

Who Dressed Betsy McCall?

by AnneLise Wilhelmsen



In the spirit of Helen Lee, Betsy's dress features a sophisticated color palette and built in petticoat with rick-rack trim.

As a child I knew one thing for certain. Betsy McCall's life was way cooler than mine. I had never met anyone famous, done important work for international charities, or visited distant lands. And I certainly didn't have her wardrobe! But she inspired me to think a life like hers was possible, even for an ordinary girl. Most of all, Betsy McCall was fun! Every month I looked forward to finding out what pretty new clothes she had gotten, and what adventures she had worn them for. That's what Betsy was to me.

What Betsy was to McCall's was a marketing bonanza. They had almost always had paper doll pages. But nothing had ever been more popular than Betsy. Her first set of dresses was created by the firm Cinderella, who advertised in newspapers across the country that their frocks could be seen on Betsy (Figure 1). It was the beginning of an incredibly lucrative promotional scheme. By the summer of 1952 Betsy McCall had visited over 4 million homes, wearing the clothing of a different manufacturer each month. The results were staggering. After less than a year and a half it was estimated that she had been personally responsible for \$1.5 million in children's wear sales. That's more than \$13 million in today's dollars, a pretty impressive feat for a six year old.



Figure 1: A Cinderella advertisement for Betsy's first dresses, placed by a local dress shop in the Delaware County Daily Times. May 4, 1951.

Helen Lee (Youngland & Her McCall's Patterns Combined) - 33	Tam O'Shanter - 3
Cinderella - 31	Touraine Co. - 3
Joseph Love - 27	Twinkle Frocks - 3
McCall's Patterns (Uncredited) - 25	Weatherwinky - 3
Kate Greenaway - 20	Wonderalls - 3
Lurie Pizer - 13	Yolande - 3
Mary Jane Dresses - 13	Gay Kindreds by
R.A.R. Moppets - 12	Barry Long Manufacturing - 2
Tiny Town Togs - 12	Health Tex - 2
Carters - 11	Her Majesty - 2
Glen of Michigan - 11	Jean Durain of California - 2
Jack Borgenicht - 11	Macwill - 2
Sacony - 10	Style Undies - 2
Suzy Brooks, Inc. - 8	Sunny Lee - 2
Ship-n-Shore - 7	Wee Tog Manufacturing - 2
Aileen Girl - 6	Biquette - 1
Bambury - 6	Childcraft - 1
Borgenicht Brothers, Inc. - 6	Florence Schulman - 1
Bow Age - 5	Ganter & Mattern Co. - 1
J.C. Penney - 5	Harry Berger - 1
Margery Daw - 5	J Bar T - 1
Montgomery Wards - 5	Jack L. Honig - 1
White Stag - 5	Jack Turk & Co. - 1
Derby Sportswear - 4	Jog Togs - 1
Pandora Knitwear - 4	Kiddie Coats - 1
Peggy 'N Sue - 4	Lighthouse for the Blind - 1
Robert Hall - 4	Little Star - 1
Shepardess - 4	Lounges - 1
Cole of California - 3	Mon Amie - 1
Fairy Frocks - 3	Nanette - 1
Frank & Masket - 3	Nitey-Nite - 1
Johnston of Dallas - 3	Petite Fleur - 1
Just Stretch - 3	Ray Modes Negligees - 1
Kayser - 3	Regal Knitwear - 1
"Lil" Airess - 3	Spatz Brotheres - 1
McKem-Vanta - 3	Thermo-Jac - 1
Oxford Girl's Wear - 3	Tidykins - 1
Polly Flinders Frocks - 3	Turtle Bay - 1
Revro, Inc. - 3	Young Set Sport Togs - 1
Scout Tex - 3	Young Sophisticates - 1
Stretchini - 3	Youtheme - 1

Figure 2: List of designers and manufacturers who dressed the Betsy McCall paper doll, and the number of outfits they're credited with between May, 1951 and July, 1967. This does NOT include outfits for Barbara or Linda, or slips & underwear.

Figure 3: "Every little girl needs one red dress for courage," claimed Helen Lee. McCall's® M4644. Image Courtesy of the McCall Pattern Company copyright @ 2015.



So who were these lucky advertisers? Who designed the dresses that sent little girls across America running for their blunt nosed scissors? As it turns out, there are at least eighty-two answers to that question (Figure 2). This is the number of individual vendors and designers who dressed the Betsy McCall paper doll from May, 1951, through July, 1967.

After this point, Betsy began to appear less regularly and when she was included she frequently traveled. In months where she visited a foreign country, her outfits were often costumes native to those locations instead of everyday fashions. So there were fewer real clothes for her fans to enjoy. More importantly, even though Betsy would have plenty of stylish outfits in the 1970s and 1980s, her relationship with her "advertising partners" changed. From September of 1967 onward, neither manufacturer's names nor pattern references were included on the actual paper doll pages anymore, although they were often listed at the back of the magazine (if you cared to look for them). In the early 1990s the credits suddenly reappeared (including popular brands such as Esprit, Laura Ashley, and Oshkosh B'Gosh), and remained until Betsy's permanent retirement in 1995. But clearly, the heyday for those hoping to capitalize on Betsy as their spokes model was between 1951 and 1967. And capitalize is exactly what they did.

In 1952 Betsy McCall's image was licensed for production as a "real" doll, the first ever to be dressed by the Fashion Editor of a woman's magazine. She was introduced in September, and had identical dresses to those worn by the Betsy paper doll that month. All three of them (including



Four of the Helen Lee designs used in Betsy McCall paper dolls. Left to right: McCall's® M4944, McCall's® M4643, McCall's® M2369, and McCall's® M5496. Images courtesy of the McCall Pattern Company copyright @ 2015.

the famous Red Dress) came from the firm Youngland, whose top designer was Helen Lee. Although nobody knew it then, Ms. Lee would continue to play a significant role in Betsy's life.

In 1953, Helen Lee became the first children's wear designer to win the coveted Coty American Fashion Critics Award, for her contributions to Youngland. She had not been a household name before, but both the fashion media, and the public, took increased notice now. And they liked what they saw.

In a world obsessed with dressing little girls in fluff and frills, Helen Lee's designs stood out. She didn't like fussy trims, and didn't believe children should be restricted to pastels. Her clothes relied on cut, clever details, and sophisticated color schemes (often incorporating black or other adult shades) for their appeal. She loved plaids, stripes, and bold colors (Figure 3). And she believed it was only logical for children's clothing to be fashionable, since they outgrew and needed to replace it every year anyway.

