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My Highchair Tray

One of my prized and sometimes useful possessions is a highchair tray. It was one of the gifts my parents received at the time of my birth, along with the usual silver cups, spoons, and porringers. This was a gift from the president of the oil company for which Daddy worked. It is hardly your ordinary highchair tray, although it's shaped like a conventional tray, the usual oval shape with a built-up edge. It differs from traditional trays by being heavily silver-plated, extensively engraved - a decorative piece. I suspect that Mother used it for me about as much as I used it for our two sons -- once or twice for each -- preferring the more easily cleaned ordinary plastic or wooden tray.

The shape of this tray is roughly oval, with a straight front side ending in a plain inch-wide flange underneath to keep the tray steady on the edge of a table or a highchair tray. It has a raised rim which is about an inch high with a horizontal half-inch striated finished edge. The bed of the tray has six engraved pictures, beginning on the left bottom side with three young animals, a puppy with a kitten on either side. The picture above the pets is more elaborate, an oven fronted by an aproned, capped baker brandishing an oven paddle, facing a pinafore clad child who holds a cake. Above the figures are the words from a familiar nursery rhyme, "Pat-a-cake, Pat-a-cake, Baker's Man." The top center picture shows two baby chicks facing a frog and backed by some tufts of grass. Then to the right side of the chicks are two women peering curiously from their open front doors, watching several pigs walking down the street on their back legs accompanied by a dancing flute player. This picture is captioned with another nursery rhyme, "To Market, To Market, To Buy a Fat Pig, Home Again, Home Again, Dancing a Jig." The last picture on the right bottom shows three animals, a different set of two cats and a dog, to balance the first pets. The bottom center is a framed engraving of a handsome donkey, with the words "MARY FRANCES HICKMAN" below it in capital letters.

I was always conscious of this tray when I was a small child, and after my brothers and sisters reached the talking stage, I heard a great deal about the center picture of a donkey, bearing my name beneath it. This label not only shows that the tray was intended for me but it provided my younger siblings with a continuing source of hilarity. They had great fun reminding me that the donkey bore my name. They were able to think of numerous variations on their teasing, but the consistent theme was that their oldest sister was a donkey, and sometimes I obliged them by acting like one. Although I was accustomed to the teasing the oldest of several children always gets and didn't greatly resent that kind of teasing, I did try to keep the tray hidden behind other pieces in the china cabinet so that they would forget about the donkey. Out of sight did not mean out of mind to my loving brothers and sisters.

After Paul and I were married and my siblings were adults, too, I discovered that pesky highchair tray to be an asset. I really did like it. No one else seems to have seen such a piece of baby equipment. Moreover, I discovered that if I made use of the dropped front flange to keep the tray steady on the table, it became a useful and decorative plate for hors d'oeuvres such as a vegetable dip, little sandwiches, or fancy cakes. Now, when I'm not using the tray, I keep it in the place of

pride in my china cabinet, and I'm not a bit hesitant to point it out to unsuspecting visitors and make sure that they notice the portrait of a donkey with my name underneath.