



A fine quality shirt collar has no puckers on the inside or outside when the collar is shaped in a circle. Coffin often makes collars that can be detached from the shirts.

Making a Great Shirt Collar

Taut sewing's the key

by David Page Coffin (from issue #4)

While investigating the construction of a fine-quality shirt with a stand collar, I developed collar-making procedures that will enable the home sewer to approach the results achieved by the elaborate machinery of the manufacturer. Stand collars, like the ones above, are most often found in men's dress shirts, but they are also used on women's shirts. A stand collar has a stand area, or collar band, separate from the collar area. The stand gives the collar its height. A fine-quality shirt has certain hallmarks. The collar is shaped so it curves around the neck without puckering. The edge seams are hidden under the edge of the collar, which rolls naturally at the roll line. The

two collar points are exactly the same shape and length.

My objectives were to build shape or curve into the collar and its stand, to increase the accuracy of the sewing in order to ensure a perfectly symmetrical and precisely sized collar, and to keep seam bulk to a minimum. These concerns grew out of the unsatisfactory results I got when I followed pattern instructions or general sewing texts. After explaining the general techniques, I'll incorporate them into step-by-step instructions for making a stand collar.

The first technique I use is what I call taut sewing, required for many of the top-stitching and construction steps in a collar. Taut sewing eliminates the common problem of additional length being

eased into the bottom fabric layer by the action of the feed dogs, and it generally eliminates seam pucker. The technique, shown in the photo at near right, is to pull the layers of fabric equally and in opposite directions, from in front of, and behind, the needle while you're sewing, letting the feed dogs move the fabric under the presser foot. The needle won't be deflected if the tension is kept equal. If the hand behind the needle pulls too hard, the fabric moves faster than the feed dogs, and the stitch length increases; if the hand in front of the needle pulls too hard, the fabric moves too slowly, and the stitch length decreases. Long seams are sewn in sections, so the hands are never more than 12 inches apart. Practice on scrap fabric. Sew a few stitches and stop with the needle

down. Now stretch the fabric gently and start sewing again, moving your hands evenly as the machine moves the fabric. You must still guide the seam accurately while stretching the fabric.

This technique is the basis for the next, which is to stretch one layer more than the other while you're sewing in order to build ease into the unstretched layer. Note that if you lay one piece of 2-inch by 12-inch on-grain cloth on top of another with all edges matching and hold the short ends together to make a circle, the inner strip buckles a little. If you were to add a layer or two of interfacing between them, the buckling would become severe. This is what happens to a flat collar when it curves around a neck. The principle is simply that one circle cannot fit inside another unless it is smaller; the inner circle (under collar) must be smaller than the outer circle (top collar), or it wrinkles. To achieve a smoothly curving collar, the smaller under collar is stretched to match the longer top collar; when it relaxes, the stretched under collar pulls the outer top collar into a circle.

To try this on your two pieces of cloth, first fold them in half and notch the midpoint of each. Then unfold and position them under the presser foot at the midpoint $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from one edge, and start to sew a seam toward one end. Stitch straight for about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, and then stop with the needle down. Grab both pieces together at approximately the midpoint of the fabric, with the left hand behind the machine, and grab the bottom piece with the other hand in front of the machine. Now continue stitching, but pull only the bottom piece taut while allowing both to feed reg-

ularly, as in taut sewing. Try to keep both pieces aligned and the seam straight.

A more accurate way to do this is to trim the bottom piece $\frac{1}{8}$ inch to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch at each end and, after stitching the first $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the midpoint, to stretch the bottom piece to match the top. This controls the amount of stretch you give. Try it both ways, however.

Whichever way you choose, you should be able to stretch the bottom piece at least $\frac{1}{4}$ inch to $\frac{3}{8}$ inch by the time you are $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the end. Stop at this point, with the needle down, turn the corner, and sew the ends together, keeping them parallel. Now return to the midpoint so the stretched piece is still underneath, and do the same thing to the other end. You will be using the other side of the presser foot to guide your $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch seam.

You should see a distinct curve built into what you've just made. Think of it as a rudimentary collar. Trim the seam allowances at the corners and turn it right side out.

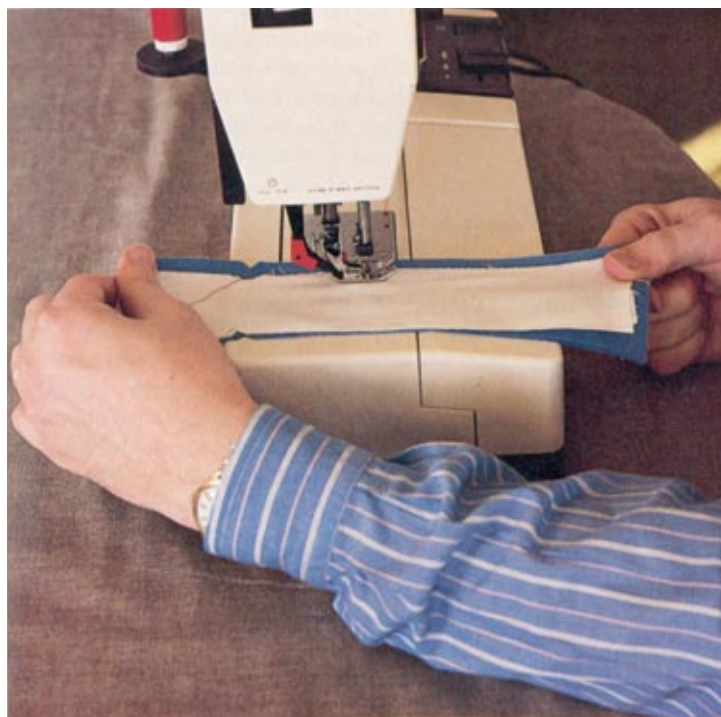
Some readers may object that the longer piece should be on the bottom, not the top, to take advantage of the natural action of the feed dogs. I reverse this sensible procedure to ensure the precision of the seam line that eventually forms the collar shape. When sewing a collar, I stitch right along the edge of the interfacing (which has been glue-basted in position on the wrong side of the top collar), and so the top collar, the longer piece, must be on top where I can see it. To glue-baste, I use Baste and Sew Glue Stick by Fantastic Fit.