Furthermore, she was practical. She was the first children's wear designer to create capsule wardrobes that all matched a single coat. And she once explained to an interviewer that she preferred to build petticoats into full dresses, because it saved busy mothers from searching for a slip when a child was late for school (and looked better than a straight slip when little girls in wide skirts leaned forward).

McCall's pattern division took notice as well, and soon after her CAFCA win they wisely began paying her to create fashions for them. However, she continued to design for other firms where she had partnership deals (e.g., Alyssa), as well as for Sears Roebuck & Company, Saks Fifth Avenue, and her own line, Designs by Helen Lee, which makes her relationship with McCall's difficult to define. She's been variously referred to as having designed for them, being a consultant to them, or as being the head of their children's wear department. But we need look no further for a definitive description of her role than McCall's themselves. In the Fall/Winter 1964-65 issue of *McCall's Pattern Fashions* they described her as, "...our own Helen Lee - dean of children's wear

designers and creator of most of McCall's children's patterns."¹ Clearly, whatever her job title, by the mid 1960's Ms. Lee had become the star of McCall's children's wear show. And she had become a star in Betsy's world as well.

In 1959, when McCall's sewing division decided to take advantage of Betsy McCall's popularity, it was Helen Lee who created the first three patterns to be featured in a Betsy paper doll. Over the next eight years Betsy's mother would "make" her many clothes. Nearly half of them can be traced to the drawing board of Ms. Lee. But who to credit for the remaining half is uncertain.

Helen Lee, along with Pierre Cardin, Hubert Givenchy, and Pauline Trigère, were the focus of McCall's push to be recognized for their serious design credentials. As part of this campaign, these artists were given an honor not previously bestowed on lowly pattern makers - their names appeared on the pattern envelopes. This is how we know Betsy's mother used Helen Lee's patterns almost half the time. But it's quite possible Ms. Lee was at least partly responsible for the other half. Because we know for a fact that McCall's sometimes advertised patterns as Helen Lee designs without including her name on the envelope (Figure 4).

I have personally spoken with McCall's (who sadly, no longer employ an archivist), as well as with collectors of Ms. Lee's patterns but the true extent of her work seems destined to remain a mystery. None of the people I interviewed were aware of a definitive list of her McCall's designs. Which means we will likely never know the exact number of Helen Lee dresses hanging in Betsy McCall's closet.

Yet even if we can only make an educated estimate, it's important to try. Because what Betsy McCall wore is a direct reflection of society's taste and values during the years she appeared in McCall's magazine. And she clearly had favorites. Forty-eight of the 82 companies and designers who dressed Betsy from May, 1951 through July, 1967 appeared just once in the magazine. And a dozen more only contributed to Betsy's wardrobe twice. Together they provided a modest 135 of Betsy's 444 paper

¹ "Helen Lee Fashions: To Russia With Love." *McCall's Pattern Fashions* Winter, 1964-65.



doll outfits from these years. Sixteen more were not credited. Which means the remaining 293 came from just 21 firms.

Betsy McCall had a strong preference for four of these. Kate Greenaway dressed her 20 times, Joseph Love provided 27 outfits, and Cinderella was responsible for 31. But Helen Lee and McCall's patterns were far and away her top choice, collectively accounting for 58 of Betsy's outfits (almost twice as many as second place Cinderella). And of these, Helen Lee was definitely responsible for at least 33. This makes her the single most frequent provider of fashions for the Betsy McCall paper dolls (prior to September, 1967) even without the McCall's patterns for which she was given no credit. She also maintained the second longest running designer-client relationship with Betsy, (narrowly losing out to Joseph Love who dressed Betsy for two months longer).

Betsy was not Helen Lee's only famous fan. Ms. Lee was also retained by Jackie Kennedy, in 1961, to create a wardrobe for Caroline. Which made it official. Helen Lee was not just a genius. She was more than just prolific (although she was outrageously

productive, claiming never to run out of ideas and sometimes generating 100 new sketches in a week!) Helen Lee was a tsunami. She was the biggest "thing" to ever hit children's fashion, period. Her trendsetting ideas created an influence on the entire industry which was impossible to escape. And what made her such a force of nature was the source of her inspiration.

Helen Lee was an amateur psychologist, having taken at least one course in Child Development to better understand her subjects. And she had three daughters of her own from whom she gleaned important insights. She strongly believed in the power of bright colors to lift the spirits of children. And she enjoyed a good joke, often including something unexpected (like a petticoat embroidered with multicolored dachshunds) to make her small clients laugh. Young people loved her, and she loved them. It showed in everything she did.

More than anything, Ms. Lee was a proponent of purposeful femininity. She despised blue jeans, claiming they hurt a girl's normal development. "Little girls should always be dressed



Eight of the McCall's patterns used for Betsy McCall. Numbers in bold text are believed by many to be unmarked Helen Lee designs. Top L-R: McCall's® M8423, **McCall's® M5123**, McCall's® M5427, **McCall's® M6833**. Above L-R: McCall's® M7789, McCall's® M8703, **McCall's® M4540**, and McCall's® M6552. Images courtesy of the McCall Pattern Company copyright @ 2015.



Figure 4: At the left is a two-page advertisement published by McCall's pattern company. At the right is the actual pattern envelope for M5084, curiously missing the Helen Lee credit. Left to right: McCall's® M4943, and McCall's® M5084. Images courtesy of the McCall Pattern Company copyright @ 2015.



The dress worn by Betsy McCall for a family vacation to Washington, D.C. in her July, 1959 paper doll. McCall's® M4465. Image courtesy of the McCall's Pattern Company copyright @ 2015.

up, even if it means mother irons ruffles every day," she said. "It's the only way they'll acquire a sense of beauty and pride in their looks."² And this pride was important, she felt, to the overall success of childrearing. "A child who knows she is becomingly dressed gains poise and confidence," claimed Helen, "She is likely to be a happy child. And a happy child usually is a good child".³

Perhaps this was the secret to Betsy McCall's own enduring charm and good manners. She never got into any real trouble to speak of, and we probably should have hated her for her perfect wardrobe, her unfailingly clean white gloves, and her "goodie-two-shoes" ways. Instead we adored her. It was impossible not to.

