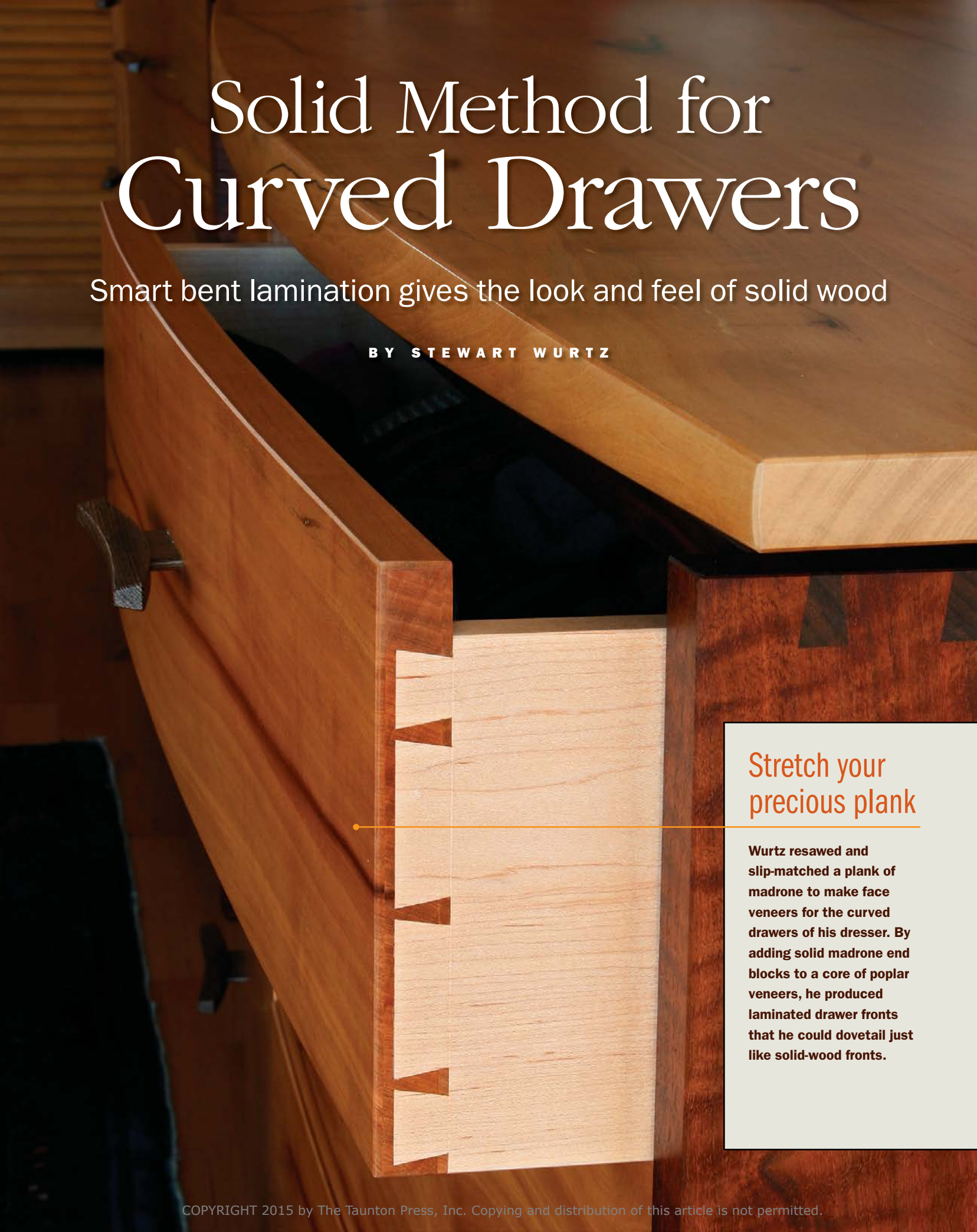
Solid Method for Curved Drawers

Smart bent lamination gives the look and feel of solid wood

BY STEWART WURTZ



Stretch your precious plank

Wurtz resawed and slip-matched a plank of madrone to make face veneers for the curved drawers of his dresser. By adding solid madrone end blocks to a core of poplar veneers, he produced laminated drawer fronts that he could dovetail just like solid-wood fronts.