As you iron your collarlike construction after turning, you should notice several

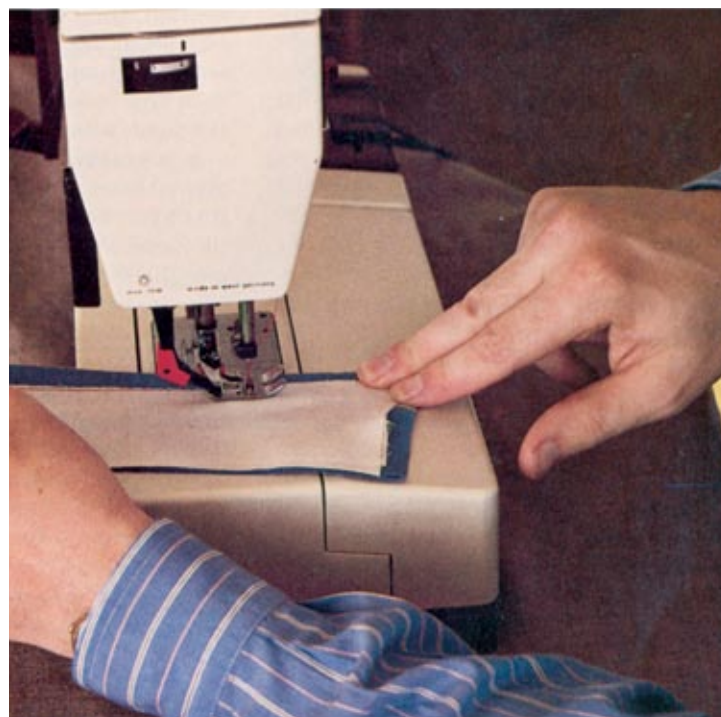
things. The under collar lies smooth, but the top collar is loose, even wrinkled. The short seams at the ends have a tendency to pull under toward the under collar. Even after heavy pressing, the curve remains. The finished collar is also slightly shorter than the original length of the pieces. All of these things result because the stretched under collar relaxes.

Of course, a collar not only curves around the neck, but it also folds over at the neckline. Thus, a curve is required along the short ends of the collar, at the roll line. Especially if the collar is a longer, pointed one, most of the curve (hence most of the stretching) should be in the 1 inch to 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches nearest the collar stand (see step 7, page 70.) Therefore, when you make a real collar, after pivoting at the corner of the collar point, you will stitch straight, without stretching, until the last 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches or so, and then stretch firmly and stitch right off the end. When you cannot grab the raw edge because it is too close to the presser foot, just press it down against the bed of the machine in order to resist the pull of the feed dogs, at the same time pulling both pieces from the back, as in the right-hand photo below. A straight seam here is much more important than a perfectly even stitch length.

As noted earlier, the finished collar will be slightly smaller than the original pieces. How then do you know how big to cut your collar pieces if sewing them together shortens the length? The answer depends on how much stretching of the under collar you do, how much interfacing you use, and how thick the shirting material is. You must make a sample, using fabric of



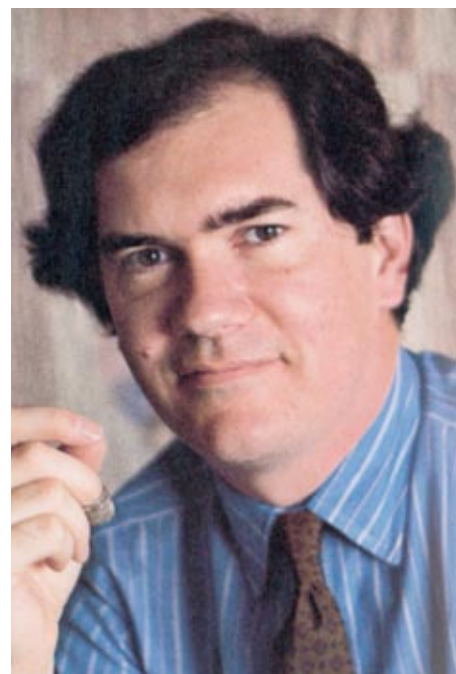
To eliminate puckering and build ease into one layer of fabric, Coffin taut-sews. Stitching along the edge of the interfacing ensures perfect shaping.



When there is too little fabric to hold, Coffin presses the fabric against the bed of the machine while still pulling from the back.



