



Crushing sadness: Mr Wickerson drives Lorry Loco through Nambour in the Sunshine Coast hinterland for the last time yesterday

Bitter taste as sugar train snakes to mill for last time

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Kevin Meade

FOR 17 years, David Wickerson had stopped traffic as a locomotive operator in Nambour, one of the last towns in Australia where cane trains still rumbled through the central shopping district.

Lorry Loco, the diesel engine he has driven in recent years, has become part of local folklore in Queensland's Sunshine Coast hinterland as the central character of three children's books.

The sight of the trains wending their way through busy traffic has long been a tourism icon in Nambour, where the locos have hauled cane from the canefields of the hinterland to the Moreton sugar mill for 106 years.

But that all came to an end yesterday when Mr Wickerson, with a heavy heart, worked his last shift as a cane train driver.

The last of the Nambour cane trains rolled in late last night. The Moreton mill, operated since 1988 by

Belgian-owned Bundaberg Sugar, will begin crushing its final stalks of cane today.

When crushing is completed tomorrow the mill will close down, putting about 100 employees — including crane drivers and firemen — out of work and sounding the death knell for the Sunshine Coast hinterland sugar industry on which the town of Nambour, 100km north of Brisbane, was built.

Yesterday was a day of sadness mixed with fond memories for Mr Wickerson, 35, who knows the 130km of cane tracks in the hinterland like the back of his hand.

"I'll miss the camaraderie among the loco drivers," he said. "Each year the mill would start crushing in July, the coldest time of the year, and we'd stand around a roaring fire during meal breaks and talk about old times."

Often driving at night, Mr Wickerson watched the rapid growth of the Sunshine Coast from the cabin of his loco.

"Out in the canefields at night you could see the lights of distant towns like Maroochydore, Mooloolaba, Bli Bli, and Coolool."

"Year after year I've watched the lights of those towns all grow slowly together."

More than 150 cane farmers will be affected by the closure and many are agonising over whether to sell their land or diversify to other industries such as hemp, softwood timber and tea-trees.

Taking a farewell snapshot of Lorry Loco yesterday was cane farmer Jan Suosaari, 63, who, with her husband David, has joined about 40 other farms in a venture to produce "biodry", a new sugarcane-based cattle feed.

One farmer is building a mill on his property to process the feed.

"It's like history repeating itself," Ms Suosaari said. "It was cane farmers who got together to build the mill that built this town."