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, now lives in a house through illness.

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 remembered the missionaries with real affection and said they were very good to her and kind. We used to have a lovely afternoon 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 good, 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 Kurrajong. 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 with George too, and then go back to the tent.'

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

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

Mrs Ridgeway forgot ill-health and her memories and her good, died face up as she heard her granddaughter, Solomon, come home from school.

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