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## COLOR MATTERS: THE CREATION OF THE SARA LEE DOLL

by GORDON PATTERSON

“It had begun with Christmas,” declared Claudia, Toni Morrison’s narrator in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. “The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed, Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it?”<sup>1</sup> Through much of the twentieth century, generations of African-American children experienced the full force of this fictional character’s dilemma. Their skin color posed a barrier between their self-image and the image of innumerable blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned dolls. In Morrison’s novel, Claudia reacted by declaring that she did not love babies and did not want to grow up and be a mother. Later, she struck out. She destroyed the white dolls. “But the dismembering of dolls,” she relates, “was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, ‘Awwwww,’ but not for me?”<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-two years before Morrison wrote her fictional account of a black girl’s childhood, Sara Lee Creech, a white woman, stopped at the post office in Belle Glade, Florida, one day in December 1948. Returning to her car, Creech noticed two black children playing dolls in the back seat of a Buick. The little girls were playing with white dolls. It was wrong, she thought, that black child-

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1. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York, 1970), 19-20.

2. *Ibid.*, 22.



Maxeda von Hesse (left) and Sara Creech hold a Sara Lee Doll. *Photograph Courtesy Sara Creech, Lake Worth, Florida.*

ren did not have quality colored dolls to play with. Later she phoned her friend Maxeda von Hesse in New York and asked if she would help create an African-American doll that would represent the beauty and diversity of black children.<sup>3</sup>

Neither woman knew anything about dolls nor the toy industry. Creech supported herself through a flower shop and an insurance agency. Nevertheless, in 1948 the women set out to create an “anthropologically correct” black doll.<sup>4</sup> Three years later Eleanor Roosevelt gave a reception for their creation, the Sara Lee Doll. Ralph Bunche, Walter White, Jackie Robinson, Winthrop Rockefeller, David Rockefeller, and Bernard Baruch were among the guests.<sup>5</sup> Sears and Roebuck introduced the Sara Lee Doll in its 1951 Christmas catalogue. “This Christmas,” a reporter wrote in the January 1952 edition of *Ebony* magazine, “a half million little girls of many races found under their Christmas trees some of the most beautiful Negro dolls America has ever produced. A transfor-

3. Interview with Sara Creech, May 10, 1993, notes in author's possession.

4. Mind over Matter,” *Time*, November 5, 1951, 45.

5. Interview with Sara Creech, May 10, 1993.

mation has taken place in toyland and new colored dolls with delicate features, lighter skin, and modish clothes are being introduced in the world of childhood fantasy where always before the Negro doll was presented as a ridiculous, calico-garmented, handkerchief-headed servant."<sup>6</sup>

Issues of race, color, commercialism, and popular culture converge in the story of the Sara Lee Doll, which grew out of a woman's desire to forge an interracial alliance. In 1949 Creech enlisted the support of prominent African Americans and white liberals. These reformers shared a commitment to fighting prejudice. The Sara Lee Doll's supporters worked for two years to create positive, non-stereotyped toys for both black and white children. In 1951 the Ideal Toy Company manufactured the Sara Lee Doll. Ultimately, however, color and commercialism proved insurmountable obstacles to realizing their objective.

Sara Creech began to work in the women's and interracial movements in the mid 1930s in Lake Worth. In 1941 she moved inland to Belle Glade. While in Lake Worth, Creech had joined the local Business and Professional Women's Club (BPWC). Shortly after her arrival in the Glades, she organized a new BPWC chapter. In 1946 she was elected second vice president of the state BPWC, and a year later she was elected president of the state federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs.

Creech's involvement in the BPWC put her in contact with Edna Giles Fuller, a past leader of the association, who had founded Florida's first Inter-Racial Council in Orlando. Creech believed that Belle Glade needed such a group. Since 1944 four men (two whites and two blacks) in Belle Glade had met informally to discuss community issues. In 1947 these men asked Creech to join them. She suggested that they pattern their efforts after Fuller's model. On April 4, 1948, the Belle Glade Inter-Racial Council held its first regular meeting.

