance projects and popular educational programs that benefit thousands.

In 2021, visitation to the historic site rose to 75,000. Domestic travelers began to visit again, special events returned to the schedule and even a few school groups made it out to the fort for special programs in the fall. The community also stepped forward with donations to aid in our preservation and education efforts. These donations, and the forgiveness of a Payroll Protection Program loan, made the difference in balancing the budget for 2021.

As we move forward into 2022, however, we have concerns about the path forward. It is doubtful

there will be additional forgivable loans, and tourism – particularly international visitation – has not returned to normal. The association is tasked with maintaining buildings that are approaching 300 years old. This is not an easy task, and several critical needs have emerged over the past two years.

The French Castle needs a new roof. The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation will undertake this much-needed project in 2022. We have also witnessed growing masonry deterioration on the French Castle and two stone redoubts. These projects together will cost over \$1,000,000. To date, we have raised only about half the funds needed to complete these projects. A grant from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund will be applied to the French Castle, and another grant from the Niagara Greenway Commission

will support the Redoubt project. The association will continue to seek additional funding to complete both projects.

Old Fort Niagara is a unique educational and cultural resource and a key partner in regional heritage tourism. During its long history, soldiers from many nations defended its walls. Nearly a century ago, local citizens stepped forward to restore the aging fort and save it from certain ruin.

Today, what the fort needs most is your support. Membership in the association is open to all. Members receive free admission year-round (fundraisers excepted), a newsletter and museum shop discounts. Most importantly, members support history education and preservation for present and future generations. More information is available on our website at www.oldfortniagara.org.

BBB tip: Don't let your quest for love blind you to realities of romance scams

SUBMITTED BY THE BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU

Online dating sites are popular, as many use technology to find a match. But behind some dating profiles lurk scammers who are ready to dupe users into believing they have found love.

Don't let your quest for love blind you to the realities of romance scams.

Online dating and social media make it easy to meet new people and find dates. Unfortunately, it made scammers' work simpler, too.

Con artists create compelling backstories, and full-fledged identities to trick victims into falling for someone who doesn't exist. This form of deception is known as "catfishing." Sometimes a catfisher is a lonely person hiding behind a fake persona, but often it is the first step in a phishing scheme to steal personal information or to trick victims out of money. In some cases, victims have been tricked into moving illegal money from other scams ("money mule"), which is potentially a crime.

Read more in "Online Romance Scams: A BBB Study on How

Scammers Use Impersonation, Blackmail, and Trickery to Steal From Unsuspecting Daters."

How the scam works:

Most romance scams start with fake profiles on online dating sites created by stealing photos and text from real accounts or elsewhere. Scammers often claim to be in the military or working overseas to explain why they can't meet in person. Over a short period of time, the scammer builds a fake relationship with the victim, exchanging photos and romantic messages, even talking on the phone or through a webcam.

Just when the relationship seems to be getting serious, the new sweetheart has a health issue or family emergency or wants to plan a visit. No matter the story, the request is the same: They need money. But after the victim sends money, there's another request, and then another. Or the scammer stops communicating altogether.

Tips to spot this scam:
 ✓ Too hot to be true. Scammers offer up good-looking photos and tales of financial success. If someone seems "too perfect," alarm

bells should ring.

✓ In a hurry to get off the site. Catfishers will try very quickly to get you to move to communicate through email, messenger or phone.

✓ Moving fast. A catfisher will begin speaking of a future together and say "I love you" quickly. They often say they've never felt this way before.

✓ Talk about trust. Catfishers will start manipulating victims with talk about trust and how important it is. This will often be a first step to asking for money.

✓ Don't want to meet. Be wary of someone who always has an excuse to postpone meetings because they say they are traveling or live overseas or are in the military.

✓ Suspect language. If the person claims to be local, but has poor spelling or grammar, uses overly flowery language, or uses phrases that don't make sense, that's a red flag.

✓ Hard luck stories. Before moving on to asking for money, the scammer may hint at financial troubles such as the heat being cut off, or a stolen car, or a sick rela-

tive, or they may share a sad story from their past (death of parents or spouse, etc.)

Tips to protect yourself from this scam:

✓ Never send money or personal information that can be used for identity theft to someone you've never met in person. Never give someone your credit card information to book a ticket to visit you. Cut off contact if someone starts asking you for information like credit card, bank or government ID numbers.

✓ Ask specific questions about details given in a profile. A scammer may stumble over remembering details or making a story fit.

✓ Do your research. Many scammers steal photos from the web to use in their profiles. You can do a reverse image lookup using a website like tinEye.com or images.google.com to see if the photos on a profile are stolen from somewhere else. You can also search online for a profile name, email or phone number to see what adds up and what doesn't.

To report a scam, go to BBB Scam Tracker.

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