Betsy McCall would undoubtedly have been one of America's sweethearts without her large assortment of Helen Lee dresses. And Helen Lee was already being recognized for her brilliance before her designs began appearing as part of Betsy's paper doll wardrobe. But together they were magic, creating many special fashion moments for Betsy's fans.

Which brings us to this issue's costuming project. The pattern that follows is one of Ms. Lee's marked designs, recreated in McCall's magazine as a dress for Betsy's visit to the White House in the summer of 1959. I've done my version with a plaid skirt, but of course you can make this up any number of ways using almost any quilting weight (or lighter) cotton or cotton blend fabric.

I hope you will enjoy dressing Betsy as much as I have, and all the nostalgic memories she, and her Helen Lee outfits, bring with her.

2 "Avoid Blue Jeans." *Idaho State Journal* 30 June 1958: p. 13.

3 Roe, D. "Clothing Affects Child Behavior." *Waukesha Daily Freeman* 2 September 1954: p. 5.

Sewing Instructions for Betsy's Summer Dress

NOTE: Betsy's pattern is designed to fit Robert Tonner's 14" reproduction Betsy dolls.

1. Cut one front bodice on the fold, two back bodices, two sleeves, two sleeve facings, four collar sections, and one bias neck band from your bodice fabric. NOTE: if your bodice fabric is too sheer, cut a second bodice front and two backs from matching batiste. Hand baste close to edges, wrong sides together, and treat as one layer going forward. You will see that I've had to do this with my fabric.
2. Cut one skirt and one continuous lap on the bias from your skirt fabric.
3. Cut one front petticoat, two back petticoats, one upper ruffle, and one lower ruffle from your organdy. NOTE: the easiest way to cut the ruffles is to trace or photocopy multiple copies of the ruffle guide and tape them together to form a piece half the width you need, then cut on the fold. For the longer (lower) ruffle cut two 27 1/4" long pieces in this manner and then seam them together using a 1/4" seam allowance.
4. With right sides together, match bodice backs to front at shoulders and pin. Stitch using 1/4" seam allowances. Press open flat. Pink, overcast, or zig-zag to neaten seam edges.
5. Match one set of collar sections to second set of sections, right sides together and pin along outer edge. Stitch using 1/4" seam allowances. Trim to 1/8" and turn to right side. Press. NOTE: sewing tiny collar sections is much easier if you lay them on top of a piece of paper towel first. This gives the machine traction so turning a clean curve is much less difficult.
6. Hand baste rick-rack along edge of collar as shown (Figure 1), having points 1/8" from finished edge. Turn in short raw end at back edge. Stitch in place, either by hand or machine. Press.
7. Turn in 1/8" along each center back edge and edge stitch in place. Press.
8. Narrow hem one long edge of bias neck binding, turning under 1/8" and a second 1/8", then edge stitching in place. Press.
9. Pin collars to bodice, right sides up as shown (Figure 2). Back edges of collar should be even with the center back of the bodice.
10. Turn backs in along fold lines and pin over collar as shown (Figure 3).
11. Turn in one short end of the bias neck binding strip by 1/4" and press. With right sides together, begin pinning to neck edge, having the initial end lapped over the bodice back about halfway. Continue around to the second back, lap over the turned in edge halfway, then trim off any excess (leaving 1/4" to turn back as at the first end). Stitch through all thicknesses using a 1/4" seam allowance. Trim to 1/8" and clip curves. Turn to right side and press.
12. On inside, tack binding to shoulder seams and at backs as shown (Figure 4).