Creech's work on the Inter-Racial Council soon eclipsed her BPWC activities. Daily contact with the black and migrant communities strengthened her conviction that change was necessary. Louise Taylor, wife of one of the council's founders, was Creech's friend. In the weeks before Christmas 1948, Taylor described to Creech the challenges she faced raising her three children. "I had

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6. "Modern Designs: Manufacturers Find Trends More Realistic," *Ebony* (January 1952), 46.

never thought about it," Creech remembered. "I had never thought about a black child needing a black doll to play with."<sup>7</sup>

The sight of the two black girls playing with white dolls in the back of the Buick was Creech's epiphany. That evening Creech did two things. She told her mother about her idea of making a quality black doll. Her mother responded: "Sara, you know absolutely nothing about manufacturing. I don't see how you can finance it. But I can see the importance of it. If you want to try it, I'll back you in whatever you do."<sup>8</sup> It was then that Creech called her friend Maxeda von Hesse in New York and succeeded in gaining her support. Von Hesse would find an artist to sculpt the doll's head; Creech would use her contacts to develop the doll's concept.<sup>9</sup>

Over the next two years Creech became an expert on the history of colored dolls. The 1950 patent application for the Sara Lee Doll documents her study. Creech's research demonstrated that the typical nineteenth- and twentieth-century African-American doll was a stereotyped Mammy or Pickaninny doll that presented African Americans as objects of comedy or ridicule. Creech believed that race prejudice was transmitted to children through dolls and games. In 1929 sociologist Bruno Lasker cited an article in the *Children's Encyclopedia* entitled "Favorite Garden Games" as evidence of the "negative educational by-product" of such playthings. The game in question was called Aunt Sally. "Aunt Sally is a black doll. She wears a white cap on her head and a white cape on her shoulders, and carries a pipe loosely in her mouth. Her body is only a stick with a pointed end, and when this is pushed into the ground she is ready for the fun to begin. The players stand at a distance of some yards and, each in turn, throw at the pipe with a number of short, stout sticks. Those who knock it out of her mouth the greatest number of times win the game, but those who cannot aim straight must not be surprised if Aunt Sally seems to smile at them."<sup>10</sup>

Creech learned that there had been earlier attempts to provide alternatives to Aunt Sally and other "coon dancer[s]" dolls.<sup>11</sup> At the turn of the century some black church leaders, recognizing the ed-

7. Interview with Sara Creech, May 10, 1993.

8. Ibid.

9. Maxeda von Hesse, "Notes from Mrs. Roosevelt's Tea," typescript, October 1952, Creech Papers, in possession of Sara Creech, Lake Worth, Florida.

10. Bruno Lasker, *Race Attitudes in Children* (New York, 1924), 220.

11. Ibid., 220-21.

educational role of dolls, resolved to break the stereotypes and market quality dolls. Dr. R. H. Boyd, a leader of the Nashville-based National Baptist Publishing House, traveled to Europe to convince German toy manufacturers to produce a nonstereotyped black doll. The toy makers initially resisted Boyd's proposal. Apparently, they believed that there was no market for the realistic doll. Boyd persisted, sending scores of photographs of African Americans to the companies. Eventually, Boyd succeeded in getting the doll manufactured, and they were sold in black churches until the beginning of World War I.<sup>12</sup> After the war, an African-American company, the leaders of whom followed Marcus Garvey, resumed importing the German bisque dolls. They hoped to use black dolls to develop children's race consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

Presumably, most American toy companies were not interested in producing realistic black dolls. The few companies that did produce colored dolls followed the P & M Doll Company's lead and painted white dolls "chocolate brown."<sup>14</sup> P & M's success with its colored Daisy Doll led the company to introduce the Topsy doll. "Topsy," however, was criticized because of its stereotypical "black face, banjo eyes, and three little pigtails."<sup>15</sup> Simultaneously, Aunt Jemima Mills marketed a line of stereotyped dolls based on Aunt Jemima and Uncle Mose.<sup>16</sup> Thus, until the 1930s most American toy manufacturers produced colored dolls that caricatured African Americans as "mammies" and "coon dancers."<sup>17</sup> In 1931 the Allied-Grand Doll Manufacturing Company expanded the procedure of painting white dolls brown and advertising them as "Negroid."<sup>18</sup>

World War II had a tremendous impact on the toy industry. The end of the war marked the beginning of the baby boom. Toy manufacturers expanded production to keep pace with the new families. Returning African-American servicemen and women resisted Jim Crowism in the workplace and the playground. In 1948 the Terri Lee Corporation introduced its teenaged Patti-Jo Doll,

12. W. D. Weatherford, *The Negro from Africa to America* (New York, 1924), 427.

13. Lasker, *Race Attitudes in Children*, 220.

14. "Negro Dolls Popular with the Public Since Birth in 1919," *Ebony* (January 1952), 49.

15. *Ibid.*

16. "Black Dolls: 1840-1990," 4, typescript for exhibit at Wenham Museum, Wenham, Massachusetts, February 1-April 7, 1991.

