

# CQ NEWS

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# A Willows Gemfields story

Known worldwide for its gems



**DISCOVER YOUR BACKYARD**  
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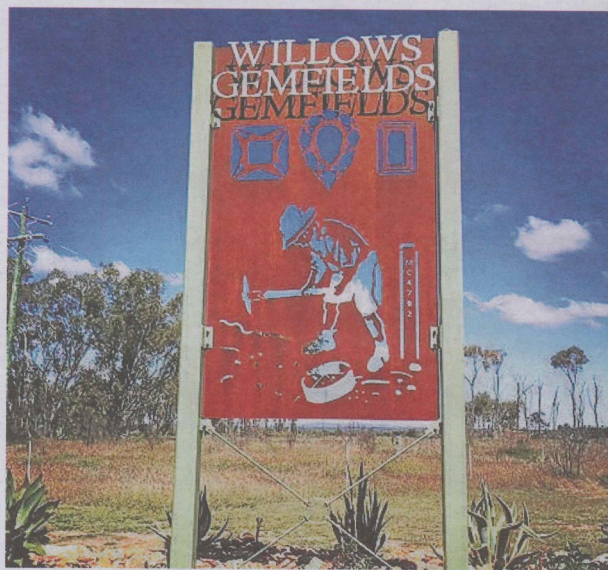
IT MAY be a small town but the reputation of the Willows Gemfields is huge and is well known worldwide for the number, quality and colour of the sapphires that have come from the area.

Little is known about the original discovery of sapphires at the Willows.

From about 1919 up to 1924 a Joshua Cousins was working in the area, today still referred to by long-term locals as Cousins Hill.

An interesting story is told that a substantial shipment of local Willows Gemfields green sapphires of the highest quality and value belonging to Tom McCarthy and Bob and Harry MacNamara was USA-bound aboard the ship USS Niagara when it was torpedoed and sunk during the Second World War.

It was also rumoured that a considerable quantity of



**GO FOSSICKING:** The Willows Gemfields in the Central Highlands.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

highly valuable sapphires belonging to the local White Family were also lost on the same ship.

The bullion carried by the ship was salvaged after the war but the story goes that the sapphires were not.

A tidy treasure trove of valuable stones just waiting for the right treasure hunter

to come along.

Towards the end of the 1940s, the area that had been referred to as "the mines" acquired its own identity as the Willows Gemfields after the postal centre "Willows" was relocated 15 kilometres away from the rail siding on the then Central Railway.

Today the small town of

the Willows Gemfields, with a population of about 108, is a popular fossicking spot where sapphires are still a common find.

The town has limited services but there are two caravan parks that provide accommodation options ranging from cabins to caravan and camping sites.



**The 7th USS Niagara was sunk by the Japanese during the Second World War.**

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

The Willows Gemfields designated fossicking areas are restricted to hand mining and fossicking and involves identifying the likely gem bearing gravel found at varying depths.

Generally in the Willows the "wash", as the gravel in known, is close to the surface soil and through digging, sieving, washing and sorting, stones of significant size, colour, quality and value are still found today.

The town is surrounded by separate areas such as "The Duffer", Rubbish Tip, Augies Gully, Klondyke, Green Ant Hill and Thru-the-Fence, which are the most common areas. Wash varies in depth from 500mm to two metres under the surface.

The wash consists of

pebbles, gravel and basalt boulders resting on a sandstone/mudstone base.

So dig out the shovel, sift out the sieve and dust off the dirt from a long hot summer and head out to the Willows Gemfields, a fortune in sapphires and a bucket full of fun awaits.

Research reveals that the 7th USS Niagara, as seen in the picture, was sunk by the Japanese during WW2.

If the story of the sapphires lost at sea is in fact true, from the movements of the Niagara at the time prior to sinking one could conclude that the sapphires were not aboard the USS Niagara. If not the Niagara, which ship and were the sapphires actually lost at sea or "secured" during the abandonment of the vessel? Believe it or not.