A point turner (above) pinches the fabric so that you can turn points without straining the fabric or poking through it. At right, Coffin wearing one of his shirts.



the same or similar weight, and interface it. Measure before and after to determine how much smaller the finished product is than the original top collar, and then add this amount to your top-collar pattern. The amount of stretching you do, and thus the amount of curve, is a matter of personal choice. I feel you should stretch at least $\frac{1}{8}$ inch but not more than $\frac{3}{8}$ inch at each end. You can establish a fixed amount of stretching for all your cotton dress shirts and cut the under collar short by that amount on each end, centering the notches in the middle. When you make a shirt of a lighter- or heavier-weight fabric, make another sample collar.

When topstitching a collar into which ease has been built, you must also taut-sew. The best way is to start at one short end of the collar and stitch smoothly to the corner or around the curve on a round collar until you're about to stitch the long edge. Then pick up the ends and, stretching until the top layer is taut, stitch to the other corner, maintaining even pressure. Stop stretching, turn the corner, and sew off the other end. The challenge is to maintain an even stitch length while you are taut-sewing—practice helps.

These are the main applications of taut sewing for collars, but there are a few more techniques that will help make your collars perfect. When stitching the collar points, take from one to four stitches diagonally across the point before turning completely (drawing 7, page 70). The number depends on the thickness of your material and interfacing, and your stitch length, which should be quite short.

I construct the entire collar, and in fact the whole shirt, with the machine set at 1.5mm (18–22 stitches/inch), and .8mm or .9mm (approximately 30 stitches/inch)

for points or curves of collars where the seam allowances will be trimmed off. Short stitches are important when you're stretching seams, since a seam of short stitches stretches more than a seam of long stitches. I use 100% cotton DMC Machine Embroidery Thread—available from Treadle Art (www.TreadleArt.com)—for all construction and topstitching when making a shirt. It matches the weight of the thread in a manufactured shirt, is appropriate with short stitches, and looks beautiful as topstitching.

When trimming a collar point, clip straight across the tip, parallel to the diagonal stitches, at most $\frac{1}{16}$ inch away. Then trim away the sides so that there will be no overlap when the seam allowances are on the inside. Try to trim each collar point exactly the same, as identical construction at each step ensures that the points will look the same when the collar is finished.

A point turner, shown in the left-hand photo above, is a useful tool. It looks like a small pair of ice tongs and works in much the same way as commercial point-turning machines, pinching the fabric at the point between two fingers of metal. You can easily turn the collar right side out or back again without straining the fabric or poking through it. Point turners are available from Fashion Sources, Inc., 600 First Ave, Minneapolis, MN 55403, or Nancy's Notions, Box 683, Beaver Dam, WI 53916.

After you've turned a collar that has been eased together, the seam allowances will press more easily if you stretch the seams a bit as you iron to stretch out the wrinkles in the top collar. Once the collar is turned, spray it lightly with water to relax the stretch, and then iron the curve in. Creasing the edge of the top collar with the iron helps you position the seams. Keep

checking the two points for similarity, and press from the point toward the collar, avoiding wrinkles by curling the collar around the tip of a sleeve board or off the edge of the ironing board, as in the photo on page 70.

The best interfacing for an all-cotton shirt is also all cotton. The cheapest and most widely available option is bleached muslin, which closely resembles the non-fusible interfacing used in the manufacture of fine shirts. It can be used double for collars and single for the other interfaced parts of a shirt: the cuffs, collar stand, and front band. Any thoroughly preshrunk soft cotton will also do, including self-interfacing or scraps from other shirts, as long as no pattern or color shows through and you like the final thickness. A little polyester content would do no harm, but why gamble with a mixture of fibers?

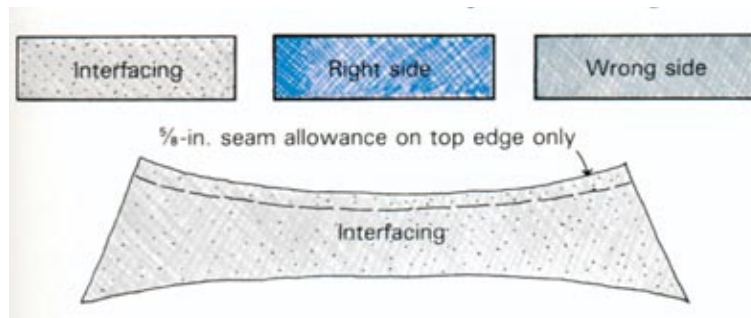
A fusible interfacing will irreversibly alter the outer cloth and permanently remove from the wearer's choice any decision about collar stiffness and appearance. Since it is very difficult for home sewers to fuse completely, as they lack the huge presses of the factories, fusing directly to the top collared piece is like adding a time bomb to your shirt: it's only a matter of time before it becomes unstuck.

Now we're ready to make an actual collar with an attached stand. You can use any pattern for a stand collar, or you can take apart the collar from a favorite old shirt, as I've sometimes done.

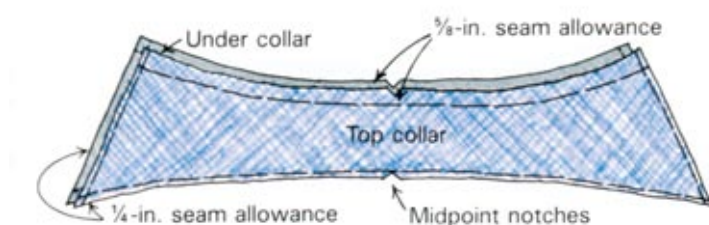
David Page Coffin, a watercolor artist and custom shirtmaker, is the author of The Custom Shirt Book and Custom Making Neckties at Home. Photos by Lisa Long, except as noted.