Figure 1

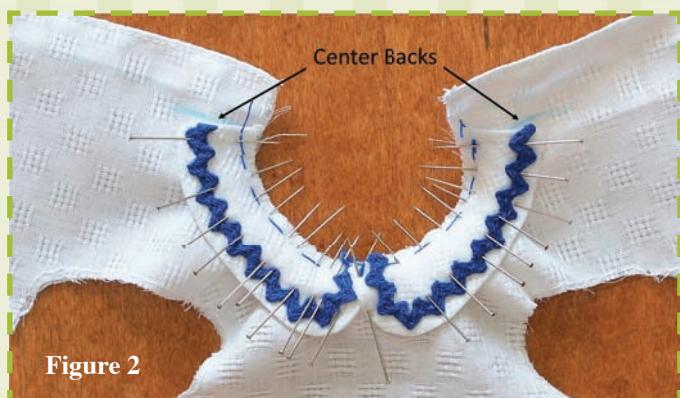


Figure 2

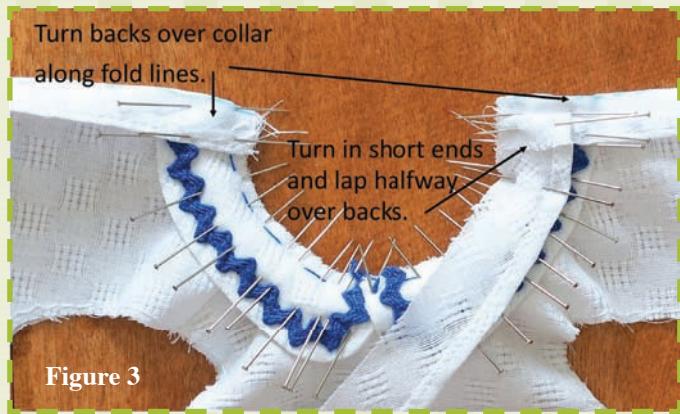


Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 5

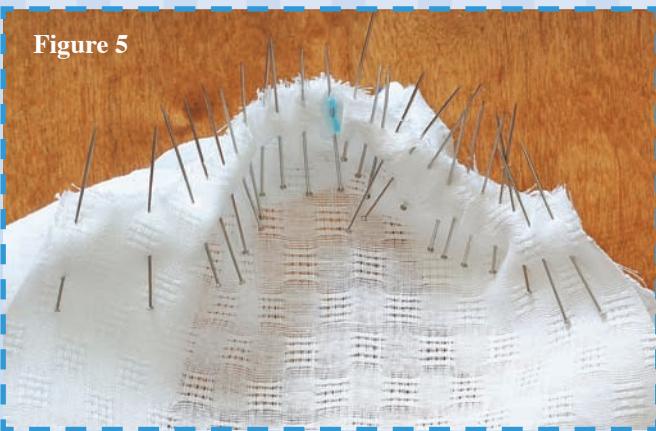


Figure 6

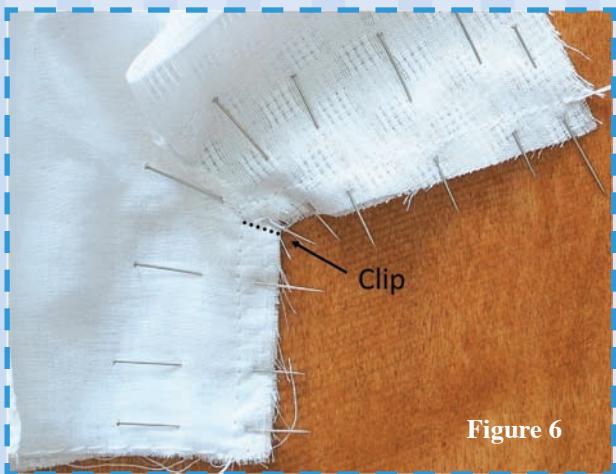
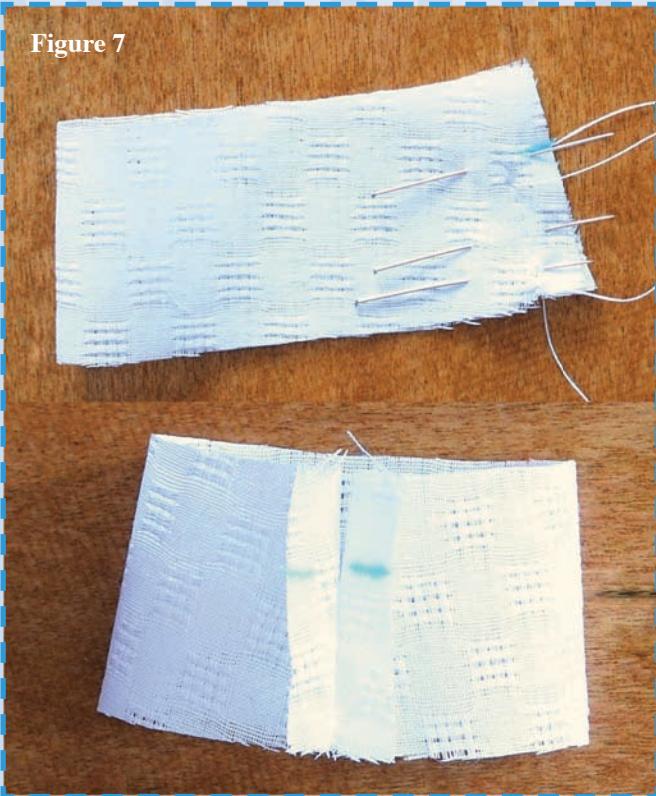


Figure 7



13. With right sides together, pin sleeves to arm's eyes, matching marks and easing in the cap as you go (Figure 5). Stitch using a $1/4"$ seam allowance. Trim seams and neaten edges with overcast stitch or machine zig-zag. Press towards sleeve.

14. Pin front to backs at sides and underarms, having right sides together and matching underarm seams. Stitch using $1/4"$ seam allowances (Figure 6). Clip just below underarm seam. Press open flat. Neaten edges with overcast or zig-zag stitch.

15. With right sides together, pin underarm seams of sleeve facings. Stitch from lower edge to mark using $1/4"$ seam allowances. Press open flat, continuing to press above stitching as shown (Figure 7).

16. Turn $1/8"$ to inside along upper edge of facing and hand baste in place.

17. Slip facings over sleeves, right sides together, matching lower edges and underarm seams. Pin in place. Stitch using $1/4"$ seam allowances (Figure 8). You should be just able to get this under your machine, as long as you stitch on the inside of the sleeve. Trim to $1/8"$. Turn facing to inside and press.

18. Hand baste upper edges of facings to sleeves as shown (Figure 9). Turn sleeve right side out. Machine stitch close to the facing edge, and then again $3/8"$ from the lower edge of the sleeve. Press. Remove all basting.



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

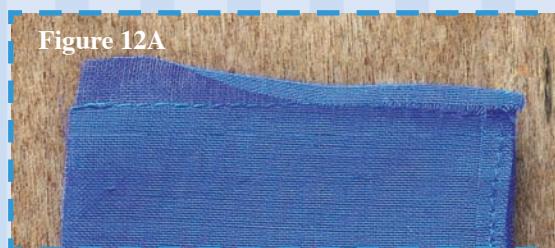


Figure 12A



Figure 12B

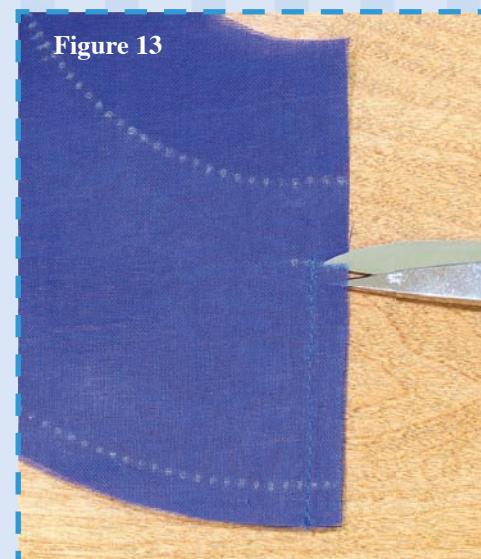


Figure 13



Figure 14

19. Stitch rick-rack to lower sleeve by hand, having the points $1/8"$ from the edge (Figure 10). Take your stitches through the ends of the points without going all the way through the sleeve layers to the other side (you don't want your stitches to show on the facing side). Turn in short raw ends at beginning and end and slip stitch together where they meet. Press.
20. Cut two pieces of elastic, each $2\frac{1}{2}"$ long. Insert into casings. Overlap by $1/4"$ and stitch ends together. Slip stitch opening together (Figure 11).
21. Pin petticoat backs to front at sides with right sides together. Stitch using $1/4"$ seam allowances. Press open flat. Neaten raw edges by folding seam allowance under to meet seam (Figure 12A) and stitching in place (Figure 12B). Press.
22. Stitch center back seam of petticoat from lower edge to mark. Clip to end of stitching (Figure 13). Below this point, neaten the seam edges by folding under and stitching as before.
23. Join lower ruffle into a loop, using a $1/4"$ seam allowance. Neaten raw edges as before. Join upper ruffle into a loop also, but stitch only from lower edge to mark. Clip to stitching at stopping point and neaten edges below this point as before.
24. Narrow hem one long edge of each ruffle by turning under $1/8"$ and then a second $1/8"$. Edge stitch in place. Press.
25. Attach rick-rack to lower ruffle edges, having "valleys" even with the finished edge. Turn in short raw ends at beginning and end, and slip stitch together where they meet. Press.
26. If the ruffle placement marks aren't clearly visible from the right side of your petticoat, hand baste them through to the right side in a good, contrasting color.
27. Run long gathering threads along upper edges of ruffles at $1/8"$ and $3\frac{1}{16}$ " from the raw edge. Begin and end your stitching $3/4"$ from center back points as shown (Figure 14). NOTE: On smaller, upper ruffle, there is just one seam from joining the ruffle into a loop. Use this as your center back. For the longer, lower ruffle, you would have two seams: one from piecing two halves together, and one for joining into a loop. Position these at the sides and mark a center front and center back point halfway between.



