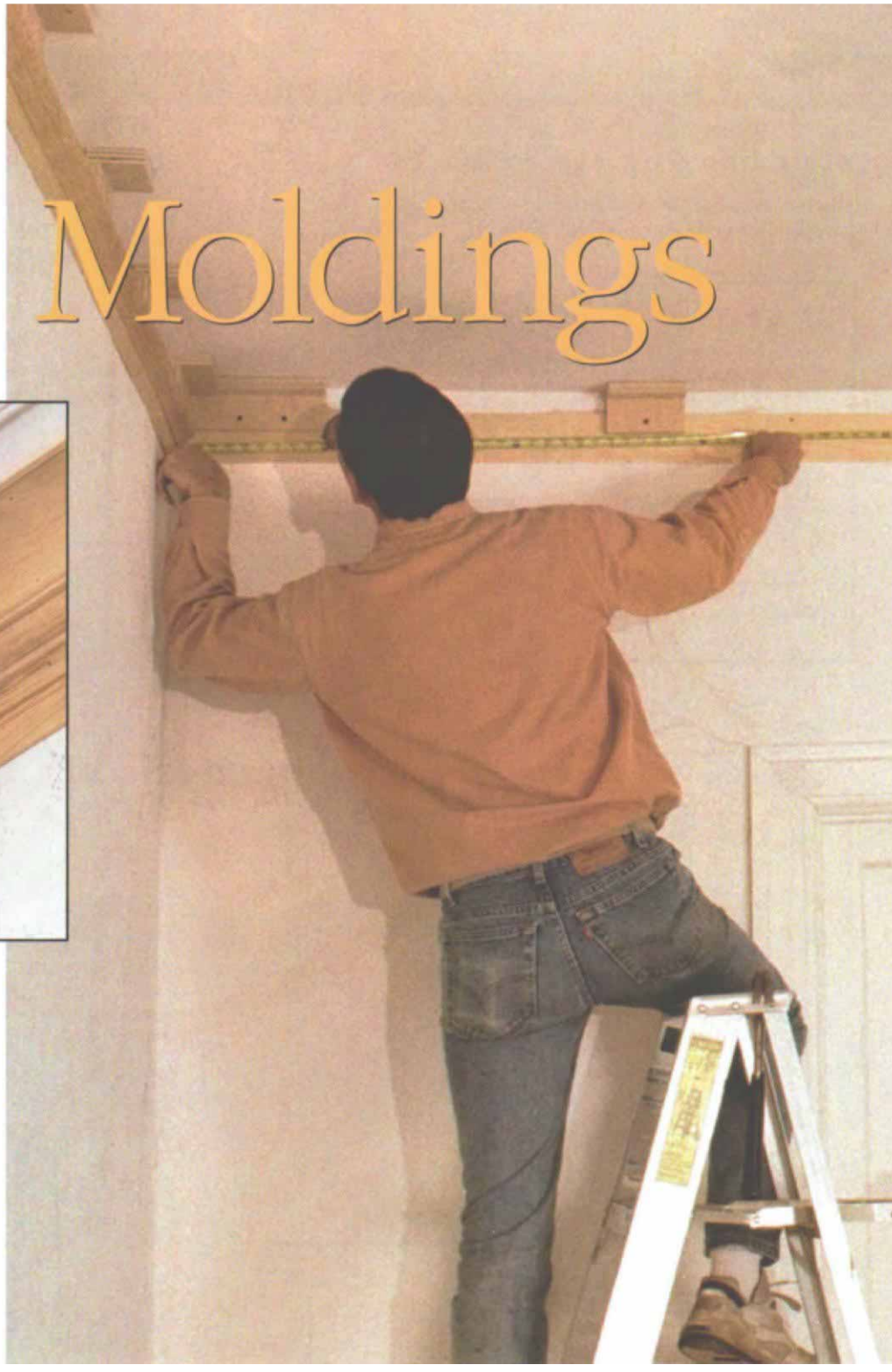
PERSONALIZE YOUR HOUSE

Making Large Moldings

BY JOHN WEST



Nothing dresses up a drab room quite so dramatically as a fancy cornice molding where wall meets ceiling. In rooms with high ceilings or in rooms full of tall cabinets, adding a big cornice molding can change the visual dimension of the space.

