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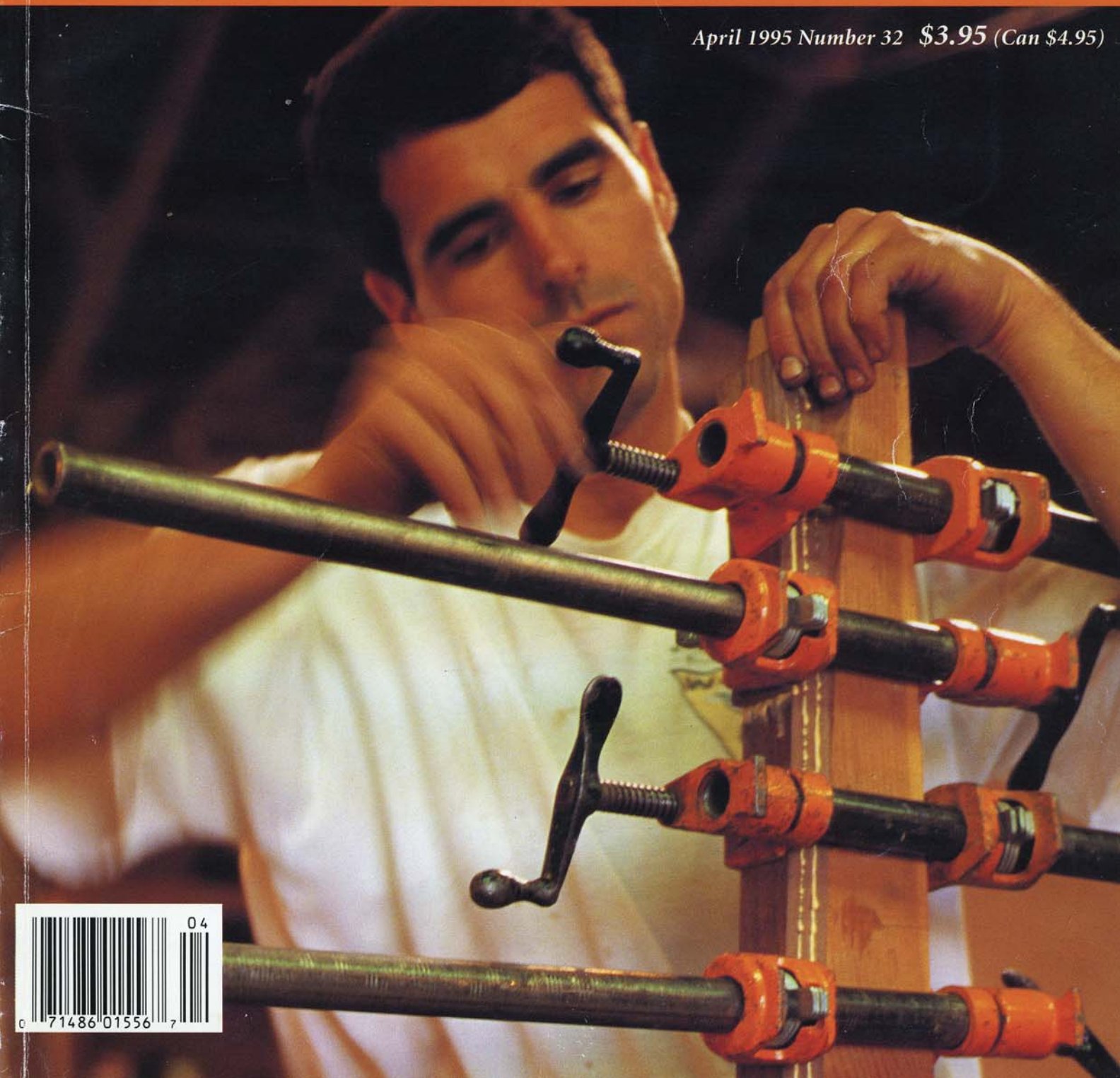

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COVER STORY

Robert Beauchamp: Knot In the Family Tree

BY DAVID COLMAN

portfolio photos by Richard Sargent

If there were a T-shirt that read "Real Woodworkers Log Their Own," Robert Beauchamp would be the first to wear one.