Figure 15



Figure 16A



Figure 16B



Figure 17



Figure 18

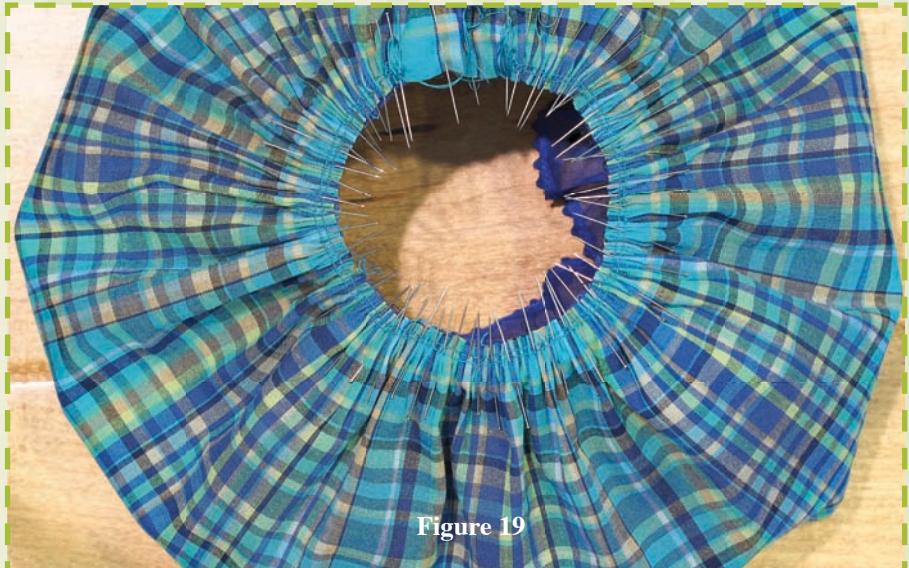


Figure 19

28. Pin lower ruffle to Petticoat having right sides together. Match center fronts and backs, and piecing seams of ruffle to side seams of Petticoat. Raw edge of ruffle should be at the placement line on the Petticoat, NOT even with the Petticoat edge (Figure 15). Pull up gathers to fit and adjust evenly. Stitch $1/4"$ from the RUFFLE raw edge.
29. Trim ruffle seam allowance to $1/8"$. Turn Petticoat seam allowance under $1/8"$ and then a second $1/8"$ to enclose raw ruffle seam allowance (Figure 16A). Hand baste in place. On right side, stitch close to seam line and again, $1/8"$ from first row of stitching (Figure 16B).
30. Pin upper ruffle to Petticoat having right sides together. Match center fronts and backs. Raw edge of ruffle should be at the placement line, with body of ruffle above the line as shown (Figure 17). Pull up gathers to fit and arrange evenly. Stitch $1/4"$ from ruffle edge.
31. Press ruffle down over seam allowance. Baste raw center back edges together as shown (Figure 18).
32. Run long gathering threads along the upper edge of your skirt at $1/8"$ and $3/16"$ from the raw edge. Begin and end your stitching $1/2"$ from the center backs.
33. Pin skirt together at center back, having right sides together. Stitch from lower edge to mark using a $1/4"$ seam allowance. Clip to stitching and neaten seam edges below this point with pinking, overcast, or zig-zag stitch. Press open flat.
34. Arrange skirt over the Petticoat, having wrong side of skirt to right side of Petticoat. Pin together at waist, pulling up and adjusting gathers to fit (Figure 19). Machine baste $3/16"$ from edge. Remove pins. Baste raw center back edges of skirt and Petticoat together.



Figure 20A



Figure 20B

35. On the right side, open out the center back as shown (Figure 20A). With right sides together, pin bias lap to center back seam allowances in one continuous line (Figure 20B). Trim away excess at waistline. Stitch using a 1/4" seam allowance, catching in all raw edges above clipped point of center back seam allowance. *Tip - If you're afraid you won't catch the clipped point in accurately, stitch this center area by hand first before machine stitching the rest of the seam.*

36. Press lap and seam allowances away from skirt and trim seam allowances to 1/8". Turn under 1/4" along remaining long end of lap and press. Turn in to seam line and slip stitch in place (Figure 21A). Press. On doll's left side, turn lap to inside on seam line and baste at waist edge (Figure 21B).

37. Fit skirt and petticoat over bodice, having right sides together and finished center back edges of skirt even with fold lines of bodice. Carefully pin in place, easing in skirt as necessary (amount of easing needed will depend on whether your petticoat waist stretched a bit while attaching the skirt). Hand baste about 1/2" from the edge and remove pins. Machine stitch using a 1/4" seam allowance (Figure 22).

38. Trim seam allowance to 1/8" and finish with overcast or zig-zag stitch. Press towards bodice.

39. On inside, turn backs in along fold line and slip stitch in place over waist seam (Figure 23).

40. Turn up 1/4" along lower edge of skirt and press. Turn up 1" to create hem and blind stitch in place. Press.

41. Close back of dress with four buttons and buttonholes, lapping doll's left side over the right and matching center backs. Place first button at neck, second at the waist, and center the remaining two between.

42. Cut a piece of ribbon for Betsy's sash, and decorate with a floral accent if you wish. Tie at the back in a bow and trim the ends at an angle.



