



The photograph above shows the view northeast across Chesler Park in the late afternoon in March. The photograph at right is of sunrise in early spring looking west to the Chesler Park reef. Photograph above taken by Michael Denis; photograph at right by Clyde Denis.

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The Origins of Chesler Park

Determining Late 19th Century Snowfall Records and Occupations of Inscription Writers in Canyonlands N.P.

By Clyde L. Denis

In the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park is a park-like setting called “the Shangri-la of the Needles.”^{1,2} Post-World War II visitors effusively depicted it “as lovely a spot as the West affords,”² “a place of hidden beauty surpassing anything ... yet seen.”³

This location is Chesler Park, an elliptical grassy enclosure approximately one mile by a mile-and-a-half that is bounded by 300-400-foot tall Cedar Mesa sandstone pinnacles consisting of alternating striated bands of pink, beige, salmon, white and orange, as can be seen in the photograph at left. Inside the rim of pinnacles is another reef of towers a half-mile long that splits the park in two and gives the area a singular immensity and sense of perspective, as the photograph depicts below. On the west side, where the pinnacle barrier opens up in the far distance, the often snow-capped Henry Mountains are visible, and just to their right lies the distant orange, red, or deep purple, sawtooth-topped Elaterite Butte located in the Maze District across

the nearby Colorado River. Most spectacular to the north of Chesler Park – and visible from nearly all places within it – are a mystical set of needle-like eroded sandstone pinnacles, often called the Devil’s Pinnacles, which can be seen on the following page. These towers, and others like them, led this area to be favorably compared to a “city of churches”^{4,5} with “a thousand spires point[ing] heavenward.”⁶ The juxtaposition of savannah-like vistas with undulating walls of colorful pinnacles is “a land to dream over.... paint[ing] a vivid picture of time eternal.”⁷

Notwithstanding the beauty and renown of Chesler Park, the origin of its name remains elusive. Two early-1950s published articles about the Needles area indicated that the name derives from a cattle stockman who first used the area.^{2,3} The most specific dating for when this putative cowman named Chesler used the park comes from a 1952 article in which an 1885 date is mentioned.² The cowboys from nearby Dugout Ranch were the probable source of this information,³ as they had been using the Needles District for winter cattle grazing since at least the 1890s.⁸ The earliest known written record of the name of Chesler related to this area refers to the nearby Chesler Canyon in a 1933

geological description of the region (based on first-hand explorations conducted in the summer of 1927).⁹ Unfortunately, there is neither mention of an individual named Chesler in local histories nor is there any record of a Chesler in the area in or around the time that the name was probably attached to this section of the Needles.

The identification of an inscription near Chesler Park, close to the southern regions of Red Lake Canyon in the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park, has led to a reassessment of the origin of the name for Chesler Park. The inscription reads, “H. Shisler Feb. 6. 92” as can be seen in the photograph on Page 5. Its apparent age and cursive script style, and the remoteness of the location, suggests that this inscription has a late 19th century origin. Moreover, a local historian writing in 1918 mentions a German named Shisler in nearby Bluff in the winter of 1893.¹⁰ It should be noted that, at that time, the name “Chesler” was fairly rare according to the 1870, 1880 and 1900 US Census Records¹¹ and that the Shisler surname was seven to eight times more prevalent. The existence of references to Shisler, and none to Chesler, suggests “Chesler” might have come into

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Morning view to the north across Chesler Park in late winter. Photo by Clyde Denis.

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being as the garbled version of another man's name and that H. Shisler was the original eponymous cowman.

Many names result from adulteration of the originals.¹² Indian Creek cowboys, like others, have made such mistakes. The authorized biography of the well-known cattle baron of Dugout Ranch, J. A. Scorup, changed the name of Goudelock, an initial co-owner of the Indian Creek Cattle Company¹³ from whom Scorup directly obtained his Indian Creek land, to Gadlock.¹⁴ More recent college-educated cowboys who worked for Scorup in the 1950s were

not above misspelling Goudelock and even adding an extra 's' to create Chessler.¹⁵

But was this H. Shisler tending cows in the Needles District in mid-winter of 1892? Local former cowboys of the Scorup-Somerville outfit and ranchers in the vicinity indicate that the then-grass-rich areas of Cyclone Canyon, Upper Red Lake Canyon, Chesler Park, Devil's Lane and other nearby regions of the grabens would have only been used by Indian Creek cowboys in the winter for the purpose of grazing their cattle.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ These areas had no permanent water sources and could not be used at any other time of the year for cattle unless

there was sufficient snow on the ground. For the years in which there was no snow, then there were no cowboys and cattle.¹⁵ Other areas of the Needles District, such as Lost Canyon or Salt Creek, contain more reliable water sources and would be used by the cowboys from fall to spring, after which the cows would be brought to their summer grazing in the nearby Abajo Mountains or other higher-elevation areas.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

