JFK's Humidor—Almost

Build a $574,000 classic — for only about $300.

THE AUCTION of some of Jackie Kennedy Onassis' belongings after her death drew lots of attention throughout the world, but when I heard John F. Kennedy's cigar humidor had been sold for $574,000, I was amazed. Being a cigar smoker myself, I was curious to see this remarkable piece of craftsmanship from Alfred Dunhill of London. When I finally saw it, my feelings were mixed. It was a good sized humidor, but it wasn't spectacular. Heck, I figured I could make one just like it for a fraction of that cost — and I did. By the way, if you're not a cigar smoker, this is a darned attractive jewelry box, and the historical significance is still fun.

I was only able to find photos of the exterior of the box, so I had to extrapolate the dimensions from Sotheby's auction brochure. The original 12" x 12" x 21½" dimensions seemed a little larger than I needed, or wanted, so the sizes offered here are for a ⅞ths scale reproduction, which still holds 140 fifty-ring cigars up to 8" in length.

1 MAIL-ORDER MESSIAH • The corner joinery was a challenge. With ⅜" sides, a biscuit was too big, as was a spline. Dovetails wouldn't match the original (unless they were blind), and a simple glued miter joint wasn't strong enough. My CMT catalog had the answer: a locking miter joint router bit for ⅜" material (item #655-502). Though pricey at $59.40 [(800) 531-5559], it was worth the expense. It takes some time to set up, but once set, it's a terrific joint for this and other small box applications. The first side is run on edge as shown above, with the mating side run flat.

Like the original, I started with a beautifully figured piece of black walnut.

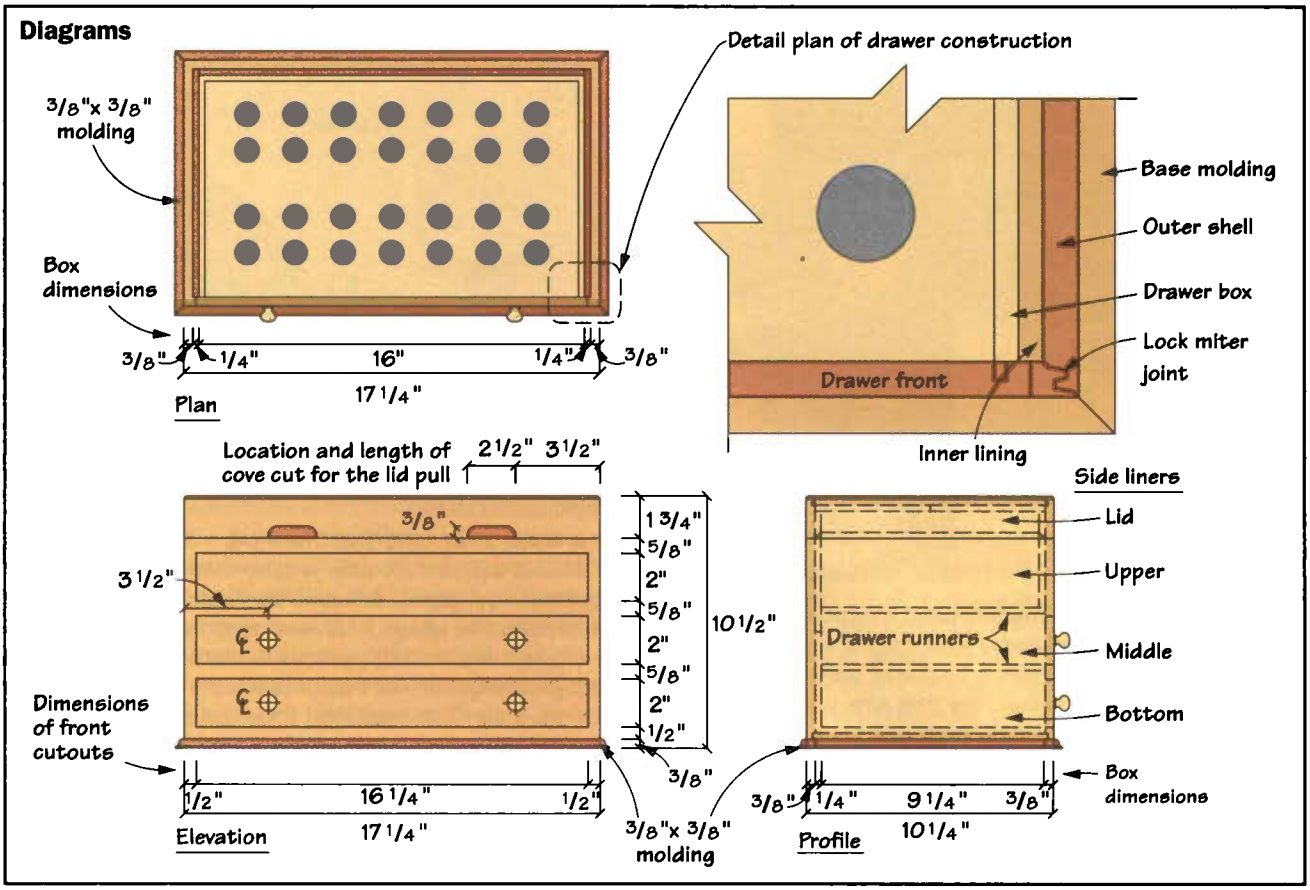
Finding a piece 11" wide is difficult, so I chose to resaw and book match my 6" wide piece of four-quarter stock, giving me a net ⅜" thick board. The rest was joinery.