Figure 21A



Figure 21B



Figure 22



Figure 23

BETSY'S SUMMER VACATION DRESS

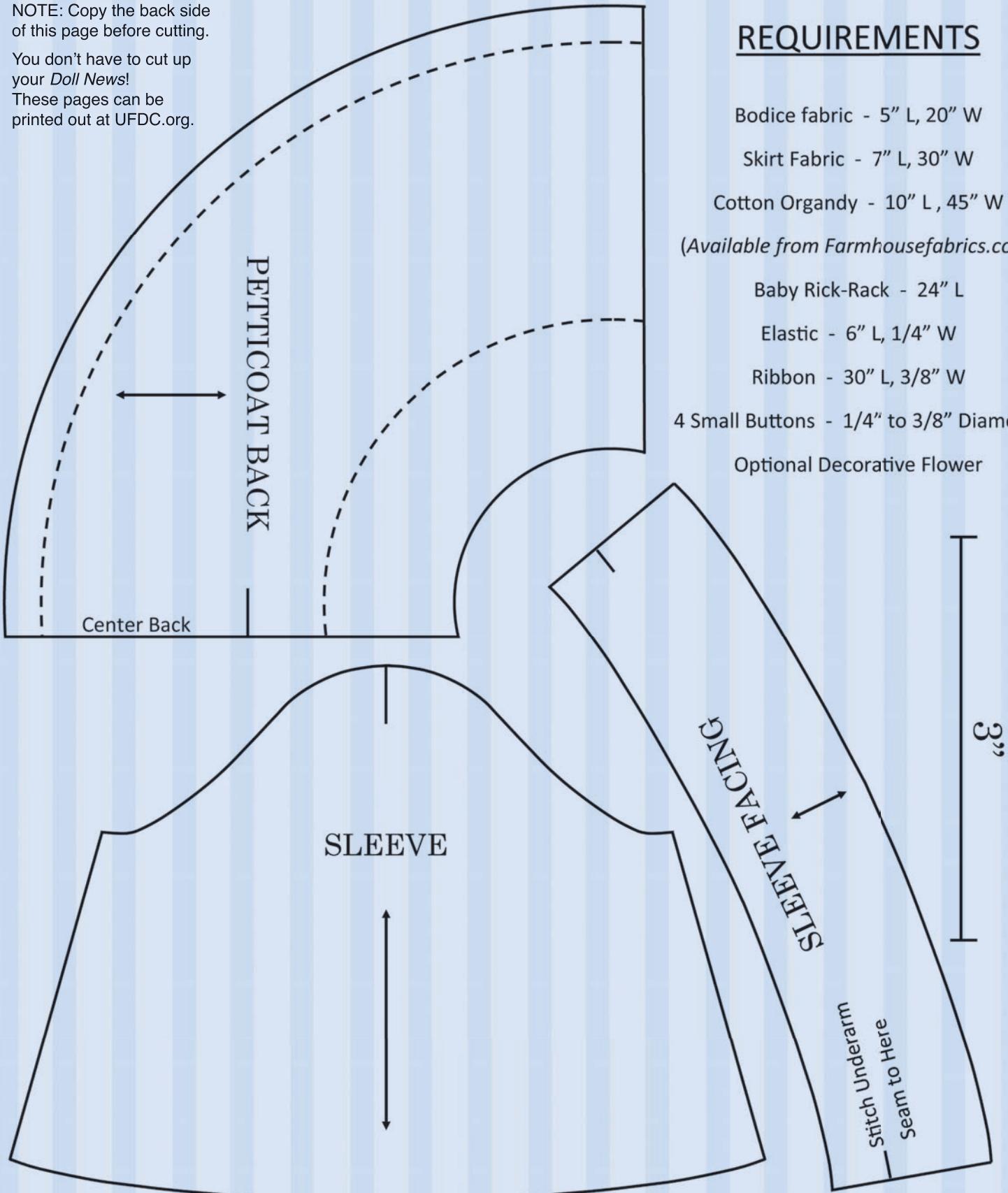
Designed to fit Robert Tonner's 14" Reproduction Betsy McCall Dolls

Seam allowances are included, but vary from step to step. Please follow the instructions carefully.

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of this page before cutting.

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REQUIREMENTS

Bodice fabric - 5" L, 20" W

Skirt Fabric - 7" L, 30" W

Cotton Organdy - 10" L, 45" W

(Available from Farmhousefabrics.com)