17. Lasker, *Race Attitudes in Children*, 221.

18. "Negro Dolls Popular with the Public," 49.

which cost \$15.95. The light-skinned Patti-Jo and her boyfriend, Benji, were among the first new offerings. A year later the Sun Rubber Company marketed an Amosandra doll. It was a spin-off of the popular Amos 'n Andy radio show. And in 1950 Allied Grand introduced a Jackie Robinson doll.

Sara Creech's research into these early dolls led her to the conclusion that parents who wished to purchase a colored baby doll for their children had two choices: They could buy either a grotesquely stereotyped doll or a white doll that had been shaded brown. She did not want to produce a teenage, glamorous doll like Patti-Jo or to pattern her doll after a national figure like Jackie Robinson. Rather she wanted to create a doll that would "reflect their [African-American children's] own attractiveness." She reasoned that "in the game of Make-Believe-Grown-Ups, how much more normal and healthy would be their play if they learned from their dolls a wholesome self-respect and appreciation for their own heritage."<sup>19</sup> Like R. H. Boyd a half-century earlier, Creech wanted her doll to bear a realistic likeness to American blacks. Her goal was to create dolls that would capture "the simplicity and natural dignity of the finest type of our colored children."<sup>20</sup>

By early January 1949 the doll project was taking shape. Maxeda von Hesse had enlisted Sheila Burlingame to join the project and sculpt the heads. She was the sculptor of the *Negro Boy Praying*, which the St. Louis Urban League had placed before its headquarters.

Burlingame outlined her requirements: she needed pictures of African-American children and head measurements. Creech accumulated more than 500 pictures, and Burlingame selected a handful of pictures in order to prepare sketches. Creech and von Hesse needed to find a toy company willing to take a risk on the doll.<sup>21</sup>

While in New York City in August 1949 at the invitation of Maxeda von Hesse and her mother, the von Hesses introduced Creech to Eleanor Roosevelt. The elder von Hesse had served as Eleanor Roosevelt's speech coach. They invited Creech to a reception honoring Mrs. Roosevelt. Creech also learned that her friend, Zora Neale Hurston, was in New York, and she told the writer about

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19. Hesse, "Notes from Mrs. Roosevelt's Tea."

20. Sara Creech, Maxeda von Hesse, and Sheila Burlingame, "The Story of How the Sara Lee Doll Came to Be," 3, typescript, Creech Papers.

21. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

the doll. Hurston liked the idea and promised to work on the project when she returned to Florida. Hurston planned to move to Belle Glade.<sup>22</sup> Creech knew that the task of persuading a manufacturer to produce the doll would be easier if she could show that the doll had support in the black community.

When Creech returned to Belle Glade in September 1949, she had two goals: to obtain a copyright for the doll and to locate a willing toy manufacturer. Establishing legal protection for the doll proved easy. Finding a toy company willing to commit itself to manufacturing the doll proved more difficult.<sup>23</sup>

Hurston played an important role in rallying support for the project. She arrived in Belle Glade the next spring, and she and Creech met virtually every evening at Creech's home. Creech remembers that during this period she began to doubt that the doll would ever become a reality. One day while she and Hurston were painting Creech's house, she told Hurston about her misgivings. "Sara," Hurston probed, "have you thought this over? Have you given it your full attention? Do you think that you are right in what you are doing?" Creech answered, "Zora, from everything I can lay my hands on, I believe a quality doll should be produced." Hurston declared, "Well, go ahead. Don't go ring'in no backin' bells."<sup>24</sup>

Hurston planned a strategy for winning support in the black community. While Creech focused her efforts on getting the doll manufactured, Hurston thought it essential that African-American leaders contribute to the project. She supplied Creech with letters of introduction to individuals in Atlanta, Washington, and New York.

Creech left Belle Glade in June 1950; her first stop was Atlanta. She had appointments with Bishop R. R. Wright, Jr., leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and president of Morris Brown College; President Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College; and President Rufus Clement of Atlanta University. A meeting was arranged with Harley Kimmel, the southern merchandise manager for Sears and Roebuck, who had access to leading toy manufacturers.

22. Interview with Sara Creech, May 10, 1993.

23. Interview with Sara Creech, October 8, 1993, notes in author's possession.

24. *Ibid.* This expression comes from Hurston's experiences collecting folklore in railroad camps. When locomotives were put into reverse, a bell rang to warn workers. Hurston used the phrase to mean, "Don't retreat, don't look back, go ahead with your business." See Interview with Sara Creech, December 4, 1993, notes in author's possession.