This furniture maker from Davis, California, does everything but plant his own seedlings. To find the kind of wood he needs, Beauchamp relies on a friend of his, Terry Wenner, who trims trees for a living. Wenner is always on the lookout for unusual specimens to add to Beauchamp's collection.

In addition, Beauchamp himself spots and tags felled trees that look promising, affixing notes that read: "Please call me if you would like to sell this wood." He occasionally responds to newspaper ads offering free wood in exchange for tree removal services.

It was Robert Erickson, Beauchamp's long-time mentor, who introduced him to the advantages of harvesting in the first place. Erickson, a noted chairmaker in his own right ("A Sierra Chairmaker" in *Woodwork*, Issue 21), co-owns a portable chain saw mill with Beauchamp. Together, they use the mill to renew their supply of raw material year-round.

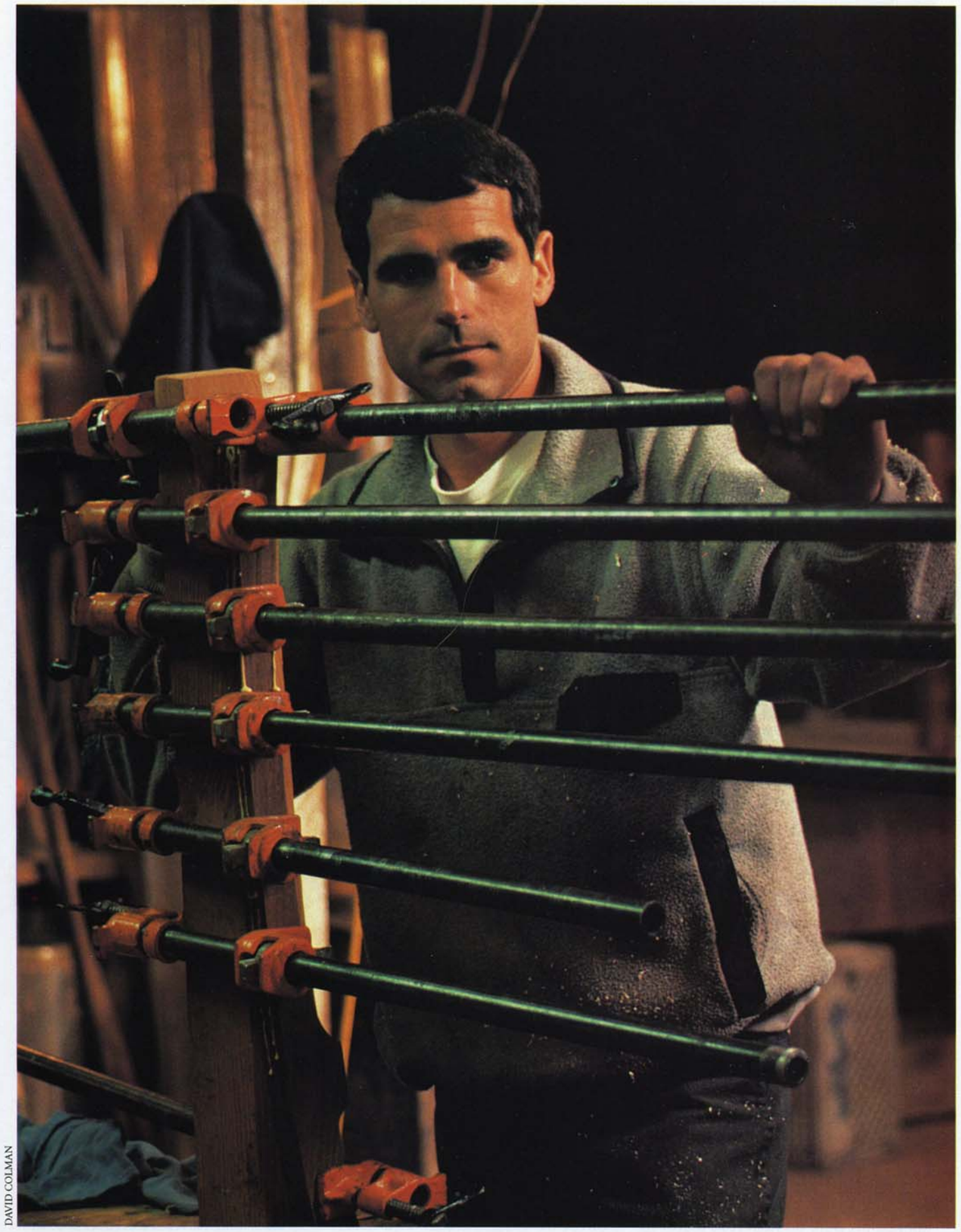
By taking control of this first stage of the furniture-making process, Beauchamp ensures himself the best possible supply of lumber. Such a selection is especially important for projects like the expansive dining room tables he loves to fashion. The walnut he harvests is superior to commercially available wood in both grain pattern and size. His inventory includes a variety of boards that are nearly three feet wide and over nine feet long.

