



Mrs Ridgeway... 'I still say my prayers at night'

Picture: MARK STOTHARD

Fond memories of 'humpy' days

By SALLY CROXTON,
Staff Reporter

'THE good old days have gone for me now.'

Maybe Louisa Ridgeway's remark is typical of many who have outlived their own generation but still treasure memories of past friends, relatives and happy occasions.

After an early wandering life

spent around the Port Stephens area, living in a humpy while her husband fished and worked on the roads, Mrs Ridgeway, a 92-year-old half-aboriginal woman, resents being confined to the house through ill health.

She said wistfully this week that she had heard of new flats and houses going up at Soldiers Point but had not seen them.

'People live in the bush now but I don't know them from a bar

of soap. It's quiet for me now. I used to know them all round here,' she said.

But Mrs Ridgeway feels herself fortunate in many ways; she still lives with her son, four grandchildren and four great-grandchildren in their own house. She appreciates the family home: 'If you live in your own home nobody interferences with you.'

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'Humpy' days were happy

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The house, built 60 years ago, has been home to four generations of Ridgeways. It has become dilapidated with time but faces almost defiantly the modern brick villas and blocks of flats opposite. It is the sort of place that real estate agents keep a vulture's eye on; it stands on one of the most prized parcels of real estate at Soldiers Point.

The Ridgeways had the pick of the Point when they started to build and it is easy to see why they chose their particular site.

Mrs Ridgeway said theirs was almost the first house built and now the road it stands on has been named Ridgeway Avenue after the family. The house is the last in Ridgeway Avenue before the road runs down into the Bay. From the road and the thickly planted garden the view out across the water towards Port Stephens Heads is magical on a clear day.

Mr Ridgeway used to pay \$1 a year to the Federal Government to live on that piece of land before the shire was formed.

Mrs Ridgeway stroked the old weatherboards of the house lovingly and talked of the years of life still left in them for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and of her husband who built the house with his son, George, now 74.

Mrs Ridgeway was born in 1899 at Carrington, near Tahlee House. Her father was a Finnish/Russian carpenter (he gave himself the name Smith because no one could pronounce his real surname); her mother was a mixed-blood aboriginal Australian.

Mrs Ridgeway remembered going to school at Tahlee and to Sunday school at an old stone church built by convicts at Carrington. She lived at the Karuah mission home on two or three occasions during her travels.

She remembered the missionaries with real affection and said they were very good to us and kind. We used to have a lovely af-

ternoon on a Tuesday at the mission with prayer meetings, a sing-song and afternoon teas — they were good old days then. But I don't forget. I still say my prayers each night.

'They gave us rations, sometimes goods, sometimes just a bit of tea and sugar, and people from town and the Government gave us clothes.'

'I wish I could see Tahlee again; it's a beautiful old homestead. I've still got some relatives around there, but I never see them now. I got married there when I was 18. He's been dead 25 years now. We got married with seven others all on the one day. I wore a blue dress with mutton sleeves that my sister made me. She's dead now, and all my brothers and sisters.'

'Nobody cooked any wedding meals then. After we were married we went away to Forster and stayed a few months, then I wanted to come back,' she said.

'I used to go out washing for a Mrs Johnson who kept the post office at Karuah. Then my husband worked for oyster farmers and went out fishing. We hardly stopped in one place; we just moved round and round Port Stephens working for different people. We'd put up the tent and we were always happy — he'd go out fishing and we'd pull together, thank God.'

'I used to row and help catch the fish and pull them out of the nets. We'd go for miles at night-time with George too, and then go back to the tent.'

'I never learnt an aboriginal language, though I understood lots of words; I can remember them still. They called nose 'nog'.'

'My husband never went to the wars. He said they were too wicked.'

Mrs Ridgeway forgot illness and her memories and her old, lined face lit up as she heard her grandson, Solomon, come home from school.

She put her arm around him and said contentedly: 'At least when I die I've got no enemies.'