The collar

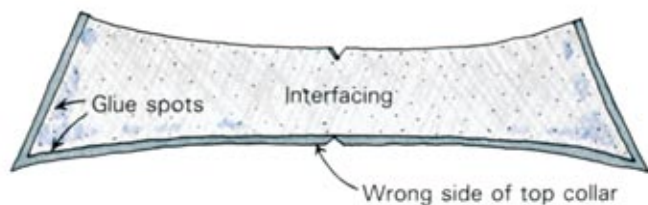
1. Using the collar pattern, cut interfacing, to exact pattern shape, with a $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch seam allowance, on top edge only (edge you'll sew to stand), and no seam allowance on other edges. Fold in half and cut ends together so they'll match exactly. If you want two layers of interfacing, use spray starch on one layer; lay the second piece on top; iron them together, being careful not to distort or stretch the fabric, and cut as one. Starching all the interfacing isn't a bad idea, as it makes it easier to handle and prevents raveling.



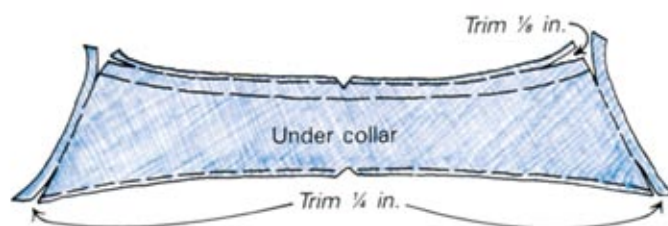
2. Using the collar pattern, cut two layers of shirting fabric (any of the fabrics usually used for shirts, including broadcloth, chambray, madras, oxford, and poplin). Allow a $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch seam allowance at the top edge and $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch seam allowances at the other edges. Notch the midpoints at top and bottom.



3. Lightly glue-baste all the edges of the interfacing, particularly the points and the front edge. Lay the interfacing on the wrong side of the top collar. Position carefully with regard to stripes or patterns, since you'll follow the outline of the interfacing exactly when stitching the collar.



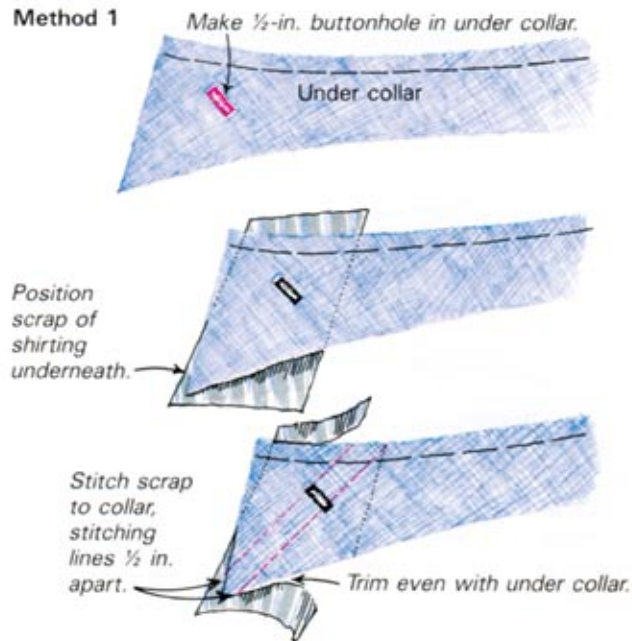
4. Trim the top and side edges of the under collar by the amount you've determined from your sample that you'll stretch back in. Almost $\frac{1}{4}$ inch is average for each side, and $\frac{1}{8}$ inch to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch is average for the top, depending on the length of the collar points.



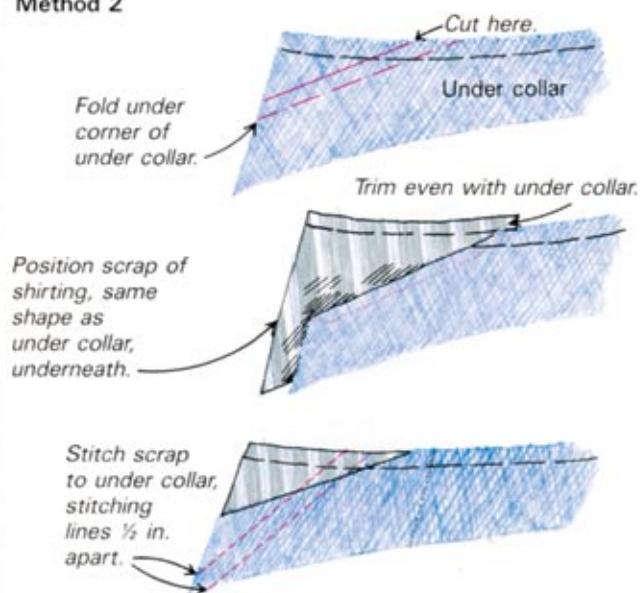
5. Make slots for the collar stays in the under collar, following one of the two methods illustrated below. Collar stays are not required on rounded, button-down, or pinned collars, or if you have your collars heavily starched. Starch and heavy pressing would cause the collar slots to show up on the front of the collar, which would be unattractive.