The drawers were cut from the front piece (see diagram), which was then glued back together. The sizes provided for the sides, front and back in the Schedule of Materials allow for a ⅛" saw kerf when the top is cut from the assembled box. The front height also allows for the four ⅛" kerfs required to cut out the drawer fronts. I left the front length 1½" longer than the finished size to allow extra material to trim and square after gluing the front without the drawers. By marking out the drawer locations before cutting apart the front, I was able to glue the pieces back together so that the grain pattern was left almost intact.

2 THE FINISHED JOINT • This detail photo shows the assembled joint with cedar lining in place. Note the bevel cut on the top edge of the cedar lining. This detail plays an important role in providing an airtight seal for the lid.

STEP 1 Tricky Joints • Matching the original's mitered corners in ⅜" thick material gave me pause at first, but the answer was in the mail: a lock-miter router bit for thin stock. Before the lock-miter joints are run, the four sides must be cut to finished size. The photo shows only the fence and table as guides, but I also used finger boards to hold the pieces against the fence. This gave me a more uniform joint along the entire length of the cut. Test your cuts on scrap pieces first.

STEP 2 Pretty, Strong Joint • The assembled joint is as strong as it is



Resawing Sidebar

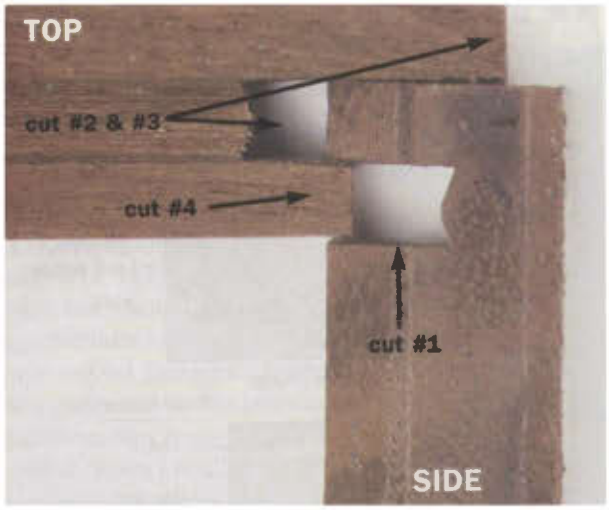
Exotic or highly figured woods go a lot further if they're resawn. The process also allows you to create your own book matched designs as on the top and sides of the JFK humidor. A ½" skip tooth blade makes quick (and square) work of most woods. The throat clearance on your band saw will determine how wide a board you can resaw, though a number of manufacturers offer 6" riser blocks as accessories to increase the depth capability of your band saw. A homemade jig like the one shown below helps keep things true and simple. Important features include a guide (preferably as high as the material being resawn), a rounded nose on the guide to provide the least amount of material wandering, and an ⅛" base setback from the guide piece to keep scraps or dust from pushing your board out of square.