The ability to select from such abundance gives him the kind of artistic latitude few artisans enjoy with store-bought material. Over the years, he has learned how to capitalize upon this advantage by selecting wood for a given project with ever greater care: "I've developed an eye for what looks right by being able to lay things out, and make a more conscious decision about how things go together. You don't just go to the wood pile and pull two pieces out, and decide those are going to be enough for your piece." Today, Beauchamp invests nearly as much time in selecting his wood as he does in finishing it: "You take the pieces out, plane them, clean them up so you can see the grain—until you find something that looks like it goes together."

The benefits of his copious wood supply extend to chairs as well as tabletop applications. As he says, "These boards are great for dining table tops. But I even cut them up for chairs sometimes, though it seems a waste. I use them for chair seats, which are 20 inches wide. It's great to have 32 inch wide lumber to use." It also allows him to coordinate the grain of the wood with the design of the posts and spindles—"In chairs, it's really important that the grain of the back posts follows the curve of the posts. You don't want the grain going across the narrowest part of the chair." Finally, having control over his lumber source allows him to board-match all the chairs in a given dining room set. Thus, he used only two boards for all six formal chairs in the van Muyden set he created to Erickson's design. Likewise, the eight chairs in Michael Zolezzi's dining ensemble were also hewn from but two slabs of walnut.

Harvesting is so important to Beauchamp that he has hardly needed to buy any wood at all in the recent past, despite the fact that he fashioned no less than 36 pieces of furniture last year. He relies instead upon his own initiative and network to locate and utilize a seemingly inexhaustible supply of fine native California wood. Some of the wildest grains and biggest boards come from the trees Wenner has trimmed in the field. One such find quickly became Beauchamp's most prized piece of wood—a paradox walnut tree (the type tree is locally known as bastone, the tree produced when the nut of a California black walnut tree is pollinated by an English walnut).

At the behest of a Sacramento homeowner, Wenner uprooted the 110 year-old tree because its roots were threatening to destroy the foundation of a neighbor's garage. Beauchamp first used "the absolutely incredible figure in this wood" to produce two outstanding Pembroke tables. But after lavishing the paradox walnut on a number of uncommissioned pieces, Beauchamp began to husband the remaining stash more carefully, deciding, "It's crazy to make all that specu-



DAVID COLMAN

lative furniture out of this wood!" Now he reserves it for special projects and customers, like the tambour couch he recently constructed for his artistic "patron saint," Michael Zolezzi.

Beauchamp's current inventory of wood consists of nearly 5,000 board feet of black walnut, chestnut, and elm. Smaller supplies of oak, camphor, and locust round out the supply. Since he uses only 800 board feet each year, and continues to harvest local timber to augment his cache, his wood supply is set for the foreseeable future. Like many concerned woodworkers, he has virtually eliminated popular exotic woods from his repertoire. While he admits to having some koa in his armada, he uses what's left sparingly and with genuine reservation—"I used to buy a little bit of koa before I changed my ways. It's an abused species, because we just devastated the koa forests in Hawaii. I have a few sticks left, but I'll never buy it again." No such reservations, however, extend to the maple or cherry that he continues to buy in small amounts. Beauchamp incorporates both of these light-hued woods to good effect in his visually arresting walnut laminations.

