Remarks by Kim C. Steiner
Director, The Arboretum at Penn State
Dedication of the Hosler Oak
The Arboretum at Penn State/Mitchell Tract
Wednesday, September 28, 2005
2:30 p.m.

Good afternoon, I am Kim Steiner, director of the Arboretum and professor of forest biology. I thank you all for coming.

It’s a beautiful day, and I can tell you all that a week ago I wasn’t so sure that that would be the case. Hurricane Rita was spinning out of control down in the Mississippi Valley, and some models projected it coming up into Pennsylvania. We’ve been praying for it to rain; we just didn’t want it to rain on this particular day.

We planted this tree on March twenty-first of this year, the first day of spring, and it was on that day or near that day that I had lunch with Charlie Hosler and he told me a story about when he was a young faculty member here in the meteorology department. Milton Eisenhower was the president of the University and Milton’s brother, Ike Eisenhower, was the president of the country. And on many occasions he would get a call from the White House, sometimes from Ike, asking if the weather was going to be all right the next day to fly. And when Charlie would say, “Yes,” Ike would go to bed and presumably sleep well, but sometimes Charlie didn’t.

And so when I woke up this morning, I realized when I looked outside and saw how nice the weather was, that I need to worry about the trees and I’ll let Charlie worry about the weather.

We’re very gratified with the turnout. I think this is a great compliment to Charlie Hosler and I also hope it shows your enthusiasm for the Arboretum.

It was said by someone that all great institutions tell interesting stories about their founding, stories that people tell to one another with satisfaction, stories that become part of the culture of the institution. Only time will tell whether The Arboretum at Penn State becomes a great institution, but we are certainly planning for that to happen. And I think that the planting of this tree is the beginning of one of those interesting stories that someday we are going to tell about ourselves.

The donor of this tree is George Biemesderfer, who is here with his wife Joyce—and, George, why don’t you and your wife stand up so that folks can see who you are? And George’s son Chuck and, Chuck, your wife, Kelly, right? And your two sons, Kobi and Tanner. Would you all stand up?

Now the story is that after graduating from high school in 1950, George’s father encouraged him to go to college, but George was reluctant and uncertain about how college would benefit him.
So I think what happened then is that George’s father said to him, “Now, look. You’ve got a cousin, Charlie Hosler, who is a graduate student at Penn State. Why don’t you go up and visit him and talk about college? At least do that for me.” So he did. It was the winter of ’50-’51. He arranged a meeting with Charlie, who was at that time a doctoral student in meteorology.

According to George, Charlie’s advice was: “George, you come from a very small town and so did I, and I can’t tell you what useful things you’re going to learn in college if you come here, but I do know that Penn State will open your mind to new ideas, not necessarily better ideas, but different ideas from what you have now, and maybe some of them will be better and will be helpful to you.

“If you complete a four-year degree you get the full dose of these new ideas, but even if you only stay for a year, you will get part of a dose. And even a part of a dose will be worth your money and time, so you really have nothing to lose as long as you are willing to give it a try for a semester or two.”

So George came for a year, beginning in 1951, and he ended up staying for four years and completing a degree in landscape design. George returned to where he grew up and has owned a nursery in Lititz for many, many years. He is a prominent member of his community.

He told me that over the years he has often reflected on that visit 54 years ago and on how Charlie’s practical advice about education ended up making a very large difference in his life.

I like that story because it is a perfect vignette of Penn State’s land grant heritage, and it is an example of the profound and positive effects that our faculty have on many thousands and thousands of young men and women.

We are here now because George wanted to repay the help he received from Charlie by donating a large tree to the Arboretum, and we gratefully accepted that offer.

Now I won’t take the time to tell you about the details of moving this tree, although I would very much like to. There were a great many people involved and the process took a very long time – in fact, three years – from the time the tree was initially dug and then replaced, in place where it was, until this spring on March twenty-first when we moved it up here. It was a very careful, very methodical process. The tree is a white oak, *Quercus alba*, and white oaks are very difficult to transplant successfully, not to mention the fact that almost any tree this big is difficult to dig and replant and keep alive. We are pretty sure that this is the largest tree to be planted at this campus since the early 1930s. What happened in the early ’30s is the planting of the two large elms at the front corners of Old Main, on either corner facing College Avenue. And it may actually be the case that this tree is larger than those. I don’t think that it is taller, but in terms of bulk and weight, it might have been bigger.
This location, well back from Park Avenue, may look a bit odd to you right now, but it was chosen to put the tree in a spot that will be prominent when the Arboretum is completed. The Arboretum will grow up around the Hosler Oak, much as a building is erected around a cornerstone, and that is why we are calling this our witness tree, as others have said – it will witness the development of the Arboretum.

Now you may have heard that we are planning for our witness tree to be around for the next 300 to 400 years. We chose a white oak because white oak has a long lifespan and also because this particular species was a major component of the original forest of this area, along with chestnut and some other species. Not only in the valley here, but probably on this particular spot white oak was growing in the pre-European forest. In fact, we have white oaks in the woodlot behind you, several hundred yards back that way, down the hill in the Arboretum, that date back to the time that the Iroquois occupied this part of Pennsylvania. One fell over several years ago that had 317 growth rings in it. So I think we have good odds on the 300 to 400 years, assuming we give this tree a reasonable amount of care down through the years.

Now, speaking of care, in that regard, as you can see, we have the tree on life support over here. The tree is “instrumented” and the water tank is not there now – it’s been taken away I guess for this occasion – but we have been watering the tree throughout the summer whenever the tree’s vital signs indicate that it has stress. Dr. Jim Sellmer in horticulture has been the guy who has headed that up. And that has happened frequently because you know we’ve had a really, really hot and dry growing season. But, as several of us have commented before we assembled, this tree is remarkably healthy; it is really looking good, and I think that that is a testimony to the skill of George and his crew and the particular care that our people have provided to the tree these past several months. All that said, we have bottled water in back here, and if you don’t drink all your bottled water, just walk over to that fence and dump it on the other side. We’ve already put 40 or 50 inches of water on that tree this summer and a little bit more won’t hurt.

In closing, I think it is very appropriate that the first tree in the Arboretum honor one of our most distinguished Penn Staters, that it’s transplanting was a task really of somewhat epic proportions, and also that the tree is going to be around here, I think, for several centuries. So we have started a story that the Arboretum will tell about itself, a story of the origin of a future landmark. It may not exactly sound like a myth to you right now, but we have many years to embellish that story before the tree finally comes down.

Thank you.