Kimmel liked the project and promised to pass the idea up the Sears chain of command. Dr. Mays wrote directly to General Robert Wood, chief executive officer at Sears, encouraging him to back the project.<sup>25</sup> Bishop Wright recalled his efforts fifty years earlier when he had helped R. H. Boyd import dolls from Germany. He believed that the country was ready for a quality colored doll. Mays and Bishop Wright also endorsed the project, and President Clement recommended that Creech discuss the proposal with Professor Helen Whiting, who taught early child education at Atlanta University.<sup>26</sup>

Whiting talked about skin color; she believed that the doll's acceptance in black families hinged on the color issue. She cautioned that the doll should not be too dark. An acceptable skin color, one that did not validate any shade as "true" or "desirable" for African Americans, was needed.<sup>27</sup>

Creech had not recognized the importance of the color issue. Her idea was to manufacture a quality doll and to ensure that it reflected black children as they were. Whiting raised an issue that Creech had overlooked. No single color was representative for all blacks. If the dolls were to depict what Hurston called "the beauty and character, the good features of a black child," then they must affirm the diversity of African Americans.<sup>28</sup> Creech believed that the solution to the problem was to create a family of dolls that displayed the diversity of the African-American community. There could be a baby doll, brother doll, sister doll, and a little Miss doll. Each would represent a different skin color and hair type. This would protect the dolls from the charge that they represented a stereotyped view of African Americans. In November 1950 Benjamin Mays reinforced Creech's belief in the need for more than one doll. He wrote that the roots of prejudice resided in what "we learn unconsciously." He reminded Creech that it was crucial that the doll not simply replace old stereotypes with new prejudices. He also suggested that all four models be put on the market simultaneously.<sup>29</sup>

25. Sara Creech to Benjamin Mays, October 23, 1951, Creech Papers.

26. Creech, et. al., "Story of How the Sara Lee Doll Came to Be," 5.

27. Telephone interview with Sara Creech, June 8, 1994, notes in author's possession.

28. Zora Neale Hurston to Creech, June 29, 1950, Creech Papers.

29. Mays to Creech, November 9, 1950, Creech Papers.

Sara Creech received an encouraging letter from Hurston. "The thing that pleased me the most, Miss Creech," Hurston wrote, "was that you a White girl, should have seen into our hearts so clearly, and sought to meet our longing for understanding of us as we really are, and not as some would have us."<sup>30</sup> Hurston told Creech to contact Georgia Douglas Johnson, the black poet, and President Mordecai Johnson of Howard University. Through Georgia Douglas Johnson, Creech met many black intellectuals.<sup>31</sup> Winning Mordecai Johnson's support was crucial, as he was a leader in Washington's black community. He arranged for Creech to meet Lois Jones, professor of design in Howard's art department. Jones made charcoal sketches of each head and four water colors of the sister doll. She made only minor changes to Burlingame's original conception but recommended changing the hair styles— adding braids to the sister doll— and modifying the facial expressions slightly.

In New York during July and August 1950 Creech and von Hesse rallied support for the doll. James Hubert, a leader in the Urban League, gave them guidance in learning about the toy industry. He arranged a tour of the Ideal Toy Company's Jamaica, New York, plant for Creech and von Hesse.<sup>32</sup>

The summer had produced impressive results. The doll was under copyright, and important black leaders had indicated support for the project. The most important backer, however, was Eleanor Roosevelt. The former First Lady invited Creech and von Hesse to visit her at her Val-Kill cottage. They used the August 1950 meeting to outline their plans for the doll. "I was so interested to see the Negro dolls you are proposing to manufacture," Mrs. Roosevelt wrote after their interview. "I like them particularly because they can be made and sold on an equal basis with white dolls. There is nothing to be ashamed of. They are attractive and reproduced well with careful study of the anthropological background of the race. I think they are a lesson in equality for little children and we will find that many a child will cherish a charming black doll as

30. Hurston to Creech, June 29, 1950.

31. Thirty years earlier Hurston had spent many evenings at Georgia Douglas Johnson's halfway house taking part in "marathon literary discussions." See Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, 1977), 19.