Given his growing reputation and considerable portfolio, it may surprise you to learn that Robert Beauchamp hardly sprang from the womb destined to be a furniture maker. In fact, it's something of a miracle that he resisted the impulse to become a physician—like his grandfather, father, and three uncles (all of whom graduated from Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia). But to their everlasting credit, neither his mother, nor his pediatrician father, ever applied pressure on Robert to follow in the family medical tradition. In fact, his parents became the most enthusiastic supporters of his woodworking career. Both parents seemed happy to accept the fact that their son had become the knot in the family tree.

But their role in Robert's art has always been more than just passive. To this day, they supply him with his most important source of criticism and acclaim. It's an evaluation process that Robert both encourages and seeks. Whenever his father visits the woodworking shop, Beauchamp solicits his opinion about mixing and matching wood grains—"What do you think of this piece next to this piece? How about these together?" Beauchamp also makes a point of bringing every new work to his parent's home for analysis and suggestions.

Ironically, while his parents never objected to their son knotting the family tree, they strenuously object to the

(Left upper)
Pembroke Breakfast table, of paradox walnut.

(Left lower)
Silsbee Coffee Table, of paradox walnut.

(Right and below)
Wallace Winklestein dining table and cane seat chairs, of cherry.

knots he insists on featuring in his pieces. It's an aesthetic disagreement that will remain a bone of contention between the two generations, because Beauchamp, contrary to most of his peers in the field, is committed to stressing the imperfections of wood: "My mom and dad do not like knots. I love them. There's one just glaring out at you in the table I did for Michael Zolezzi. It's a ten inch long crack, right in the middle of a two foot by six foot board, where a limb came through. I just love it, but they both prefer that I be more selective with my use of knots."

Beauchamp, who is now 36, has been a professional woodworker for nearly 15 years. But his career in the field was far from pre-ordained. In fact, he showed little interest in the profession until his junior year at Humboldt State University, when he settled upon an industrial arts major, with a concentration in woodwork. Beauchamp cites his college woodshop instructor, Richard Erickson (no relation to Robert), as a special kind of teacher who not only made learning fun, but also stressed the practical and safe aspects of the craft. Beauchamp came away from that experience with an insatiable desire to learn more about woodworking, and a healthy respect for the perils of power tools. Looking back on that period, he recalls, "I learned a lot just by observation. I can't say that what I learned

(Left)
Adjustable desk, of cherry.

(Below)
Chest of Drawers, of quarter-sawn black oak.

(Right upper)
Splayed chest of drawers, of cherry and curly maple.

(Right below)
Writing desk of California black walnut and tiger maple.

gave me the knowledge or the experience to make what I make now, but I think it helped lead to that."

Practical experience helped fill important parts of the puzzle. During his senior year, he spent a worthwhile internship at Jim Drennen's "Woodworks" shop in Sacramento, making mirror frames and coat racks. Looking back on that experience, Beauchamp now realizes "From lots of repetitive work there, I learned how to do things quickly, efficiently, and safely. Those things are key for me now." Less inspiring was a four month stay at a production cabinet shop in Woodland, where he laid the same patterns onto plywood over and over until he reached his wits' end. "I knew very little then, but everyone there knew even less than I did," says Beauchamp of the kind of robotic woodwork he swore never to do again.

After he left the cabinet shop in 1980, Beauchamp's mother, Marie, alerted him to an intriguing article in the local newspaper about Robert Erickson, entitled, "In Search of the Perfect Rocking Chair." It would prove to be the start of a momentous affiliation between the two craftsmen that continues to the present day. After numerous supplications, Beauchamp persuaded Erickson to accept him as an apprentice in his Nevada City, California, shop. The first thing Beauchamp managed to do there was

play inventory at the show. When the piece sold, a gratified Beauchamp treated it as his "graduation present" from apprenticeship. A friend of both woodworkers, who witnessed the sale at the 1982 fair, called the piece the "best chair Bob Erickson never built."