I'd like to share a technique for making curved drawer fronts that have a bent-laminated core but give you the appearance and joinery options of solid wood. This lets you stretch a single plank of special wood across a series of curved drawers, yet still join the drawers with traditional half-blind dovetails. The key to the technique is to glue a block of solid wood to each end of the drawer front's laminated core—while also adding the usual edging top and bottom. Because the edging and end blocks are cut from the same plank as the face veneers, the construction is virtually undetectable.

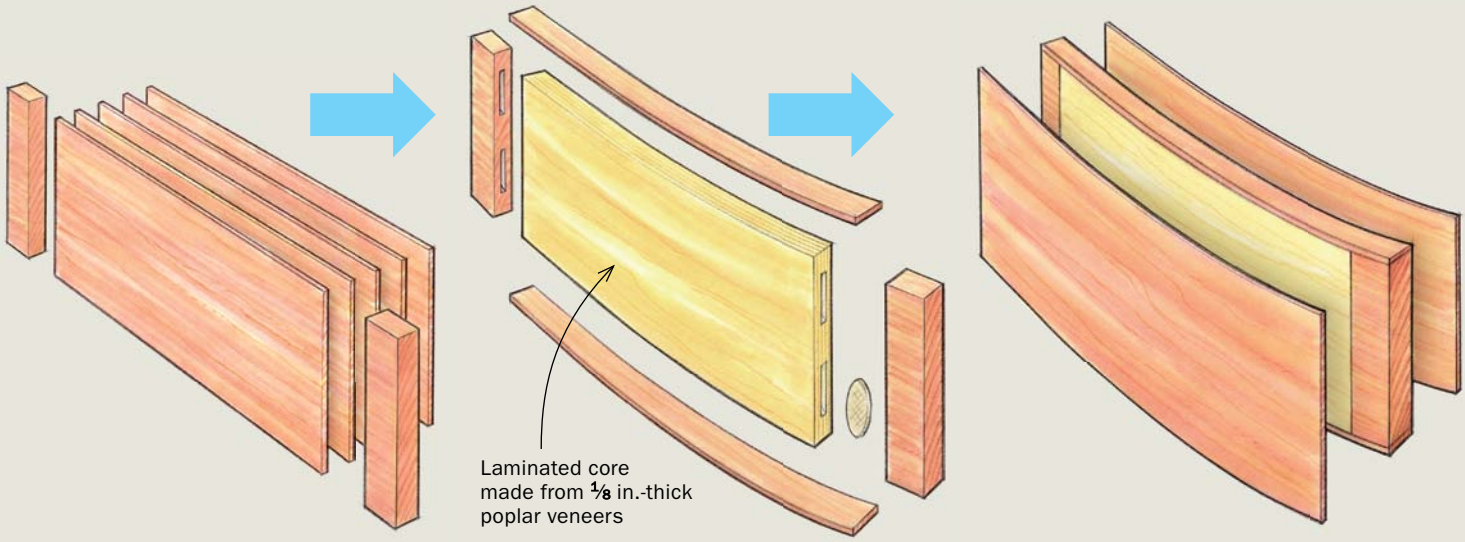
I came across the idea on a visit to Edward Barnsley's workshop in the Cotswolds more than 35 years ago, when I was just starting out in woodworking. I was mystified when I saw that many Barnsley pieces with curved fronts had string inlay or cock beading right around the drawer fronts—not something solid wood readily allows—yet these same drawer fronts were joined with half-blind dovetails. Shaking a little in my boots, I asked Mr. Barnsley about it, and, as I remember, he kindly explained that end blocks were applied to a laminated core construction. In the years since, I've used the approach repeatedly, evolving it as I go. It's particularly useful on curved drawers, but I've also used it with flat drawers where my show wood was very special and in short supply.