32. Creech, et. al., "Story of How the Sara Lee Doll Came to Be," 5.

easily as it will a charming white doll.<sup>33</sup> Mrs. Roosevelt wrote a letter of introduction for Creech and von Hesse to Ralph Bunche requesting that he advise them on the doll project.<sup>34</sup>

Creech returned to Belle Glade in September. There was nothing to do but wait. Harley Kimmel promised to keep her informed about his efforts to find a toy manufacturer. Maxeda von Hesse used a fall vacation to come to Belle Glade. While they were meeting, Creech received a letter from Kimmel. He wrote that he had succeeded in interesting one of Sears's purchasing directors in the doll. He asked Creech to meet in New York in mid January 1951 with Lothar Kiesow, from Sears, and David Rosenstein, president of the Ideal Toy Company.<sup>35</sup>

Ideal was the largest manufacturer of dolls in the world at this time. Founded at the turn of the century by Morris Michtom, creator of the Teddy Bear, Ideal had remained a family-run business. Benjamin Michtom, Morris Michtom's son, and Abe Katz, the founder's nephew, controlled the company. David Rosenstein served as company president. Rosenstein became the doll's champion at Ideal. He had a long record of involvement in social issues. Michtom and Katz were skeptical of the proposed doll and felt that Rosenstein was letting his social conscience cloud his business sense.<sup>36</sup>

Creech returned to Belle Glade in high spirits after her meeting with Rosenstein. On February 4, 1951, she and Hurston reported on the project to members of the Belle Glade Inter-Racial Council. She also informed the group that she had invited Mordecai Johnson to come and address the council. Johnson spoke at the Methodist church, and afterwards he and Creech discussed the doll project.<sup>37</sup>

When Johnson returned to Washington, he wrote to David Rosenstein and outlined the reasons why manufacturing the doll was good business. "It is my opinion that this project is timely, that it is an admirable conception, and that it is capable of wide and rewarding commercial success," he wrote.<sup>38</sup> Johnson underscored the

33. Eleanor Roosevelt to Creech, August 8, 1850, Creech Papers.

34. Creech, et. al., "Story of How the Sara Lee Dolls Came to Be," 5.

35. *Ibid.*, 6.

36. Telephone interview with Miriam Gittelson (personal secretary to David Rosenstein), November 1, 1993, notes in author's possession.

37. Interview with Sara Creech, October 23, 1993.

38. Mordecai Johnson to David Rosenstein, February 21, 1951, Creech Papers.

significance he attached to the project. He believed that the doll could be a powerful educational tool. Black Americans were a neglected group of consumers. If Ideal took the lead in the campaign against prejudice in toys, the company would "win many, many new customer friends." This was precisely what company officials needed to hear.

Johnson realized that the campaign against racial discrimination was at a turning point. Lawyers from the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund were preparing for a trial in Clarendon County, South Carolina. This case would lead to the Supreme Court's decision three years later in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Dolls played a crucial role in this process. Johnson knew that Kenneth and Maime Clark had used dolls in their research into black children's self-esteem. In 1939 the Clarks had purchased four dolls; all were identical except that two were colored brown. The Clarks' findings indicated that by the time African-American children reached nursery school, they had internalized many of society's prejudices about race. In a series of articles, the Clarks reported that children viewed colored dolls as inferior simply because they were colored.<sup>39</sup>

Robert Carter and Thurgood Marshall called Kenneth Clark as an expert witness on the effects of segregation on black children in the Clarendon County case. He testified that the children that he had examined demonstrated "an unmistakable preference for the white doll and a rejection of the brown doll." By as early as three years of age black children "suffered from self-rejection" brought on by a "corrosive awareness of color."<sup>40</sup>

Like many educators, Creech believed that the battle against prejudice and self-hatred had to begin in the nursery. With only white dolls and playthings, black children were more likely than whites to feel inferior. Creech considered her doll a progressive step. She believed that quality dolls, based on realistic portrayals of black children, would improve the image of African Americans for both whites and blacks.

President Charles Johnson of Fisk University supported this conclusion. He informed Creech that he "liked the general idea [of the dolls] and thought it would be an excellent thing to have them put into production." Like Benjamin Mays, Johnson advised that the four dolls be manufactured simultaneously. This would of-

39. Kenneth Clark to author, May 26, 1994, in author's possession.

40. Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice* (New York, 1976), 318.

fer consumers a wider choice, and it would "remove any doubts which might arise regarding the possibility of creating a stereotype of Negro characteristics."<sup>41</sup>

Charles Johnson asked Beryl Shelton, director of the nursery school at Fisk, to "show the [sketches of the] dolls to a group of the children and some of the adults working with the children, and to compile the record of spontaneous reactions." Shelton showed twenty children (sixteen black and four white) the portfolio of pictures that Creech had developed. The children were enthusiastic. "No mention," Shelton noted, "was made of the fact that these were Negro dolls."<sup>42</sup>

The adults in Shelton's study identified the issue to which Charles Johnson had called attention in his letter to Creech. A single black doll contained the potential of becoming a "stereotype of Negro characteristics."<sup>43</sup> That is why Johnson advised that the four dolls be sold simultaneously. Independently, Benjamin Mays and Mordecai Johnson had reached the same conclusion. The key to the project's success lay in the dolls' ability to portray the diversity of black Americans.