Beyond the importance of harvesting wood, Beauchamp also learned from Erickson the principles of design. Having taken no courses at college in this discipline, Beauchamp was primed to assimilate the lessons

cut some expensive walnut boards too short. The apprentice now terms his debut "an inauspicious beginning" because "Erickson didn't have a lot of money at the time."

Things could only get better, and they did in August, 1982, when Beauchamp, subbing for his absent boss at the Pacific States Crafts Fair in San Francisco, added a rocking chair he had built himself to Erickson's display inventory at the show. When the piece sold, a gratified Beauchamp treated it as his "graduation present" from apprenticeship. A friend of both woodworkers, who witnessed the sale at the 1982 fair, called the piece the "best chair Bob Erickson never built."

Beyond the importance of harvesting wood, Beauchamp also learned from Erickson the principles of design. Having taken no courses at college in this discipline, Beauchamp was primed to assimilate the lessons of his mentor about symmetry and organization. Erickson placed a premium on uniformity of design, and the drift of the message was not lost on his student, who to this day strives for classical balance in all of his projects: "Bob taught me to keep things uniform. For example, the chair support posts I laminate will all be made from the same wood on the front, and the same wood on the backside. It gives some symmetry to the piece. I really like things being symmetrical in their appearance, even if a piece itself is asymmetrical."

Words like "book-matched woods" and "mirror images" pepper Beauchamp's conversation about woodwork. He invests each of his projects with a clarity of vision, and a lack of clutter, that makes them stand out from the crowd. Take, for example, the armoire Beauchamp recently completed for client David Stephens. Stephens came to the artist with more than just a concept for the piece. He brought along complete plans, which Beauchamp simplified, but followed rigorously. The simplification consisted of dividing the seven-foot-tall object into four separate parts for ease of transport and installation.

The armoire is by far the most ambitious piece Beauchamp has ever undertaken. He and his assistants have invested 800 hours in the course of four months in crafting the finished product. Originally, the projected cost for the piece was $9,000. When Stephens learned that Beauchamp had seriously underestimated the time required for completion, he magnanimously offered to up the total to $14,000, to cover material cost and everyone's hourly rate.

What Stephens received, however, exceeded his every expectation for appearance, craftsmanship, and utility. As the owner puts it, "It's worth every penny." A carefully orchestrated facade of chechem, cherry, and walnut decorates the exterior panels. Beauchamp purchased a small amount of chechem for the project because it is a sustainable yield hardwood from an area in Belize, where "they're not wiping out whole forests just to get one tree." Like a puzzle box, the piece invites you to open its curved doors and investigate the labyrinthine compartments that await inside. Behind the obvious array of drawers and bins within lurk three of Beauchamp's trademark hidden compartments, buried deep inside

PROCESS

A Simple Method of Clamping for Making Edge-Glued Veneer

by Robert Beauchamp

The process of edge-gluing 1/8" thick flitches of veneer can be a very frustrating experience. However, I have found that a simple modification of the clamping system greatly facilitates the process.

Development of a good edge-gluing system is essential to the production of well joined veneer. Any gaps in the veneer joints will show up prominently when the piece is finished. My hours of struggle with bar clamps and strap clamps finally ended when I started using wedges (1/4" x 3", tapered from 3/8" to 5/8") to provide the required clamping pressure.

The amount of pressure sufficient to hold the flitches tightly together is directly proportional to how well the corresponding edges have been jointed. If well jointed, simply pulling the flitches together with one's fingers should suffice to produce tight joints. To this end, having razor-sharp blades is critical (one can readily cut through the most highly figured woods with a properly sharpened hand plane).

Once the joints have been prepared, the most critical remaining concern is the achievement of adequate and uniform clamping pressure. The process I use for cutting and edge joining veneer is as follows:

1. Mill the selected board so that it is squared up on all four sides. Cut 5/32" flitches on a resaw band saw, cutting off alternating sides of the board (this helps keep the board flat by equalizing internal stresses) and face joint or plane off the band saw marks from the remaining board after each flitch is cut.