But there are some problems with large, one-piece moldings. Because so much material is removed from one side, they have a tendency to cup, and cupped moldings are difficult to hold tight to the wall and ceiling. It is also impossible to make good outside corner miters when molding isn't flat. And mitering inside corners of large moldings can drive you nuts because beaded profiles can't be coped.

There is an answer to large molding problems, and it begins at your local lumberyard. If you break down the cornice into several smaller parts—even stock pieces off the shelf of a nearby store—you can avoid all these problems.

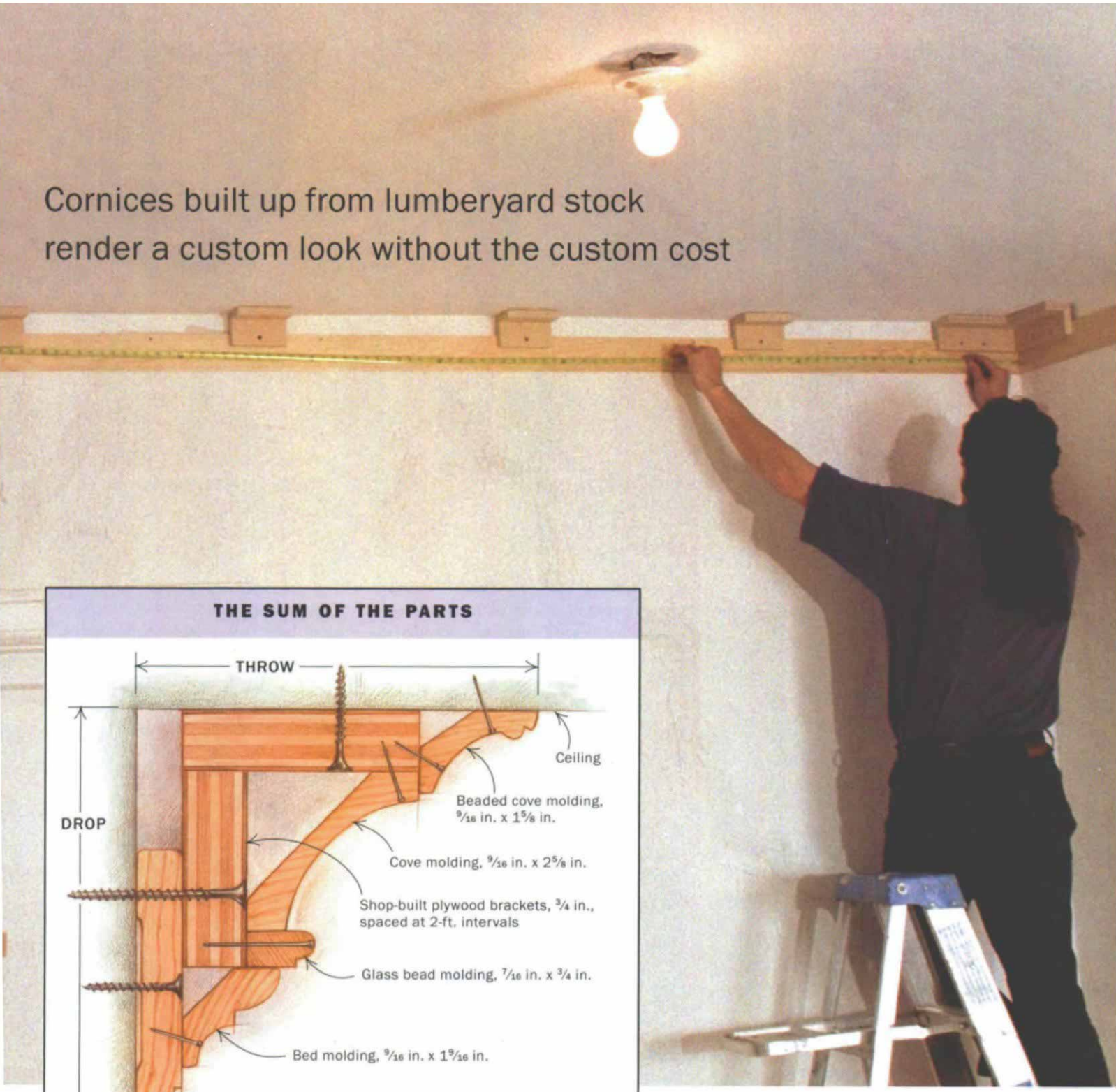
Smaller pieces yield better results

When you're perched on a ladder, installing several small pieces at the ceiling can often be a lot easier than dealing with one huge molding. With careful planning, you can establish many desirable conditions using smaller moldings: a good nailing surface behind the moldings, hiding places for fasteners, good square corners at ceiling and walls, and a way to locate and lock moldings together.