Ideal's President David Rosenstein agreed. He had spent much of his life fighting poverty and prejudice. He tried to make his business an instrument of social change. He argued that the "toy world [was] indeed the whole world in miniature." The problem was that his partners were not social reformers. Rosenstein tried to convince them. He drew on the report of the Mid-Century White House Conference on Youth, where Kenneth Clark had presented his findings.<sup>44</sup> Michtom and Katz, however, did not think the Sara Lee Doll made good business sense, and they put the project "on the back burner."<sup>45</sup>

Rosenstein persisted. He asked Charlotte Klein, a public relations consultant, to help him. Klein remembers that during one of their periodic planning sessions she asked Ben Michtom which

41. Charles Johnson to Creech, February 6, 1951, Creech Papers.

42. Beryl Shelton, "The Sara Lee Dolls: Summary of Spontaneous Impressions of 20 Children and 10 Adults at Fisk University Nursery School," 6, typescript, Creech Papers.

43. Johnson to Creech, February 6, 1951.

44. Kenneth Clark, *Prejudice and Your Child* (Boston, 1955). Clark published an expanded version of the material that he presented in the White House conference in this book.

45. Telephone interview with Charlotte Klein, October 13, 1993, notes in author's possession.

new products were coming up. Rosenstein seized the opportunity to make another pitch for the Sara Lee Doll. When Klein told Michtom and Katz that she thought the idea had commercial potential, they agreed to allow her to run a marketability study. She reported that "the Negro doll would make news for the company and outlined some publicity possibilities." It was decided that a few prototypes should be produced.<sup>46</sup>

Klein tested the doll herself. She boarded a New York subway train carrying the doll and noted passenger reactions. A young black woman approached her and asked, "Is this doll going to be sold? . . . It's the wrong color," the black woman declared. "It's too gray. That's the color of a dead baby."<sup>47</sup> Klein realized that Ideal needed expert advice in choosing the doll's color.

Ideal's delays frustrated Creech and von Hesse. Creech left the January 1951 meeting with Rosenstein convinced that the doll would soon be in production. Nine months passed and nothing had happened. In September Creech learned of Klein's impromptu market test and the color fiasco. She told Rosenstein that she wanted to come to New York, and Rosenstein arranged to pay her expenses for two weeks.<sup>48</sup> Creech arrived early in October. Two major obstacles blocked Ideal's production of the doll. Creech had to find a way to convince Michtom and Katz that the doll would make "news" for Ideal, and she had to find a solution to the color problem that Charlotte Klein had discovered on her subway ride. Creech and von Hesse had two weeks to come up with a solution.

Eleanor Roosevelt saved the Sara Lee Doll. On October 15, 1951, she invited Creech and von Hesse to visit her at the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York. Creech outlined what had transpired since their last meeting, including the support of black leaders and Klein's experiences on the subway train. Mrs. Roosevelt offered to hold a reception for the doll. Black and white leaders would be invited to a tea and would be asked to serve as a "color jury" for the doll. The reception would have to take place within ten days, since Mrs. Roosevelt was leaving for Paris shortly. The tea was scheduled for October 22.<sup>49</sup>

46. Charlotte Klein to author, October 25, 1993, in author's possession.

47. Telephone interview with Charlotte Klein, October 13, 1993.

48. Creech to Harley Kimmel, November 5, 1951, Creech Papers.

49. Interview with Sara Creech, May 10, 1993.



Bernard Baruch, Eleanor Roosevelt, theatric producer John Golden, and Dr. James Hubert of the New York Urban League at Mrs. Roosevelt's "color jury," October 22, 1951. Photograph courtesy Sara Creech.

Mrs. Roosevelt asked the women to prepare a guest list by the next morning. It read like a who's who of African-American leaders. The final list included Charles Johnson, Mordecai Johnson, R. R. Wright, Jr., Helen Whiting, Lois Jones, Sadie Delaney, Benjamin Mays, Ralph Bunche, Walter White, Mary McLeod Bethune, James Hubert, Lester Granger, Jackie Robinson, Earl Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston.<sup>50</sup> They phoned David Rosenstein and told him about the reception. Rosenstein promised to mobilize his forces. He pledged that Ideal would have the models ready by Monday. Charlotte Klein went to work notifying the media.