When I built this dresser I had two planks of beautiful madrone that I wanted to use for the

START WITH A CURVED CORE

Laminate the substrate. *Wurtz bandsawed ⅛-in.-thick poplar veneers for the core and glued them up over a curved form in his vacuum bag.*

Trim the sandwich. *After jointing one long edge of the laminated core, he cut it to width on the tablesaw, using featherboards to keep the work tight against the fence. To trim the ends he made a cradle for his crosscut sled (see top left photo, p. 62).*



1. Break down the board. Start by cutting off end blocks from the show wood. Then resaw the center section for face veneers and edging.

2. Add end blocks and edging. The madrone end blocks are aligned and secured to the poplar core with biscuits. Then madrone edging is glued to the top and bottom.

3. Apply the face veneers. With the end blocks and edging trimmed flush, the madrone face veneers are applied to the front and back, completing the drawer front.

1 PREP THE STOCK

Crosscut the end blocks. *Before resawing the show wood into veneers, crosscut the plank to produce the solid blocks for the ends of the drawer front.*

tops and drawer fronts of three bow-front chests that would all live in the same room. To stretch the madrone I used poplar as the core for the drawer fronts. I cut ⅛-in.-thick slices and built up a ⅝-in.-thick core. On drawers with thinner fronts, I sometimes save time by using bending plywood for the core rather than sawing up solid wood.

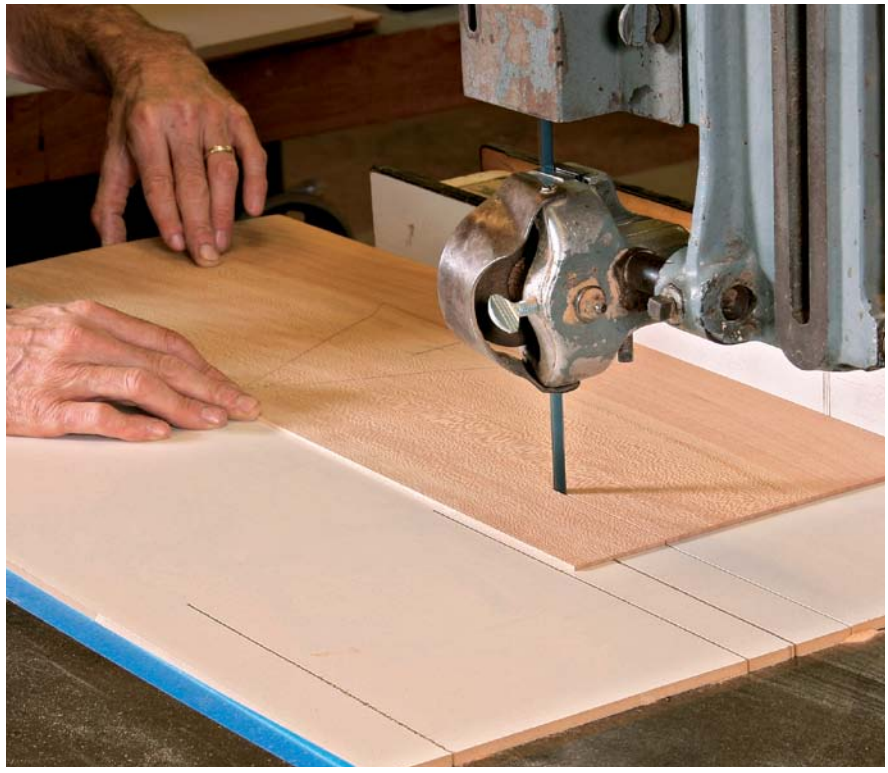
Before slicing the madrone show veneers, I crosscut the 2-in.-long end blocks from the madrone planks. I cut the show veneers 3/32 in. thick, and from each sheet I bandsawed a strip wide enough to produce the edging for the top of the drawer front. This guaranteed a perfect grain match between the top and the face of the drawer front. In cases where there's enough width in the sheet to yield the bottom edging also, I cut that off too. If not, I'll cut an extra sheet or two of veneer and cut the bottom edging from them.