Prepare a sturdy nailing surface—When you are laying out the design for a large

Photos: William Duckworth

Cornices built up from lumberyard stock render a custom look without the custom cost



Smaller shapes linked together add a more formal look to a room. *Five different store-bought moldings shaped the cornice for this dining room at a cost far less than custom-milled moldings.*

THE SUM OF THE PARTS

This large cornice molding was built up from five separate pieces of smaller moldings and installed in a dining room with 9-ft.-high ceilings. The shop-built plywood brackets serve to make square corners, provide a solid nailing surface and help locate the moldings where they belong in sequence to one another.

Drawing: Tim Langenderfer

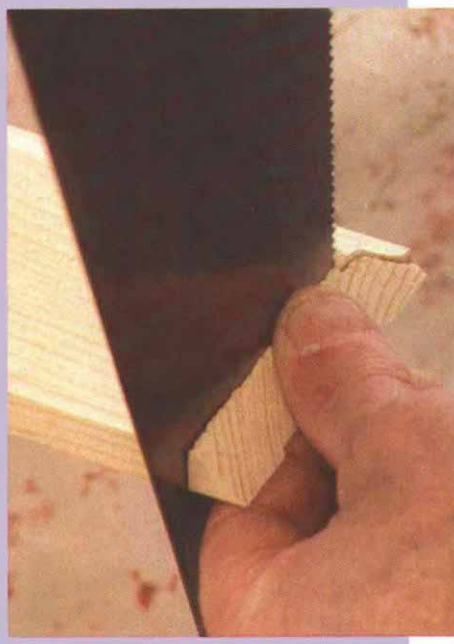
Shop-built brackets are easy to make square. *The author mass-produces plywood brackets in the shop, using the tablesaw, an air nailer and a screw gun. Pieces are butt-joined at the comers with glue, nails and screws.*

cornice, start with a piece of inverted baseboard molding on the wall (see the drawing on p. 79). This piece of molding answers two important needs: a solid nailing surface for building up the cornice from the bottom and plenty of room to hide large fasteners. It doesn't matter whether you use nails or screws to secure the baseboard to the wall. All but the bottom edge will be hidden from view. You can put as many fasteners as you need to anchor the baseboard solidly in place.

With the inverted baseboard we installed in the dining room shown on the previous pages, we started by nailing the pieces in place and followed with screws. If you're going through drywall, you want to secure these pieces to studs whenever possible. If you're going through plaster, as we did on this job, all but an occasional screw will grab hold of lathing behind the plaster, which is plenty strong to do the job.

Plywood brackets make the corners square—Few houses, old or new, have walls that are perfectly square to each other or to the ceiling. By building up a cornice from several small pieces and by using a bunch of plywood brackets behind the built-up moldings, you can accommo-

Coping the profile

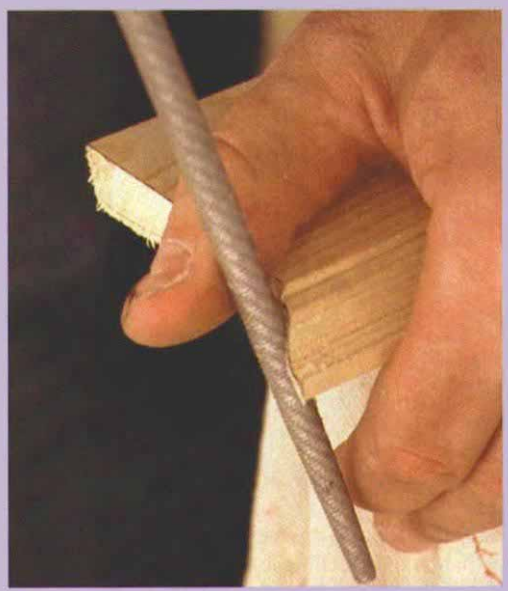


Handsawing the straight run

Coping a joint

As with the inverted baseboard piece shown in this sequence of photos (see the photos above and below), coping *a* joint to look like an inside miter is easy. Start by making a mitered sawcut on the end of the molding to be coped. Trace the inside edge of the miter with a lead pencil to make it easier to see where you need to make the cope.