Making slots for collar stays

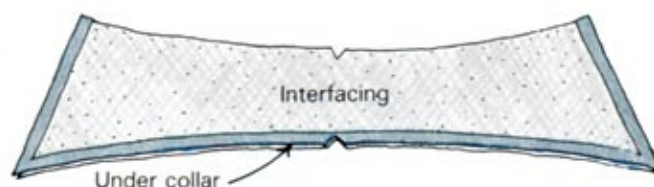
Method 1



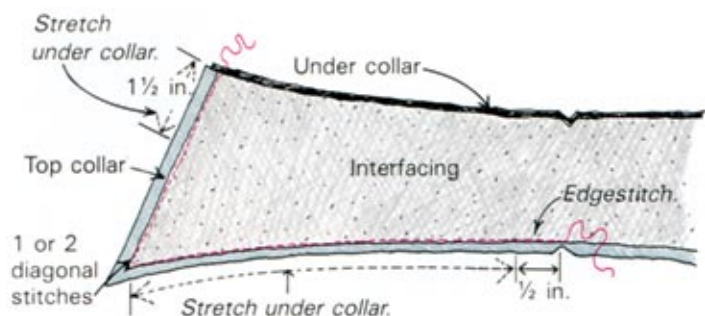
Method 2



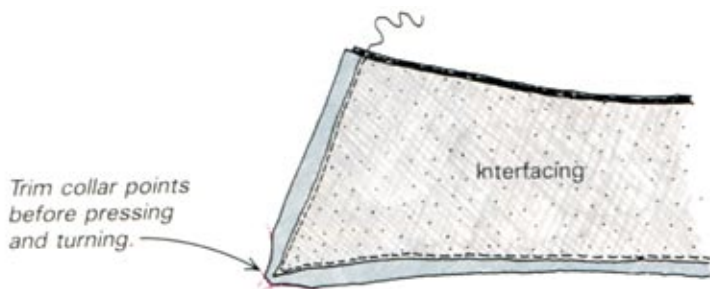
6. Align under collar and top collar at midpoint notches and along bottom edge, right sides together, interfacing on top.



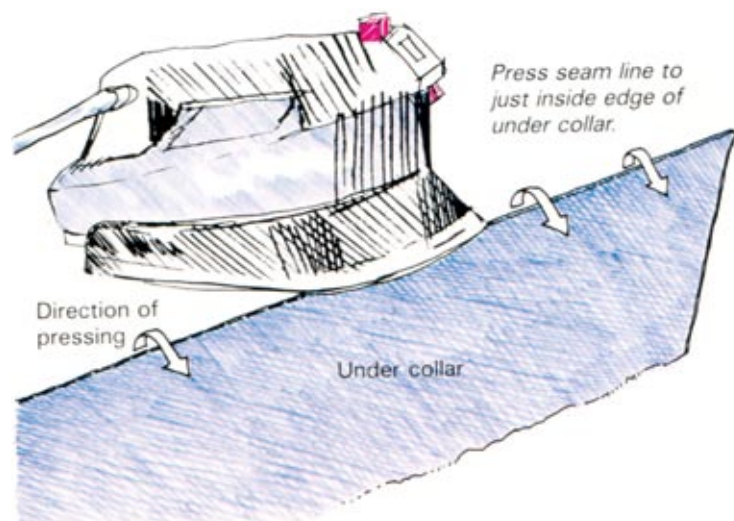
7. Stitch the top collar to the under collar, catching just the edges of the interfacing. Starting at midpoint notches on bottom edge, edgestitch interfacing for $\frac{1}{2}$ inch. Then taut-sew, stretching under collar to align with top collar and edgestitching interfacing until you reach the collar point. Take one or two diagonal stitches across point, turn, edgestitch side of collar until $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches from top edge. Stop and lower needle. Stretch under collar to match top collar, hold down firmly on sewing machine bed in front of needle, and pull from behind, stitching along edge of interfacing exactly. Stitch other side exactly the same, duplicating any slight uncorrected shaping errors. Most important, keep the stitching on the front edges very straight.



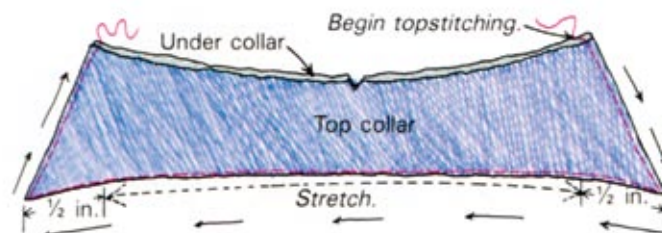
8. Trim seam allowances at collar points exactly the same way on each side. Press and stretch bottom edge flat. Press seam open on point presser, a wooden tool with a narrow pointed arm that slips into the point to be pressed. Turn collar right side out, shaping points carefully until they are as identical as possible.