After gluing up the poplar core on a curved form in the vacuum bag, I jointed it and trimmed it to width. Then I cut it to length using a curved cradle on the crosscut sled, and it was ready for the solid madrone end blocks. I used biscuits to align the blocks, which I made slightly oversize so I could shape them to the curve of the core after the glue-up. Once I had trimmed the blocks with handplane and scraper, I glued on the top and bottom edging, and then I was ready for the face veneers. I used the same bending form and applied them in the vacuum bag.

When that package came out of the vacuum bag, I trimmed the face veneers flush and got to work cutting the half-blind dovetails.

Stewart Wurtz designs and builds custom furniture in Seattle.

Shopsawn veneer. *Cut the show veneers on the bandsaw, jointing the plank between slices. A tall shopmade bandsaw fence dedicated to resawing ensures uniform slices when cutting the 3/32-in.-thick show veneers.*



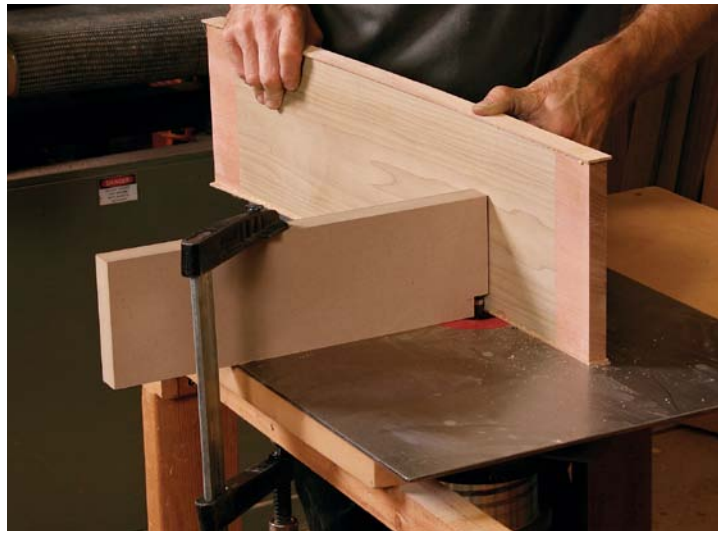
Account for the edging. *After slicing the show veneers, rip a strip from each sheet to provide edging for the top and bottom of the drawer fronts.*

Photos: Jonathan Binzen; drawings: Dan Thornton

2 ADD THE ENDS AND EDGES

Solid ends on a core of plies. *Use biscuits to attach the solid end blocks to the core of poplar plies (left). After the glue-up, plane and scrape the blocks flush to the core (above).*

Custom edging. *Trace the drawer front onto the edging and bandsaw the shape. A thin spacer between the pencil and the drawer front (right) produces enough overage to simplify the glue-up. After gluing, Wurtz trims the edging at the router table (far right), using a notched one-point fence to support the curved workpiece.*

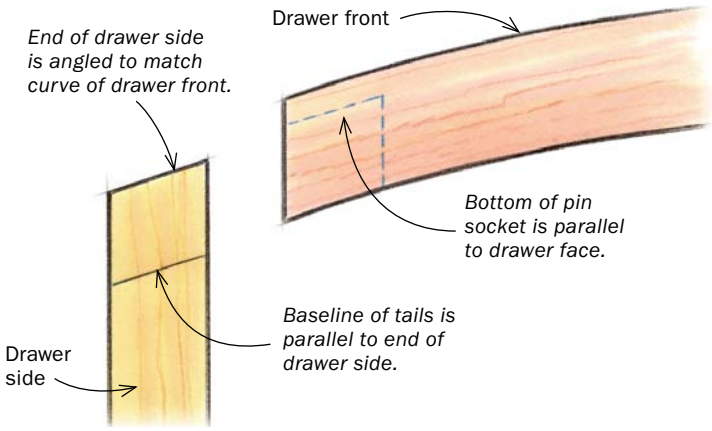


3 APPLY THE FACE VENEER

Back in the bag. *When it's time to apply the front and back show veneer, the core goes back in the vacuum bag (left). After the glue-up, Wurtz routs the face veneers flush with a laminate trimmer (above).*

Dovetails on a curved drawer

Wurtz joins the straight drawer sides to the curved front with half-blind dovetails. He lays out and cuts the joint using techniques familiar from cutting ordinary half-blinds, but with a number of jigs and tricks to accommodate the curve and the added angles.



