

Sewing Patterns During the Model A Years

By Janet Gundlach

General Information

The major pattern companies during the Model A Era were McCall, Butterick, Vogue and Simplicity. Also very popular were Pictorial and their subsidiary, Excella. All the magazines and catalogs also produced their own patterns. Several companies started at the end of our Model A Era or just after but no dates are available for New York (late 1931?), Advance (late 1931), Hollywood (1932), and DuBarry (1932).



McCall produced patterns in late 1927 that had a “paste on” colored illustration on the envelope cover. The date of publication was printed on the envelope flap. Some patterns like men’s wear and young children’s clothes did not change so often had several dates but were the same pattern. McCall held the copyright for cutting and sewing lines printed on the pattern pieces, that makes them easier to use but their sewing directions were minimal.

Butterick produced patterns in beige envelopes. There is no printed date on the envelope but monthly and quarterly catalogs or *Delineator Magazine* can determine this. The pattern pieces were printed on beige tissue paper and had notches and perforations that make them more difficult to use. However, their pattern-cutting layout and directions are good.

Vogue also used beige envelopes. A date is sometimes found on the envelope or on the pattern direction sheets. It is best to date them by using monthly, quarterly pattern catalogs or the *Vogue Magazine*. These pattern pieces were printed on beige tissue paper with notches and perforations. The pattern-cutting layout and directions are good.

Simplicity started in 1927. The envelopes were simple, beige and with directions written on the back of the envelope. Later 3 views were shown and sewing directions were included. Simplicity was the least expensive pattern available at 15 cents. Dating Simplicity is impossible due to a lack of catalogs. Few of these patterns are complete due to the price.

Other patterns included Pictorial and Excella that worked around the McCall copyright by writing instructions on the pattern pieces. Needlecraft, Ladies Home Journal, Superior, Country Gentleman, and etc. all had small beige envelopes with the directions written on the back of the envelopes which makes them more difficult to use.

Sizes

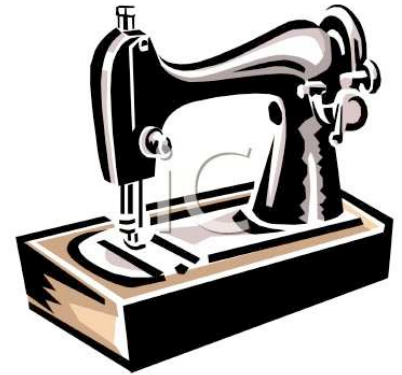
Women’s sizes were 32, 34, 36, 38, 40... These were bust sizes and were meant for the average height woman during the Model A Era. So if you are tall, check the length before cutting. Misses sizes, which were for the teenage body, were labeled 14, 16, 18, and 20. A 16 is same size as a woman’s 34 but there are differences in length and the shoulders. For most women, you will need to add 2 inches minimum in length, so check measurements before you cut!

Styles

Consider what style looks best on you. The 1928 dresses are easier to fit and sew due to a lack of a defined waistline. Often the back of the dress is one piece.

Sewing

Look in the *Fashion Guidelines* under “Reproduction” and *A Book of Fashion Facts*, chapter 12 for information on fabrics and basic sewing information. The fashions section of the MAFCA website is a good source also. Consider looking for original sewing manuals if you are seriously interested in making numerous garments. Sewing was popular during the ‘20s and ‘30s; these ladies knew how to sew on their straight stitch sewing machines. Necklines or armhole openings in sleeveless dresses were finished in bias, not facings. Long sleeves closed at the wrist at the seam line. Overlap seams were used in many of the dresses, where flounces, circular drapes, and the bodice attached to skirts, instead of sewing right sides together as we would today. If possible, examine original dresses to show how common this technique was used. To further explain, when attaching a bodice of a 1930 dress to the skirt, the bodice bottom edge would be turned under 3/8 of an inch and could be pinned, basted or both and ironed. It would then be placed over the top edge of the skirt and again pinned or basted. The two pieces would be attached by top stitching very close to the edge; it also helps to set your sewing machine on a smaller stitch to do this seam. Also long thin darts or gathers were common at the shoulders; some waists also used very thin darts or gathers to designate the waist. The sewing directions in the patterns are often vague on these techniques.



Fabrics

If sewing for entering “Reproduction” judging refer to the chapter in the *Fashion Guidelines*. For the Model A Era Image entrants and fun outfits, fabric choice is not critical. However, nowhere is it mentioned to prewash your fabrics. This is not necessary with polyester or wool, but cottons, rayon and silks should be prewashed if you do not want to dry clean, especially with the last two fabrics. Cotton shrinks a bit and may also soften; rayon and silk shrink a lot in length and will change in texture and both have more changes if placed in the dryer. Cut two six inch squares of your silk or rayon fabric and hand wash both, then allow one square to drip dry and put the second square in the dryer. Determine shrinkage of the two squares if you want to prewash and how you will dry your garment in the future. Perhaps you will find you prefer to dry clean your clothes but just don’t change your mind after the dress is complete. A label inside the dress may help you remember how to clean it and is helpful if you sell the dress later.

Other Hints

Consider making your first dress from inexpensive fabric. If you have sewing or fitting problems, the next one will be much easier. Ask other members what patterns they have made. Consider fabric drape if you are making a summer dress with a circular skirt. Think about the type of fabric needed for pleating, some polyesters do pleat, but with difficulty. Steam is a very good friend when sewing and use a pressing cloth (where the iron is not placed directly on your fabric). Many of the iron-on products may make your sewing quicker and easier if you are making fun dresses.

Have fun making your Model A clothes! Enjoy wearing them on tour, club parties, Regional Meets and National Meets.

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