Start the cut from one end of the miter using a coping saw, and follow the pencil line. As you follow the shape of the cut, tilt the blade back at a slight angle so that you remove more of the stock from the back of the cut. For straight cuts, like those along most of the width of the baseboard pieces, use *a* regular handsaw to remove the material, again, tilting back the sawblade slightly. For a good fit, use a small, round rat-tail file to refine the shape of the curved cuts. —*J.W.*

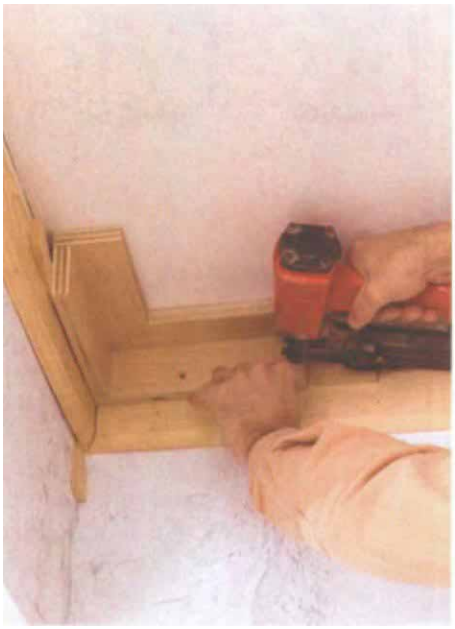


Undercutting with a rasp

Installed and shimmed

date walls and ceilings that are not square. These brackets also serve to establish the drop and throw dimensions for the cornice, as shown in the drawing on p. 79. (*Drop* refers to the overall vertical height of the cornice; *throw* indicates how far the cornice projects off the wall at the ceiling line.) By making the brackets just the right size, you can use them to locate the separate pieces of molding where they belong in relation to one another.

All the plywood brackets can be assembled in the shop, where it's easy to make them square (see the top left photo on the facing page). Make separate brackets for all the corners, in addition to a slew of smaller ones for the wall-to-ceiling joints. When installing the plywood brackets, space them at intervals of about 2 ft. or less to allow ample nailing surfaces for the moldings to follow. Add shims behind the backs or tops of brackets, as necessary, to square up the corners (see the top left photo on this page).



Shims help create square corners. *During installation, pine shims fill gaps in out-of-square corners at walls and ceilings. Once the brackets are screwed into place, trim off the excess by scoring the shim with a utility knife.*

Coped joints are cleaner. *The first two layers of this cornice, an inverted baseboard and a bed molding, were installed with coped joints at the inside corners.*

Install one layer at a time—After the inverted baseboard pieces and all the plywood brackets on top of those are squared up and installed, layering a large cornice molding is simply a matter of adding one layer at a time, starting with the one at the bottom. At inside comers, coped joints (see the top right photo on this page and the box on the facing page) look better than miters, which don't always meet perfectly at the joint. Also, coped joints hold up better through seasonal changes in humidity levels. However, with moldings that contain a full beaded profile (see the drawing on p. 79), as did two of the five we used on this job, you have no choice but to miter them at inside corners.

With all the layers of molding in a built-up cornice like this one, don't bother using glue on most of them. Use glue on the top edge of the top piece of molding where it joins the ceiling, just to help it stay put. Also use glue on outside miters at protruding sections of walls or the top faces of cabinets.

The installation will go easier and look better in the long run if you can minimize the number of joints along any given span. With this job, we had only one scarf joint in one layer of molding (see the box below). If you must have joints in several pieces, it's best to stagger them. And keep in mind that not all runs of the same profile of molding are the same size. □

John West operates Cope and Mould Millwork in Danbury, Conn.

Scarf joints should be invisible

If you can't buy molding long enough for the spans you need, you'll have to join two pieces with a scarf joint, which requires cutting matching miters on the ends of each piece. Be aware that pieces of molding from the same millwork shop will sometimes vary in width and thickness. Mismatched pieces will create a sloppy scarf joint.

Every trim carpenter I know has his own preference for what angle to use for scarf-joint miters. For me, a 60° angle on the molding works best. At that angle, the molding has less of a tendency to spring back at the outside of the miter than it does on a sharper angle, such as 45° or less. I always use glue at the joints, and I'm careful to place scarf joints over one of the plywood brackets to get a solid nailing surface at the joint. Any slight discrepancies in the profiles can easily be sanded smooth. —*J.W.*