1. ANGLE THE ENDS

Curves get a cradle. *Wurtz built a curved jig for his crosscut sled to support the drawer front for crosscutting.*

Angled ends on the drawer sides, too. *The front ends of the drawer sides are cut at an angle that matches the curve of the drawer front.*

2. CUT THE TAILS

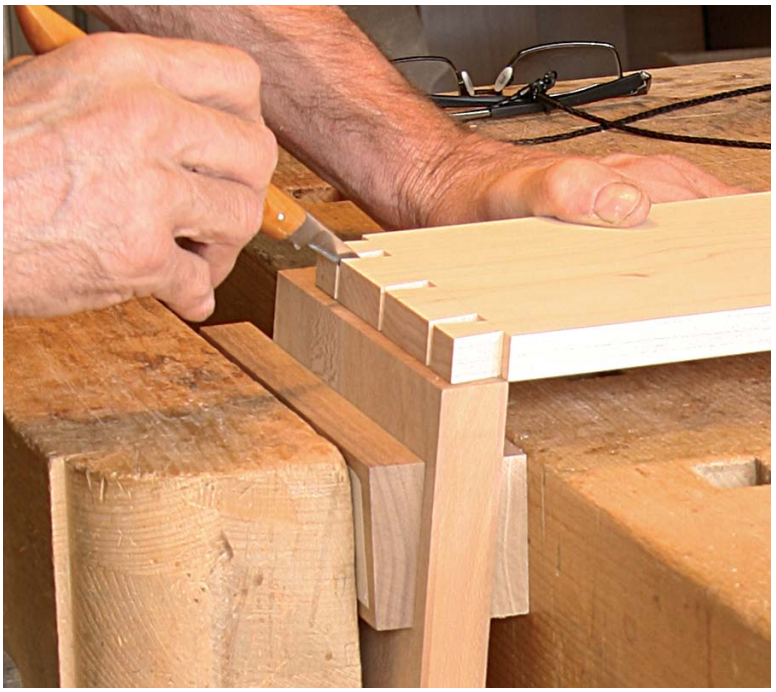
Tilted layout. *When scribing the baseline of the tails, hold the marking gauge so that its face rides flat against the angled end of the drawer side.*

Bandsaw to the lines. *Wurtz starts his tails by bandsawing to the layout lines. A tapered spacer against the fence rides with the workpiece and creates the dovetail angle.*

Quick cleanout. *After bandsawing along the angled lines, Wurtz removes the waste between them with repeated freehand cuts, stopping just shy of the baseline.*

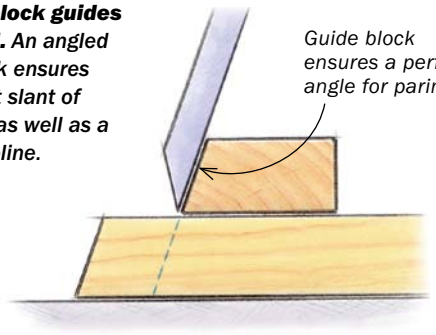
3. FINISH WITH THE PINS

Handsaw follows bandsaw. *Wurtz uses a handsaw to establish the angle at the bottom of the sockets. With the drawer side angled in the vise, a few strokes finish the work the bandsaw started.*



Tricky transfer. *To make a clean transfer of the tails to the drawer front, Wurtz clamps the curved front in the vise between angled cauls.*

Beveled block guides the chisel. *An angled guide block ensures the correct slant of the chisel as well as a clean baseline.*



Flip the guide block. *To chop the half-blind pins, use the same beveled guide block, but inverted. Support the far end of the drawer front on a scrap.*