At five o'clock on October 22 Mrs. Roosevelt welcomed her guests and presented the "new colored doll, made by the Ideal Toy Corporation."<sup>51</sup> Roosevelt introduced Creech, von Hesse, and Rosenstein and outlined the "jury's" task. Members of the "color jury" were to examine the prototypes and select the color that they

50. "Guest List for Mrs. Roosevelt's Tea," typescript, Creech Papers.

51. Watertown, NY, *Times*, October 24, 1951.

judged appropriate for the first Sara Lee Doll. "There were twelve to fifteen people in the room," Charlotte Klein remembers. "The dolls were displayed. There was lots of discussion. People would pass by each and discuss it in detail. I remember overhearing people say, 'Do you think this hits the mark.' They came up with a medium brown. No one wanted to make the doll too light. They fixed on a medium color."<sup>52</sup>

The reception persuaded Ideal's directors to authorize the doll's production. They knew that the press would give the Sara Lee Doll extensive coverage. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* ran a full-page story on the doll. *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life Magazine*, *Ebony*, and *Independent Woman* also published stories.<sup>53</sup>

Initial sales were encouraging. Lothar Kiesow arranged for the doll to appear in Sears's 1951 Christmas catalogue. Large department stores in New York like Gimbel's and Abraham and Straus ran advertisements for the doll. David Rosenstein, who had just returned from Europe, was ecstatic. "It's high time," he declared in a press release "[that] there were [sic] a quality Negro doll which would give Negro children a new respect for their heritage and would give White children a new respect for the Negro."<sup>54</sup>

Rosenstein's and Creech's hopes for the doll's commercial success faded when high sales failed to materialize; however, they continued to believe in the doll as an educational tool. Miriam Gittelsohn, Rosenstein's secretary, succeeded in persuading the New York City public schools to purchase several hundred dolls annually for three years. The New York public school system was the single largest purchaser of the doll.<sup>55</sup>

There were several reasons for the doll's commercial failure. Color was central. First, there was a technical problem. In July 1951 Ideal introduced "Vinylite Magic Skin." Vinyl in the early 1950s was an unstable material. The secret to the Sara Lee Doll's "magic skin" lay in mixing plasticizers with synthetic resins. This gave the doll's

52. Telephone interview with Charlotte Klein, October 13, 1993.

53. *Ibid.*; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 11, 1951; "Mind Over Matter," 5; "In Passing," *Newsweek*, November 5, 1951, 48; "Doll for Negro Children: New Toy Which is Anthropologically Correct Fills an Old Need," *Life*, December 17, 1951, 61-62; "Modern Designs," 46-48; Gertrude Penrose, "Mission of a Doll," *Independent Women* (December 1951), 350-51.

54. "Realistic Negro Dolls to Combat Racial Prejudice in Youngsters," typescript of press release from Edward Gottlieb & Associates, n.d., Creech Papers.

55. Telephone interview with Miriam Gittelsohn, November 1, 1993.



skin softness. Katz and his chemical engineers discovered that over time the plasticizers seeped out of the vinyl. This caused the doll to harden, the skin to change color, and the doll's clothes to absorb the vinyl's dye.<sup>56</sup>

Second, Creech's desire to produce an anthropologically correct, quality black doll was impossible, as no one could define precisely what Zora Neale Hurston or anyone else meant by "anthropologically correct." Creech had set herself an impossible task. There is no such thing as an anthropologically correct black or white child. Years later Kenneth Clark identified this problem when he observed: "The serious research to correct the racial stereotyping and create the 'anthropological [sic] correct' doll is in itself an interesting concept. As if all black children look alike any more than all white children do. But the idea of providing a Negro child with other than a white doll was an advanced perception in the 1940s."<sup>57</sup>

What Creech, von Hesse, and Burlingame had intended to do was to create a doll that would depict black children with love and respect. This was a laudable objective. The questions raised about the doll's skin color, however, pointed to the fundamental contradictions involved in the project.