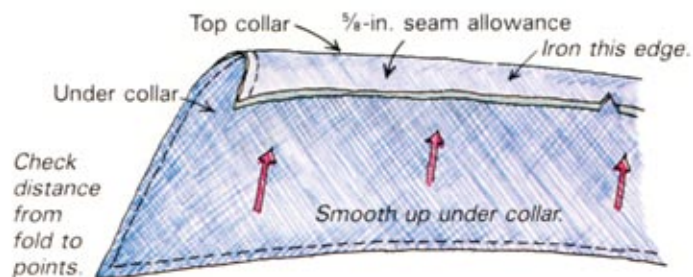
9. With iron, carefully shape the collar, positioning seams just inside the edges. Start pressing at center back with top collar face down on ironing board. Then press points by placing on edge of sleeve board with collar hanging off. Smooth any wrinkles. Shape collar in a circle, and press in the curve (see photo at right).



10. Once you are satisfied with the position of the edge seams and have pressed out all wrinkles, you're ready to topstitch. To topstitch, start at one raw edge and carefully stitch $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from the edge, stopping when the needle is $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from each side of collar point. With the needle down, pivot the collar and stitch for $\frac{1}{2}$ inch or so. Then pick up the points of the collar and stretch taut so the top collar is flat against the under collar. Slowly and smoothly stitch to about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the opposite point, stop stretching, pivot with needle lowered, and then stitch off the other raw end. This method preserves the curve in the collar and eliminates any puckering in the topstitching and the join in the back that would be caused by starting at midback and stitching toward either end.

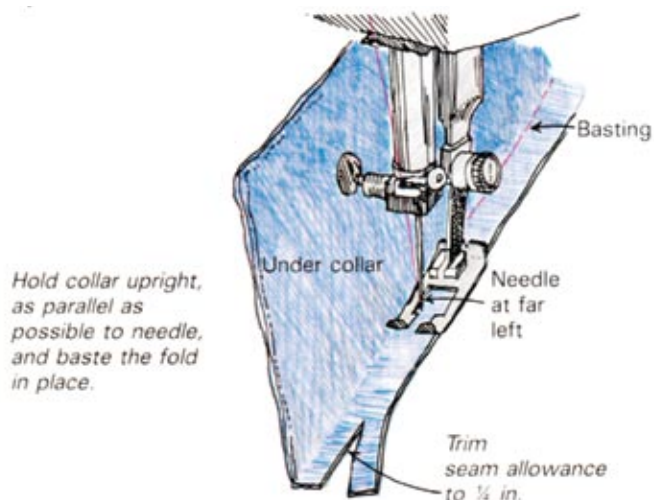


11. To shape the roll line, fold the $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch seam allowance of both the top collar and the under collar toward the under collar, and smooth the fullness in the under collar up toward the fold. The under collar should stick out slightly beyond the top collar. Iron this edge flat and hard when you are satisfied that enough of the fullness in the under collar has been taken out. You can use a tailor's ham (a firmly packed ham-shaped cushion that is used for shaping and pressing curves) to shape and check the collar. Make sure that the collar points are exactly the same length from fold to point and that the fold hits any pattern or stripe at the same point on both sides.

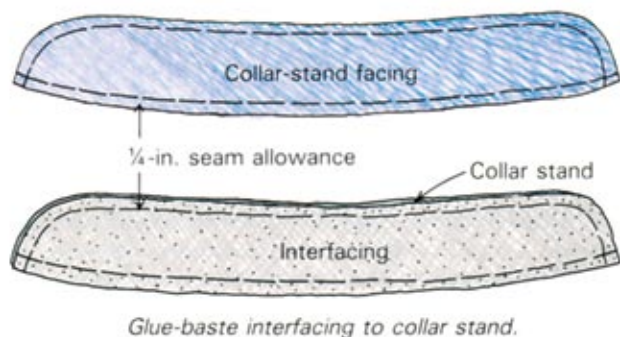


To shape the collar, Coffin presses it on a sleeve board, letting the collar hang off the edge.

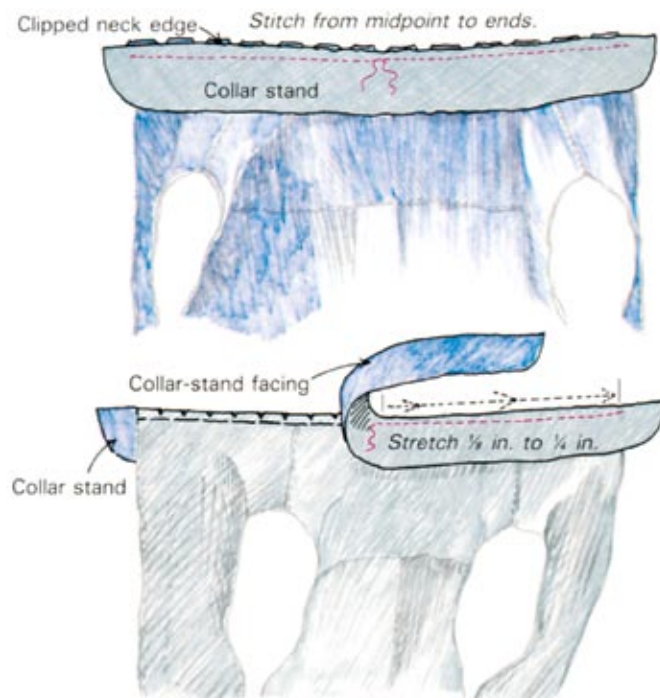
12. When you are satisfied with the shape, position the collar under the presser foot with the needle at far left (or use zipper foot), and to hold the fold in place, machine-baste the seam allowances together approximately $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (but no less) from the fold (see photo below). Trim seam allowances to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch from fold. The collar is now ready to be attached to the collar stand.