Schedule of Materials: JFK Humidor

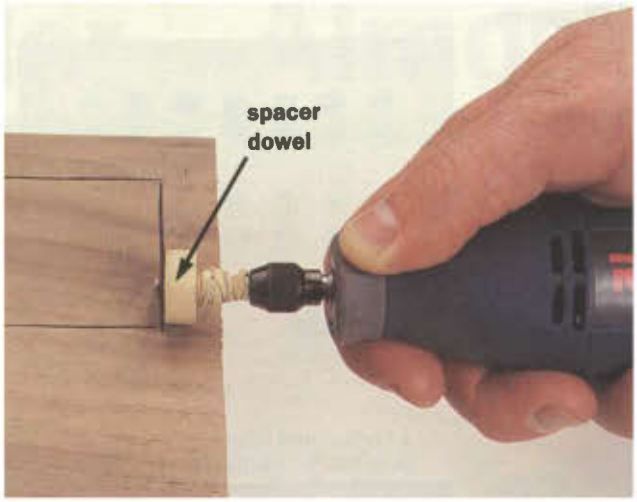
No.	Item	Dimensions T W L	Material
1	Front	3/8" x 11 1/8" x 17 1/4"	Walnut
1	Back	3/8" x 10 5/8" x 17 1/4"	Walnut
2	Sides	3/8" x 10 5/8" x 10 1/4"	Walnut
1	Top	3/8" x 10 1/4" x 17 1/4"	Walnut
1	Bottom	1/4" x 9 7/8" x 16 7/8"	Masonite
4	Top & bottom liners	3/8" x 4 1/4" x 16 1/2"	Cedar
2	Back liners	1/4" x 4 1/16" x 16 1/2"	Cedar
1	Front liner	1/4" x 3 3/16" x 16 1/2"	Cedar
2	Bottom side liners	1/4" x 2 3/8" x 9 1/2"	Cedar
2	Middle side liners	1/4" x 2 1/8" x 9 1/2"	Cedar
2	Upper side liners	1/4" x 3 1/8" x 9 1/2"	Cedar
4	Drawer runners	1/4" x 3/4" x 9 1/4"	Cedar
2	Lid front/back liners	1/4" x 3/4" x 16 1/2"	Cedar
2	Lid side liners	1/4" x 3/4" x 9 1/2"	Cedar
2	Tray front & back	1/4" x 2 7/8" x 15 15/16"	Cedar
2	Tray sides	1/4" x 2 7/8" x 8 11/16"	Cedar
2	Tray bottoms	1/4" x 4 1/4" x 15 5/8"	Cedar
2	Drawer fronts	3/8" x 1 7/8" x 16 1/8"*	Walnut
4	Drawer sides	1/4" x 1 7/8" x 9 1/8"	Cedar
2	Drawer backs	1/4" x 1 7/8" x 15 3/4"	Cedar
4	Drawer bottoms	1/4" x 4 7/16" x 15 11/16"	Cedar
2	Front/back mouldings	3/8" x 3/8" x 18"	Walnut
2	Side mouldings	3/8" x 3/8" x 11"	Walnut
4	Drawer pulls	3/4" dia. x 3/4"	Brass

*Drawer fronts are cut from case's front piece.

Parts available from The Woodworker's Store (800) 279-4441, Brass quadrant hinges #11099 $25.99 a pair; Credo Humidifier #10372 $54.99; Hygrometer #10398 $24.99; ¾" Solid brass knobs #36459 $2.99 each.



3 MAKE THE TOP • The half-blind tongue-and-rabbet (really, tongue-and-dado) joint for the top is made on the table saw and provides a captured panel that looks like it's glued to the sides. The first saw pass defines the groove in the lid's sides, front and back (1). The second and third cuts (2 & 3) define the top lip and the groove in the edge of the top. The final pass (4) trims the tenon on the lid to fit into the groove in the side.



4 A FAKE, JUST LIKE THE ORIGINAL • The original Dunhill humidor includes a false drawer detail at the top of the front panel. Because they didn't include knobs to complete the effect, I followed their lead to be true to the original. A standard v-groove router bit makes a decent width groove but doesn't quite reach the necessary depth. With the tools I had available, I marked out the location with a marking gauge and followed with an abrasive disc in a Ryobi multi-tool. I used a piece of dowel to make a stop to limit the depth of cut.

attractive and will no doubt cause some conversation among your woodworking friends. The joint's strength comes from the much larger gluing surface and the locking feature keeps the parts in place when clamping.

STEP 3 Planning for Growth • It isn't likely that a 10½" wide piece of walnut is going to grow or shrink dramatically (⅛"). However, by using this saw-made joint to capture the top piece, the depth of the lower tongue and groove can be left a little sloppy to make sure it will never be a problem. If I hadn't found a router bit to make the locking miter joint in photo one, I would have used this joint on the corners of the box as well. While cutting the sides for the top, a ¼" x 3/16" deep groove can be cut ¼" up from the box's bottom to capture the Masonite bottom.

STEP 4 False Front • While I used a Dremel-type multi-tool to cut the fake top drawer detail on the front, a 60 degree, razor-point v-groove router bit also would have done the trick.