Ideal's officers ultimately sabotaged the Sara Lee Doll when they blocked production of Sara Lee's brother and sisters. Michotom and Katz let their commercial sense guide them. They did not share Rosenstein's and Creech's vision of toys as agents of social change. While the Ideal Company's interest in the doll peaked with Mrs. Roosevelt's tea, Creech considered the affair just a beginning. The day following the tea Creech wrote to the black educator Sadie Peterson Delaney, "Tomorrow I am working with them [Ideal] on additional models to follow this first one."<sup>58</sup> Creech also wrote to Benjamin Mays: "Today we had a conference with our manufacturer and he wants to have a little booklet printed to attach to each doll. It will contain a short history of the development of the doll and the purpose of the doll . . . to put into the hands of all children regardless of race a lovable Negro doll as fine and attractive as to quality and workmanship as any white doll."<sup>59</sup> Creech asked

56. Judith Izen, *Collector's Guide to Ideal Dolls* (Paducah, KY, 1994), 8.

57. Kenneth Clark to author, June 16, 1994, in author's possession.

58. Creech to Sadie Peterson Delaney, October 23, 1951, Creech Papers.

59. Creech to Mays, October 23, 1951.



A publicity photograph used in the Ideal Toy Company's marketing campaign. *Photograph courtesy Sara Creech.*

Delaney, Mays, Ralph Bunche, Eleanor Roosevelt, and others to contribute to the booklet.

Creech's relations with Ideal began to cool. She and von Hesse worried that Ideal's advertising director might misuse the materials they had prepared for the booklet. "Maybe we're over cautious,"

Creech declared, "but to be sure as possible that the material available to us is properly used, we are checking every bit of it . . . also, all of the publicity."<sup>60</sup>

Creech was right to be concerned. She and Michtom had already quarreled over Ideal's publicity campaign. Michtom had decided to use his own press agent. Creech was furious when the agent distributed an error-filled press statement. Michtom agreed that all releases would henceforth be cleared by Creech for accuracy. Three days later, however, Creech discovered that Michtom had authorized another batch of misleading press bulletins. She demanded a meeting with Michtom to set matters right, but she discovered she had nothing "to fall back on."<sup>61</sup> There was no contract with Ideal. After Mrs. Roosevelt's tea the doll had been rushed into production. Creech had no objections; she did not want Ideal to stop the forward momentum. She did, however, want an agreement that protected the doll's integrity. Creech hired a lawyer, Oliver Titcomb, to represent her interests, but he did not have much luck with Ideal's management.<sup>62</sup>

Late in 1952 a contract was signed, but by then Creech felt that Ideal had betrayed the project.<sup>63</sup> Commercialism had won out. Except for Rosenstein, Ideal's directors considered the doll a marketing gimmick. After the fanfare generated by Mrs. Roosevelt's tea, Ideal had no incentive to expand the project. Klein was instructed to curtail the publicity campaign, and the company abandoned the idea of including an educational booklet with the doll. In 1952 Ideal decided not to expand the Sara Lee line. Michtom and Katz favored other projects. In the comic strips, Ann Howe had married Joe Palooka. A *New Yorker Magazine* reporter asked Klein if anything was to be expected from Ideal. "Mr. Michtom will see to that," Klein responded.<sup>64</sup> The Joan Palooka Doll was born in 1953.

Ideal stopped producing the Sara Lee Doll in 1953. Sara Creech returned to Belle Glade to organize the first stage of a ten-year campaign to meet the day care and educational needs of migrant workers. Abe Kent, who was in charge of marketing at Ideal in the 1950s, recalled: "The summer of 1951 saw the introduction

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60. Creech to Harley Kimmel, November 5, 1951.

61. Ibid.

62. Oliver S. Titcomb to Creech, March 27, 1952, Creech Papers.

63. Interview with Sara Creech, May 10, 1993.

64. Izen, *Collector's Guide to Ideal Dolls*, 22.

of the Bonny Braids doll. It was a fabulous success. Sara Lee didn't make it. I guess that tells you a great deal about how things go."<sup>65</sup> It would be another decade and a half before another toy manufacturer produced a quality African-American doll.

Despite the commercial failure of the Sara Lee Doll, Sara Creech's social consciousness and activism did not wane. She played a central role in the 1950s and 1960s in the struggle to provide day care for migrant workers. Her efforts led to the creation of the Wee Care Child Development Center in Belle Glade. In 1965 she testified before the White House Conference on Day Care. Although illness compelled her to leave Belle Glade in 1974 for the coastal climate of Lake Worth, her new home provided the opportunity to fulfill a dream of attending college. She enrolled in Palm Beach Community College and subsequently worked as a computer operator at the college until her retirement in 1985. Sara Creech remains active in efforts to forge interracial alliances.

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65. Telephone interview with Abe Kent, November 1, 1993, notes in author's possession.