2. Plane all flitches to a 1/8" thickness, taking very light cuts and using very sharp blades—dull blades tend to tear the wood. Lay out the flitches to select the most desirable bookmatches.

3. Using a shooting board and a sharp hand plane, joint the edges using very light cuts and frequently checking the alignment.

4. Simple finger pressure should be enough to push the flitches together to produce a perfect joint the full length of the boards.

5. When not working with the flitches, always leave them under a cover sheet (a thick board or piece of plywood suffices) to keep them flat.

6. Screw two straight and squared runners on a melamine bed (glue does not adhere to melamine). The distance between the inner edges of the runners should be one inch greater than the combined width of the flitches to be jointed. Place the first flitch snug against one of the runners. Weight the flitch so it will not buckle under pressure (I use 1/8" x 3" x 50" plate steel to provide uniform pressure). Glue the edge of the next flitch, push it up against the first flitch and weight it, repeating the process until all the flitches are laid out.

Place the wedges in pairs (which will be pushed against each other to produce the needed clamping pressure), at 8-10 inch intervals, between the last flitch and the runner. Tap the wedges snug (alternate tapping the wedges, as making one pair too tight will loosen the adjacent pairs).

7. Working quickly, use a hammer to press down hard along the full length of the joints, evening out the flitches to one another and forcing them flat to the melamine (I call this "running the joint" and find it helpful to have an assistant if there are numerous joints to be run).

After all the joints have been run and all the flitches are flat, retighten the wedges and inspect each joint to make sure it is snug along its entire length. Excessive wedge pressure will buckle the veneer.

Allow two hours for drying. Loosen the wedges before removing the steel or other weights used (to prevent the veneer from buckling). Now remove the weights.

8. Lift the veneer from one end of the flitches and carefully break it away from the melamine. Lightly scrape any excess glue from the bottom side of the veneer. It is now ready to be glued to a plywood base.

Remember that it is essential to glue veneer to both sides of plywood to maintain stability in the finished panel.

As a final step, I choose to have all my "new plywood" wide-belt sanded to bring the veneer down to a final thickness of 1/16".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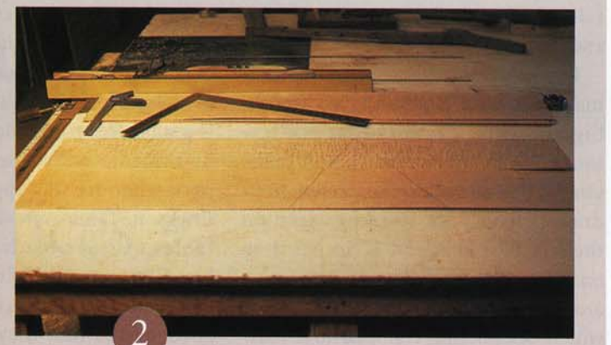
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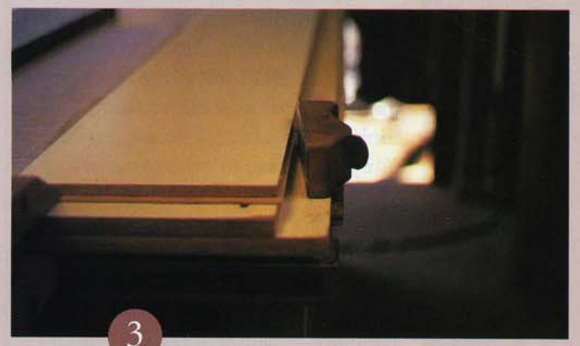
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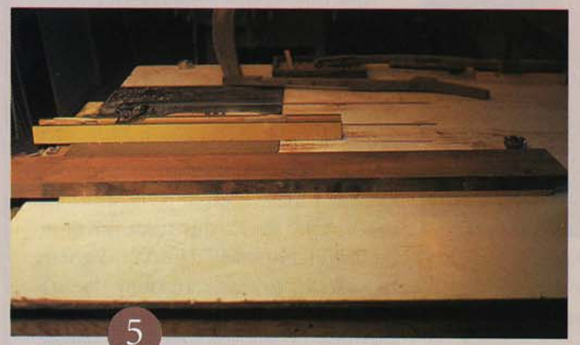
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dead spaces, and accessible only by releasing the right sequence of pins and dowels.