STEP 5 Clamp Every Corner • Gluing the box takes a few clamps, but in general all the joints lock together so it's unlikely pieces will slide out of position while clamping. Remove excess glue and set the box aside to dry.

Ripping the lid from the box can be tricky. Work with

Storing Your Cigars

Dickson Farrington, director of premium product marketing at General Cigar Co. Inc., gave us some pointers about proper storage techniques for cigars and suggestions on getting a humidor ready for use. General Cigar provided the Macanudo and Partagas cigars shown in the opening photo.

Proper cigar storage is important to the enjoyability of a cigar. While it's true that a dried-out cigar can be revived, the flavor will likely never be quite the same. The following tips will keep you from ever having to worry about reviving a cigar.

To precondition a humidor before storing cigars, wipe down the cedar sides of the humidor with a damp sponge moistened with distilled water (which you also should use in the humidifying unit). Distilled water keeps minerals and chemicals from closing the pores in the sponges and foams used in humidifiers, thus lengthening their life span. Also, regular tap water can allow those same chemicals and minerals to collect on the stored cigars and affect the taste. You should always follow the humidifier manufacturer's instructions as some require different maintenance.

With the cedar moistened, the wet sponge should be left on a plate in the bottom of the humidor for 24 hours. The humidifier should also be filled with water and put in the box during this time. After about 48 hours, the sponge can be removed and your cigars can be safely stored in the humidor.

Preferably, cigars should be stored in a humidor with the cellophane removed to allow them to age

5 TIME TO GLUE • With all the joinery completed, I dry-fit the case and fine-tuned it a bit to get the best joints. I advise actually putting the clamps on during a dry-fit, as it gives you a good idea of any potential problems or awkward maneuvers you might encounter. When you're ready, put glue on the locking miter joints, but only put a little glue on the front joint of the top. Leaving the other three sides glue-free allows for expansion without breaking the joints. The bottom should be installed without glue.

6 THE CEDAR LINING • The cedar is a bit of a puzzle, but not complicated. Start with the top and bottom pieces, then work your way toward the top. Each piece should be fit as you go to ensure the best fit. The sizes in the Schedule of Materials are accurate, but check them against your box to make sure. The drawer runners are simply captured between the side pieces. All the lining pieces are superglued in place after the humidor is finished. The bottom and middle side pieces are mitered only on the back edge, allowing the front edge to overlap the drawer opening and serve as a drawer stop.

the larger bottom section against your fence. As you make each cut, slide a wedge into the kerf to keep it open. Make your last cut on the back so that a longer edge is lying on the saw table. Get a friend to help remove the top after the final cut. With the box separated, plane and sand the joint so the lid seats properly to the lower box.

STEP 6 **Fit the Cedar Liner** • The next step is simply press-fitting the pieces of cedar into place as shown on the diagram. The top edges of the upper side liners are beveled at a 45 degree angle (leaving a small flat at the top), while the lid's side liners are beveled in the opposite direction to form an airtight lip at the joint. Fit the liners so the lid will fit snugly.

STEP 7 **Holey Drawer Bottoms** • Because the humidifier is located at the top of the box, equal humidification throughout the box is difficult. To help this, all three bottoms have rows of holes to allow moisture to circulate throughout. **(See "Storing Your Cigars")**

The bottoms of all three boxes were made of two pieces (to use the best material yield in the cedar) and were drilled using a 1" Forstner bit in the drill press. To keep the drawers from sliding out all the way, but to allow for removal when necessary, a small piece of walnut was screwed to the

and season at an appropriate level. That being said, one advantage to leaving the cellophane on the cigars is if you remove an unwrapped cigar from the humidor to be smoked later in the day, it will begin to dry immediately unless stored in a travel humidor. Cellophane will not stop the aging and maturing process of the cigar, but it will slow it down.

When you're storing a lot of cigars, such as in this humidor, rotate the location of the cigars. If left unsmoked, the cigars stored at the top of the humidor should be moved to the bottom, and vice versa, on a monthly basis. There can be as much as a 10 percent difference in humidity between the top of the box and the bottom.

The optimal level of humidity for cigars is 70 percent, with an acceptable range of between 68 to 72 percent. But don't fixate on your hygrometer. Unless you're spending $300 for this gauge, it could be off as much as 5 percent in either direction. The best way to tell if your humidity level is correct is to feel the cigar and taste it.