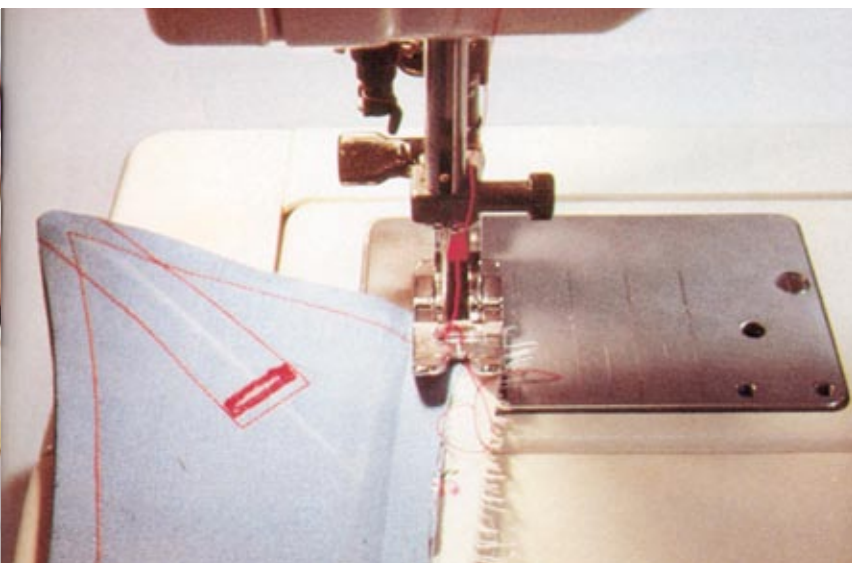
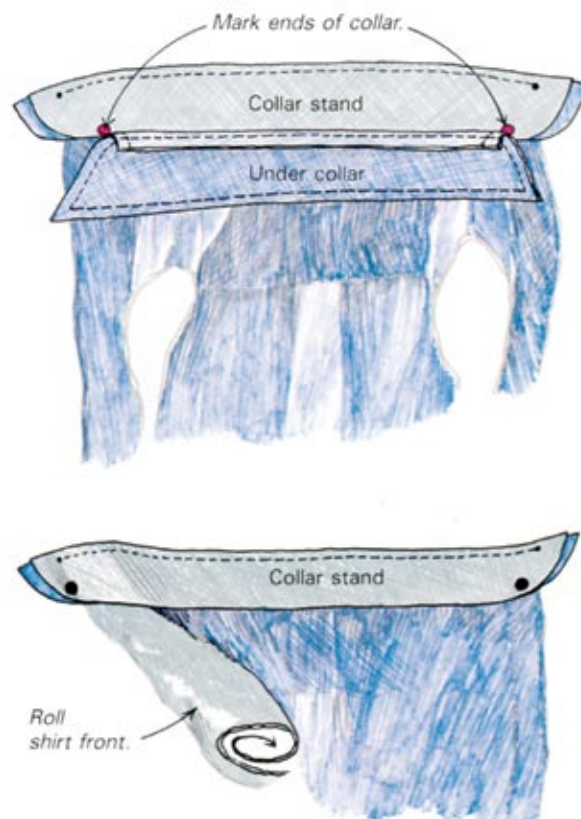
13. Cut two pieces of shirting for collar stand and collar-stand facing, and one piece of interfacing. Lightly glue-baste interfacing to wrong side of stand. I allow $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch seam allowances on collar-stand edges, collar-stand facing edges, and interfacing edges, but you could use $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch seam allowances and trim the seams later.



14. Stitch the collar stand to the right side of the neck edge, then the collar-stand facing to the wrong side of the neck edge, clipping the neckline edge as necessary. Stretch the collar-stand facing just as you did with the under collar. Stitch from center back toward ends, but not beyond the front edges of the shirt.

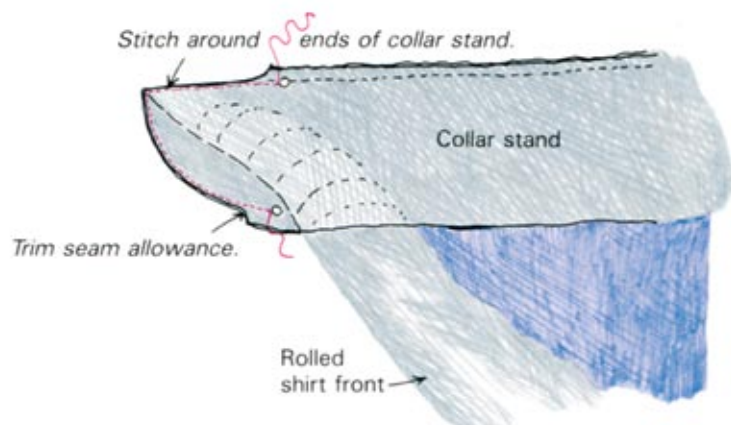


15. Center the collar on the stand and mark the end points. Remove the collar. Roll the shirt fronts until you can bring the top edges of the collar stand together to the marks for the collar.

