

Beware shady phone scams, look-alike bills

By KAREN SMITH
The Champion

You've just won a fabulous new car, says the voice on the telephone. Then comes the clincher: "You'll just have to pay \$400 for delivery."

Chances are there's no car, but many unsuspecting citizens won't find out until it's too late.

Consumers, business people, seniors, investors and children are all the potential targets of scam artists, warns the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations.

Unscrupulous promoters may use hundreds of different approaches, but all have one thing in common — they want to grab their victims' money.

"One of the most common mistakes people make when they're approached by a scam artist is to think the amount of money they are being asked for is so small — or so huge — that the promoter must be legitimate," said Marilyn Gurevsky of the ministry.

Scam artists, in fact, are just as likely to ask for a \$2 donation to

a phoney charity as they are to try to convince people to spend \$20,000 on a timeshare condominium that they don't own and have no right to sell, she said.

"If someone makes you an offer of anything, whether it's a free vacation, a loan, or even fax paper for the office that sounds too good to be true, a warning bell should go off in your head. You may be dealing with a scam artist, and once they have your money it may be impossible to get it back."

The list of over-the-phone scams is so long the OPP has set up a special task force — Operation Phonebusters — to attack the problem.

Police are aware of more than \$60 million lost by Canadian consumers to shady telemarketers last year. It's estimated that if everyone in the country who was taken told their tales the total would be closer to \$600 million.

The majority of tele-marketing frauds stem from Quebec companies that are difficult to trace because they change locations so frequently, says Detective Bob Percy of the Halton Regional

Police.

Other phone scams include calls asking people to place advertisements in directories or magazines for charity, Ms Gurevsky said.

With more people operating small businesses from their homes, the approach has appeal, she said.

"Some legitimate directories do solicit advertising by telephone. But many are scams, so check the publication before you make a commitment."

"Also, scam artists often say they work with police or fire departments, knowing that people will tend to trust the voice on the phone by association. A quick call to your local department will verify that claim."

Police say the basic rules of thumb when dealing with any company over the phone are simple.

- Never give your address, credit card number, bank account number or any other personal or financial information over the telephone to someone who calls you.

- Refuse all offers if an immediate deposit or payment is necessary. If the company won't give you time to check on them, don't do business. Hang up on them.

Through the mail, look-alike hydro bills, a scam reported recently in Milton, is also at the top of the ministry's list of attempted frauds.

The look-alike invoices, mailed by people who hope the recipients will send them money, have been received primarily by businesses, but also by consumers from Port Colborne to Thunder Bay, Ms Gurevsky said.

The logo on these "invoices" is very similar to that of Ontario Hydro, said Det. Percy, but while the big letters on the top say "amount owing" the fine print says the "offer can be declined."

"They make it look like something that has to be acted upon," he warned. "Make sure you read the fine print."

• See LOOK OUT on page 15

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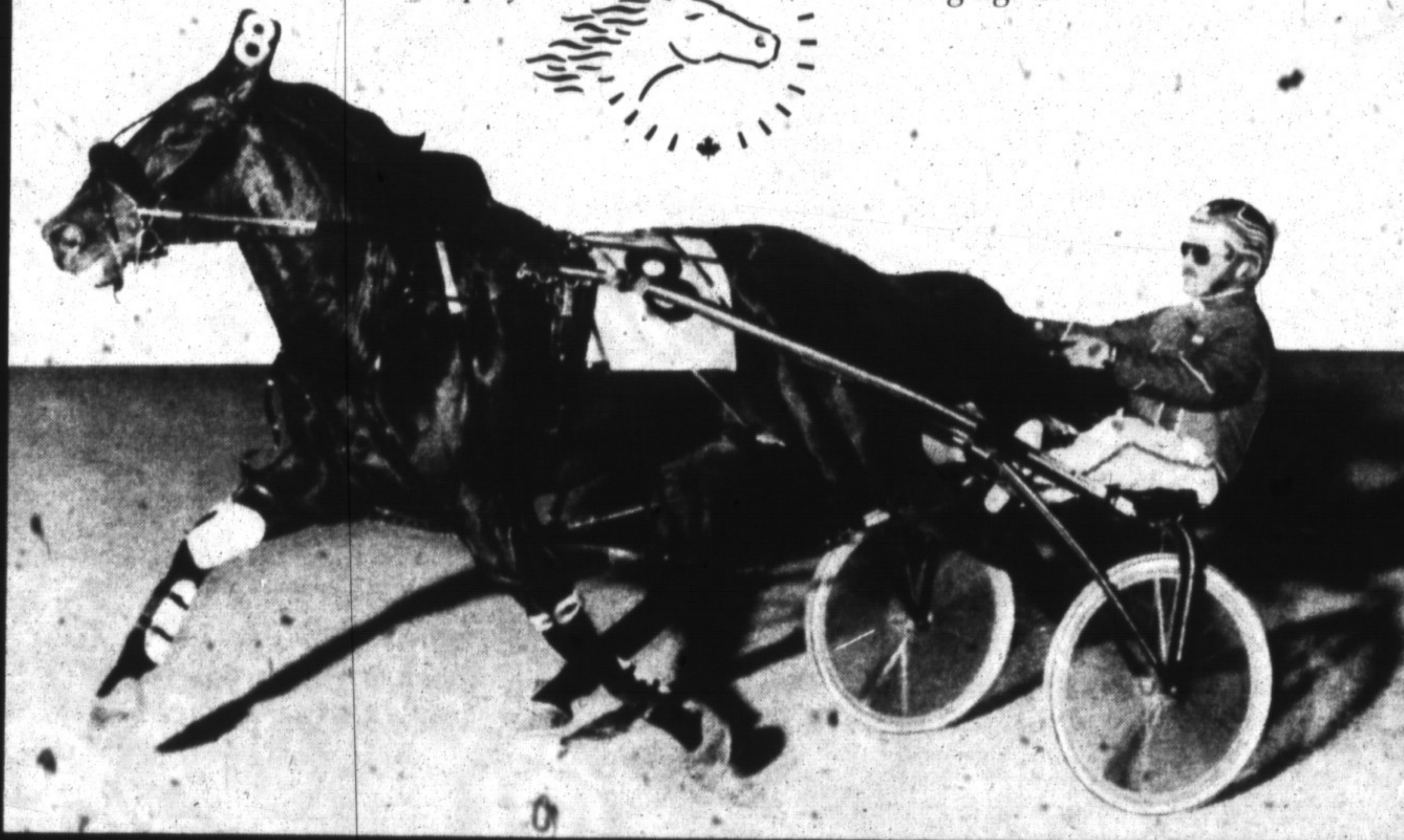
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