Spanish cedar linings in humidors also enhance a cigar's aroma and taste. One misconception is that cedar assists in keeping the cigars moist. In fact, the cedar tends to absorb humidity, removing it from the controlled environment. However the historical and beneficial presence of cedar surpasses its negative affect on the humidor's humidity level.

If a cigar is stored in a well-made humidor with stable humidity, a cigar can remain smokable indefinitely. Depending on the cigar, often the longer they are stored the taste will improve and mellow with time, as with a fine wine.

drawer back just tight enough to allow for snug movement. When opening the drawer, the tab catches on the rail above, stopping the drawer.

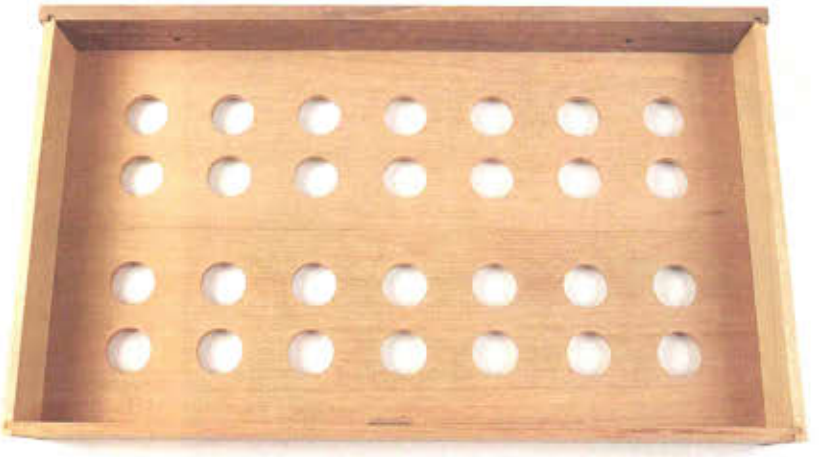
STEP 8 Indented Handles • Locate the routed finger pulls in the lid as shown in the diagrams and mill them with a router mounted in a router table. Another router table setup is for the quarter-clover detail on the boxes base molding. An ogee bit works well for this task, then glue or tack the moldings in place.

STEP 9 Install the Hinges • The hinges are cut into the box in a two-step process. First rout an appropriate mortise space for the hinge plate in the lid and box sides. Then chain drill a line of 1/8" holes, 5/8" deep, to allow the hinge support arm (shown in inset) to retract into the sides. Clean up the mortise with a small chisel or knife to make the hinge work smoothly.

You're just about done, though the drawer fronts will need some fitting, and the drawer pulls still need to be installed. At this stage, however, finish sand the exterior to 180 grit and slightly round over the top edge of the lid by sanding.

I took the high road on the finish. Remove the Spanish cedar because it doesn't get finished, and start with a sealer coat of lacquer inside and out (varnish or shellac are good alternatives). After the first coat, I applied a grain filler (tinted with brown oil-based stain) to level out the surface of the wood. I next applied two more coats of lacquer, sanding between each, and let the finish cure for 48 hours. The next step was wet sanding the finish with 400 grit wet/dry sandpaper using mineral spirits as a lubricant. After an hour of sanding, I achieved a closed-pore surface. I then applied two more coats of lacquer and finally rubbed out the finish with 0000 steel wool and Murphy's oil soap to dull the finish to a satin sheen.

I'm looking forward to the challenge of stocking this humidor (and emptying it). **PW**



7 DRAWERS & TRAYS • The drawers and tray are joined together with simple tongue and rabbet joints, also formed on the table saw. With the tray, the sides are captured between the front and back. The bottom fits into a 1/4" groove held up an 1/8" from the bottom edge. The drawers' backs are captured between the sides, while the drawer front fits over side tenons cut to leave an 1/8" overhang on either side of the drawer. The inset photo shows the simple drawer stop mounted to the drawer back.

8 ELEGANT HANDLES • The finger pulls for the lid were cut with a simple 1/4" cove bit set in a router table. Since this was a stopped cut in the middle of a piece, I marked the first and last contact points of the bit on a piece of tape at the top of the fence. I then marked the corresponding handle location on the top edge of the lid. Make sure you either turn off the router when the cut is completed, or stop moving the piece forward as you remove it from the bit or you'll end up with tearout as shown on the left edge of this sample piece.

9 TRICKY HINGES • To mark the hinge location, place it flush to the inside corner on both sides and use a scratch awl or pencil to mark the sides. The hinge pocket is cut using a straight router bit set for 1/8" depth. I used an 1/8" diameter upcut spiral bit, which made freehanding the cut simple, with little cleanup necessary.