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Beck Hall

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What's in a Name? Beck Hall

If any particular professor could be considered an academic superstar during Central's early decades it might be George Beck, who taught geology and the sciences at the Washington State Normal School (WSNS), now known as Central Washington University, from 1925 to 1959.

Beck was born in Alvord, Iowa, on December 26, 1892. He attended public schools in Minnesota and eastern Washington before his family settled in tiny Marlin, Washington (northeast of Moses Lake), where he graduated from high school in 1910.

He began teaching history and music at Snoqualmie High School in 1914 and later that year entered the University of Washington. After taking classes for two years (1914-16), he returned to teaching high school for several years at Moses Lake, Ephrata, and Yakima.

In 1925, he was hired by the WSNS to teach music and introductory science (he founded the Pep Band in 1926). He also returned to college, earning a BS in botany from Washington State College (now Washington State University in Pullman) in 1931. In 1934-35, he studied geology at the University of Washington, finally receiving his MS in geology from UW in 1947.

In addition to his teaching at Central, he served as a geologist for the Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Kittitas County from 1935-37, and served as head of the Science and Health Division at Central after 1942.

In 1931, while hunting for rocks in the Vantage area, Beck uncovered part of an 18-inch stone log, which extended about six feet into a hard layer of basalt. No wanting to damage the log of petrified wood, he left it in place, hoping to return someday to excavate the site, which appeared to have several such logs.

However, according a 1957 article in the *Campus Crier* student newspaper, a few months later the Washington highway department started to build a new, wider road through the area that would have destroyed the site where he found the logs.

"Action began at once," the paper noted. "Mr. Beck asked the Ellensburg Kiwanis Club and the Chamber of Commerce to help have the area set aside as a reserve, and he asked the highway department to change its survey slightly.

"Thus, with the invitation and acceptance of the state parks board, the Gingko Petrified Forest had its start."

From 1935-37, a CCC camp was assigned to the site, which became a state park in 1935. The Corp erected several stone buildings at the park, which are still used as a museum and visitors center.

The park's significance lies in the presence of petrified remains of a number of species including ginkgo trees (now largely found in Asia), which are rare in North America.

In addition to helping get Ginkgo Petrified Forest State Park established (which now covers more than 7,000 acres), Beck was widely published during his life and served as editor of Fossil Woods of the Far West. At the time of his death, he was known to have the largest collection of petrified hardwood in the U.S.

Beck retired from Central in 1959 and died in Yakima in 1982.

In 1964, Central erected a cluster of residence halls (now collectively known as the Bassetti's, after famed architect Fred Bassetti). One of the new halls was named to honor Beck in 1965.

Beck Hall, still in use, was built in the Late Modern architectural style. The exterior is smooth brick with occasional diagonal brickwork designs flush with the wall. The structure houses 137 students.