Baby Rick-Rack - 24" L

Elastic - 6" L, 1/4" W

Ribbon - 30" L, 3/8" W

4 Small Buttons - 1/4" to 3/8" Diameter

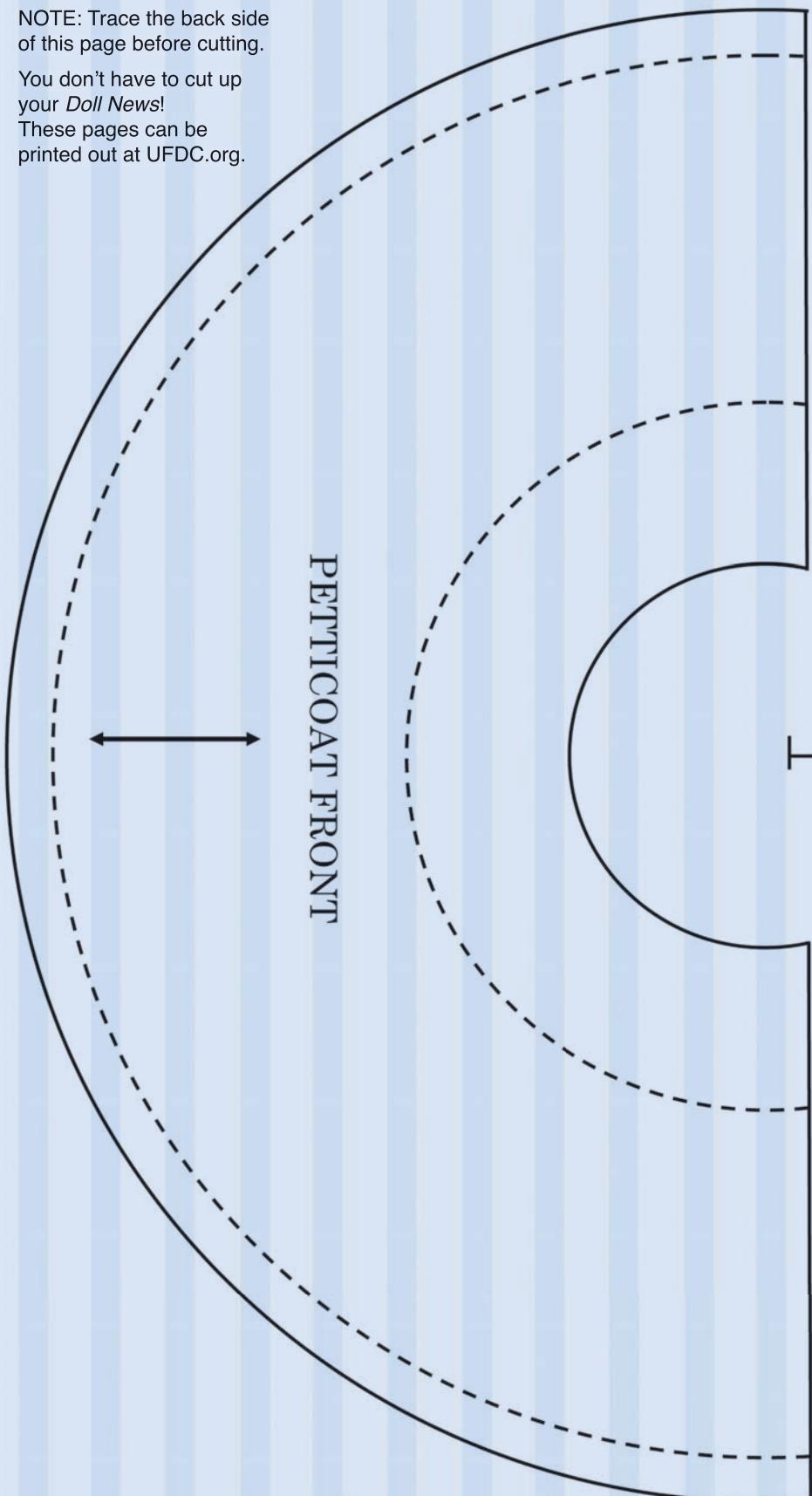
Optional Decorative Flower

Bias Neck Binding Strip

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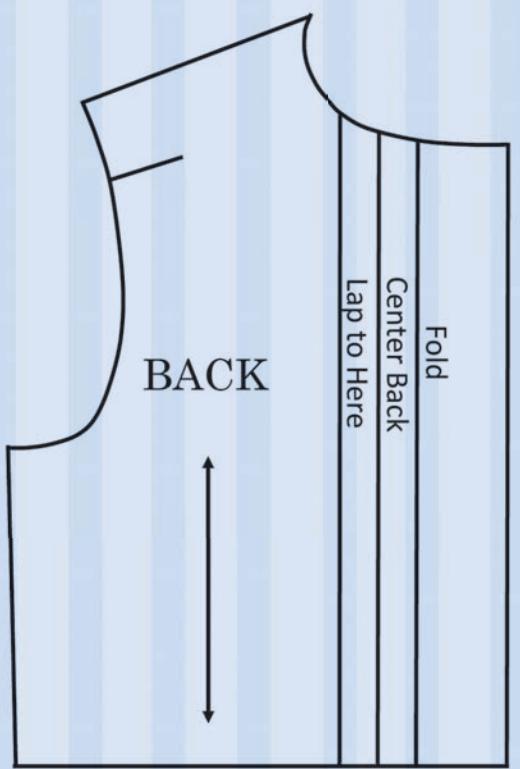
PETTICOAT FRONT



FRONT

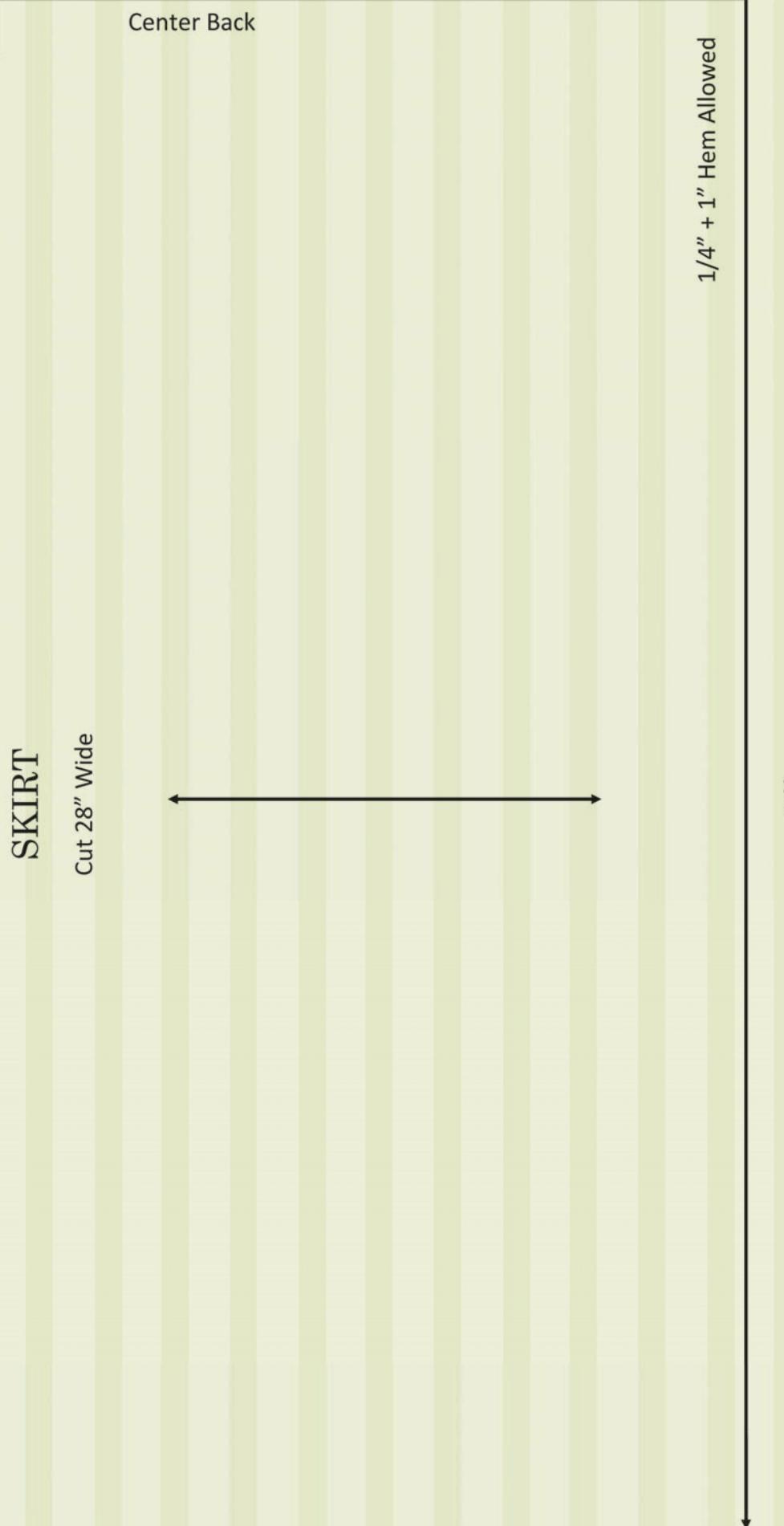
Center Front - Place on Fold

3"