The inside of the armoire offers a magical array of light and dark woods, big and little drawers that are festooned with intricately carved pulls. On the left side is a set of curved-front drawers which are 18 inches deep on their shallow end, and 27 inches deep on their other end. The drawer fronts are made from laminated curly maple which Beauchamp clamped to a master form while the glue dried. The dovetail joinery which fastens the curved front sections of each drawer to the side members posed significant problems which Beauchamp describes thusly: "Cutting the dovetails was very involved, because I didn't have a square face to lay them off. So I had to make a little flat spot for the sides of the drawer to meet the rounded front." The front and rear corners all feature hand-cut dovetails.

The handles presented even more difficulty than the joinery, because each pull was not only recessed, but undercut for better hand purchase. Beauchamp reveals just how heavily good furniture design depends upon ergonomics, when he explains, "It's very awkward to pull the drawers out because they're so deep. We wanted to design them so your hand would naturally exert the right force to pull evenly." In order to angle the handles, he fabricated a special jig which fit onto the drawer's curved front. The jig enabled him to rout each pull at the same angle. He then cut 3/16" thick handles to fit into the routed troughs, and fashioned them to protrude only 1/8". Finally, he sculpted a space beneath each handle to allow room for a hand to operate comfortably within the tight confines.

With the exception of his dining-room tabletops and coffee tabletops, which are finished with catalyzed lacquer for durability, Beauchamp finishes all his pieces with tung oil. His shop is a stain-free zone, and has been since he ruined a perfect set of teak tables back when he was apprenticing with Erickson. "They were the sweetest little tables I'd ever made," he explains, "perfect to the drawings." The client who had commissioned them explicitly requested that they be finished to match her other teak furniture, which had aged to an orange hue. Beauchamp continues, "I put this orange stain on them and I got physically nauseated. I said to myself, `Why am I doing this? I just ruined this great work that I did, and I will never do this again.'" And to this day, he hasn't. As he puts it, "If somebody said, 'I want you to make a walnut chest and put oak stain on it,' I'd say, 'You've got the wrong guy.'"

Stephens armoire, of chechem, cherry, and walnut. Inside drawers, bins, and hidden compartments. This is Robert's most ambitious piece to date.

Honesty in wood vernacular is one of Beauchamp's guiding commandments. If it's oak you want, he'll give you oak—not walnut that's stained to look like oak. If you want cherry, you'll have to take it in its natural, light-colored state, or not select it at all. He patiently explains to clients that unstained cherry only turns dark with age and time. Indeed, if there's any one thing this craftsman has learned from his years of experience in the shop, it's an appreciation for the natural way different kinds of woods work well together—"Just flipping boards the opposite way makes an incredible difference. You look at the lines and grain of the wood, and you say, 'This looks great, and that looks terrible.' You really have to take those things into consideration. When you work with the different kinds of maple—curly, tiger, bird's-eye, plain—you really can't intermix them." Hue and grain determine compatibility.

Ever the classicist, Beauchamp concerns himself not only with integrity of design and honesty of material, but also, the eternal durability of the objects he creates. It's perhaps the most important lesson he learned from working alongside Bob Erickson: "When I make a piece of furniture, I think, 'OK, what's this piece going to be like in 100 years? How am I going to make it, so that somebody doesn't have to do anything to it, and it'll be just fine in 100 years?'" Thus, when clients occasionally request him to construct tables with solid tops, Beauchamp explains that he is unwilling to immobilize wood without room for movement—"I'll say, 'Well, you can't do that, because without a gap, the panel's going to expand and contract, and break the frame apart.'" If more of industry thought along such revolutionary lines, our landfills might shrink, and our inventory of perpetual artifacts might increase and prosper. Don't bet on it, though.