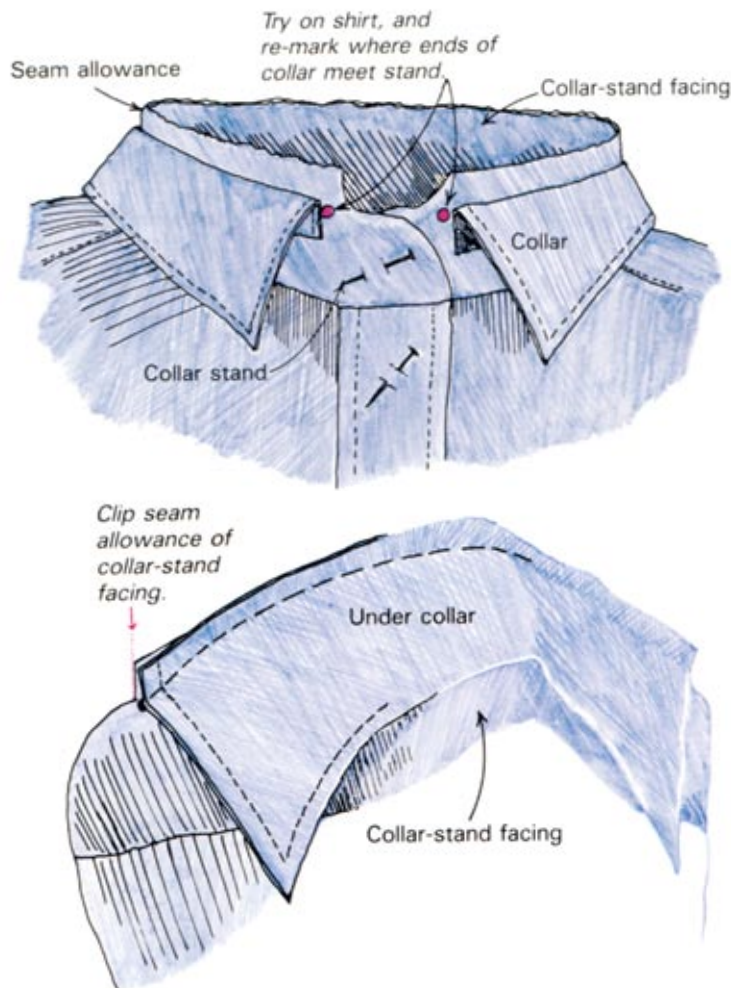


After folding the seam allowances, smoothing out the under collar's fullness, and pressing the fold, Coffin sews the fold in place. Photo by author.

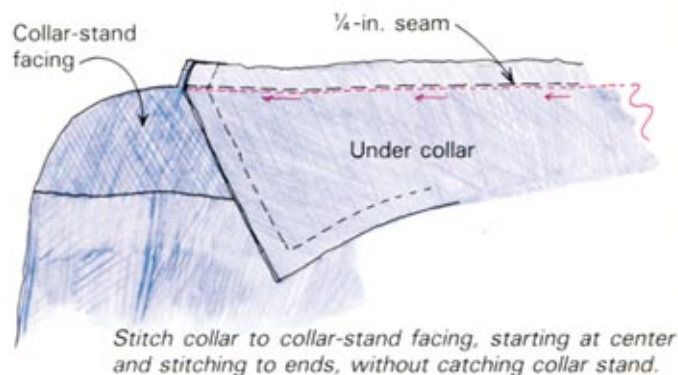
16. With the machine set at approximately 30 stitches/inch, stitch the ends of the stand in the shape you want, and stop at the points just marked. You may want to trace this shape on each end to make them identical. Don't backstitch. Trim the seam allowances, and turn collar stand right side out.



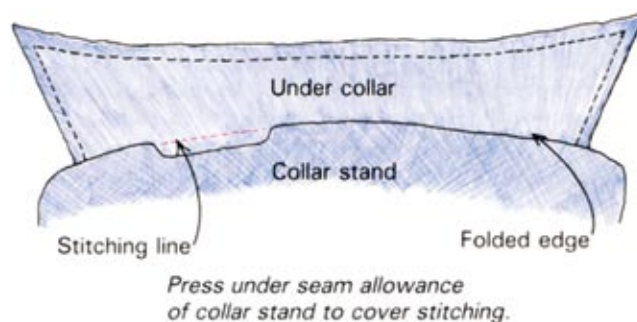
17. Turn the collar stand and facing right side out. Try the shirt on, pinning the front and the stand comfortably closed and checking that any pattern on the front matches as it should. Center the collar on the stand and re-mark with chalk or a washable marker where the collar ends meet the stand. Take the shirt off and clip the seam allowances of the collar-stand facing at these two points.



18. Stitch the collar to the collar-stand facing at the raw edge with a 1/4-inch seam, without catching the seam allowance of the collar stand in the stitching.



19. Press under the seam allowance of the collar stand, and glue-baste if necessary, to just cover the seam made in the previous step. This folded edge will be slightly full.



20. With collar-stand facing and upper collar on top and pressed edge of collar stand underneath, edgestitch around collar-stand facing, starting at the yoke shoulder seam and stitching around the end. Edgestitching should be close to edge of collar-stand facing, except where collar is attached. Here, edgestitching drops down slightly to ensure that pressed edge of collar stand is being caught in stitching. Stretch collar-stand facing to ease in fullness of collar stand.