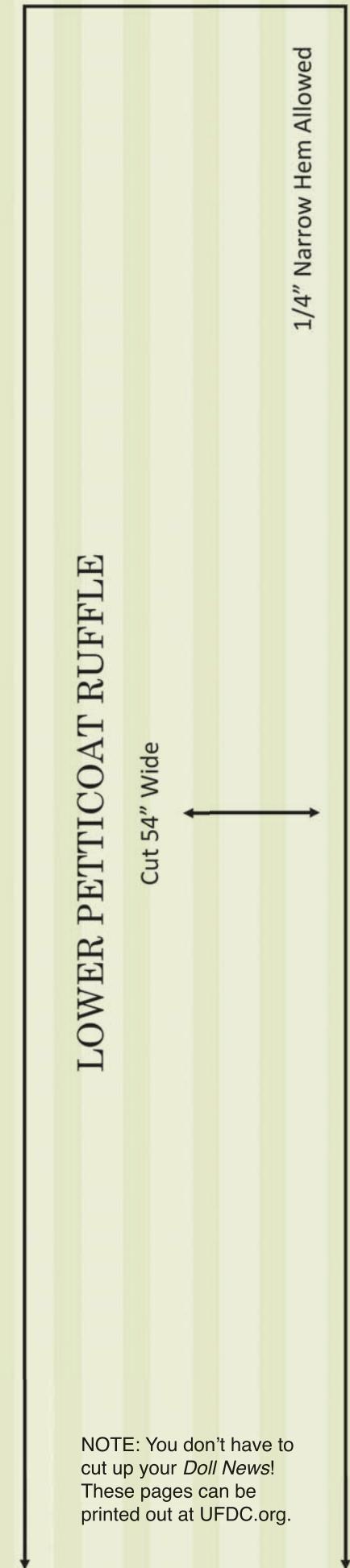
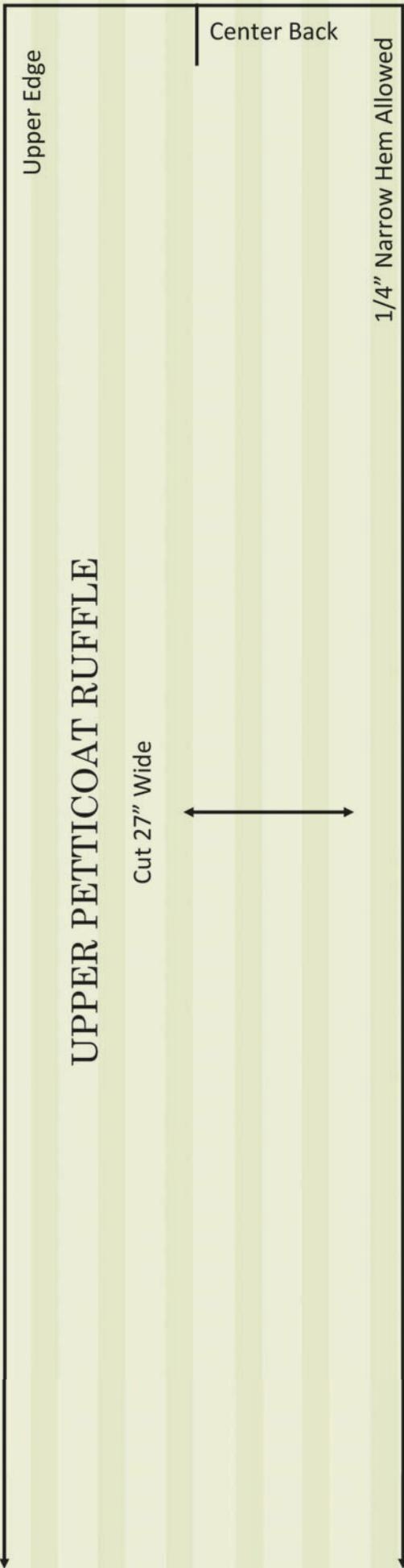
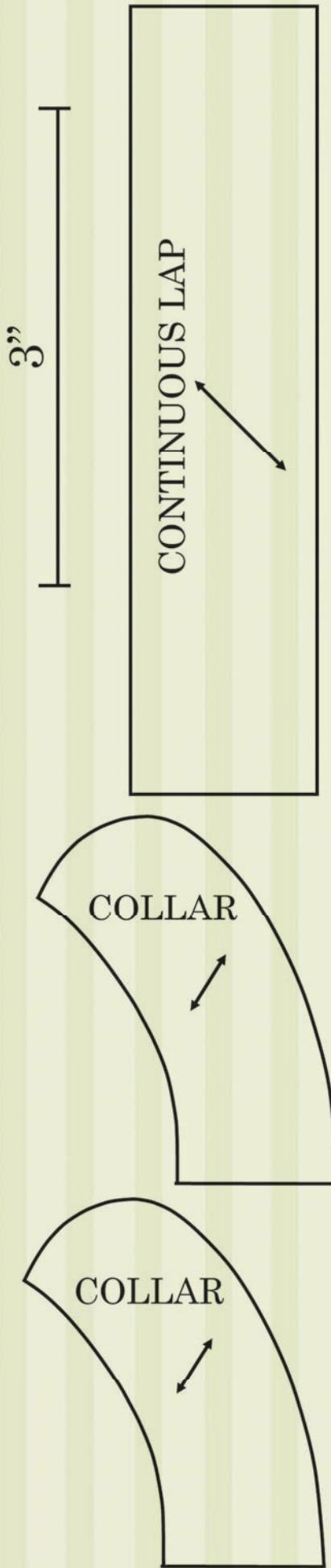


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Fold
Center Back
Lap to Here



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