Two other factors would also have contributed to winter grazing: no snowfalls greater than a couple of feet at one time (otherwise the cattle could not find the grass), and sufficient rains for the grasses to prosper during the previous

growing season. On a related note, the southern reaches of Red Lake Canyon where H. Shisler left his inscription were directly connected by horse trail to Devil's Lane, Chesler Canyon and the Indian Creek ranches at and near present-day Dugout Ranch.⁹

To determine whether the Shisler inscription corresponded to a local stockman tending his cows in February 1892, the dates for inscriptions in Chesler Park and the nearby graben areas were compared to likely seasonal usages. In this region from 1887 until 1945, 15 inscription dates with at least both a month and a year were located. Fourteen of these fifteen dates occurred from January until March with the sole outlier being from June 1938 (Table 1; Suppl. Table 1). In contrast, after 1945, until 1993, nine inscriptions in these areas were found, and none were from the winter months, ranging as they did from April to September (Table 1; Suppl. Table 1).

As the Chesler Park/graben region of the Needles District became a popular jeeping destination after World War II and cowboy use of this area declined until the establishment of Canyonlands National Park in 1964, it appears that typical use involved tourists visiting the area in non-winter times to avoid inclement weather. In addition, winter use of the area by jeep would have been very difficult due to the snow creating treacherous, if not impassable, conditions over Elephant Hill and other jeeping trails. Prior to 1945, however, use of the Chesler Park/graben areas correlated with cattle grazing and horse travel during winter months. The dating of the Shisler inscription can, therefore, be reliably assumed to be from 1892 rather than 1992.

The lack of inscriptions in winter months from 1946 until 1963

when cattle were still occasionally grazed in the area dependent on adequate snow levels¹⁵ relates to a severe drought that affected southeast Utah from the early 1940s until the early 1960s.¹⁸ In fact, in the mid- to late 1940s, J.A. Scrup initiated the construction of the vehicular trail over Elephant Hill into the grabens precisely to circumvent these water limitations.¹⁹ A bulldozer was consequently used to construct water reservoirs and thereby extend the season for cattle grazing. These efforts ultimately failed due to flash floods and water loss down the grabens.^{15,19}

To delve further into the relationship between snow levels and inscriptions in the Chesler Park/graben area, the snow records in nearby Moab were analyzed. From 1900 until 1939, snow records in Moab (elevation around 4,000 feet, which is below that of the Chesler Park/graben area's 5,600 feet) indicate that in all but four of these years, snow accumulations reached at least 6.7 inches.

Most importantly, all years from 1900 until 1939 that contained winter inscriptions in the Chesler Park/graben area had at least this number of inches of snow in Moab (Table 1). Critically, the only inscription in the Chesler Park/graben area not in a winter month

in this period, June 1938, actually coincided with a year of little snow in Moab (1.5 inches).

The amount of snow that fell in Moab is only an estimate for what fell in the Chesler Park region. Because of the increased elevation of the Needles area relative to that of Moab, more precipitation in general would have fallen at the higher elevation, and more of that precipitation would have been in the form of snow.²⁰ Moreover, precipitation across the Colorado Plateau is extremely variable.¹⁸ For example, the towns of Hanksville, Blanding, and Moab – which surround the Canyonlands – can display considerable differences from year to year, although major trends can also be discerned. However, two of the inscriptions at Chesler Park comment directly on the snow: “Feb. 6, 1919, SNOWING LIKE A SON OF A BITCH;” and “Feb. 6, 1933, SNOWING LIKE HELL.”

In contrast to the early 20th century, for the years 1945 until 1963 when cowboys could have been tending cattle in the Chesler Park area, only eight of these eighteen years had snows of at least 6.7 inches in Moab. Because inscriptions were left in the Chesler Park/graben region from 1900 until

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H. Shisler inscription near the south part of Red Lake Canyon. Photo by Michael Denis

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1939 in 22 percent of the years that had at least 6.7 inches of snow in Moab, it would be expected based on this rate of inscription writing that in only one or two of the eight years from 1945 until 1963 would a cowboy tending cattle in the winter have left an inscription.

This value is not significantly different from the actual value of zero winter inscriptions that were found. It should also be mentioned that there is no correlation at all between when inscriptions were recorded after 1945 and whether snow had fallen the previous winter; nearly half of the inscriptions in this period were written in years without winter snows in Moab.

These correspondences indicate that winter inscriptions in areas lacking permanent water sources in this area of southeast Utah relate completely to that of cowboys tending cattle in their winter range. In comparison, Lost Canyon Cowboy Camp of the Needles District, a site which had more reliable water sources, contains eleven inscriptions before 1946 that range from October until June with only two in the winter months (Table 1; Suppl. Table 2).²¹ Shisler, when he left his inscription in February of 1892, was apparently

a cowman from the Indian Creek area.

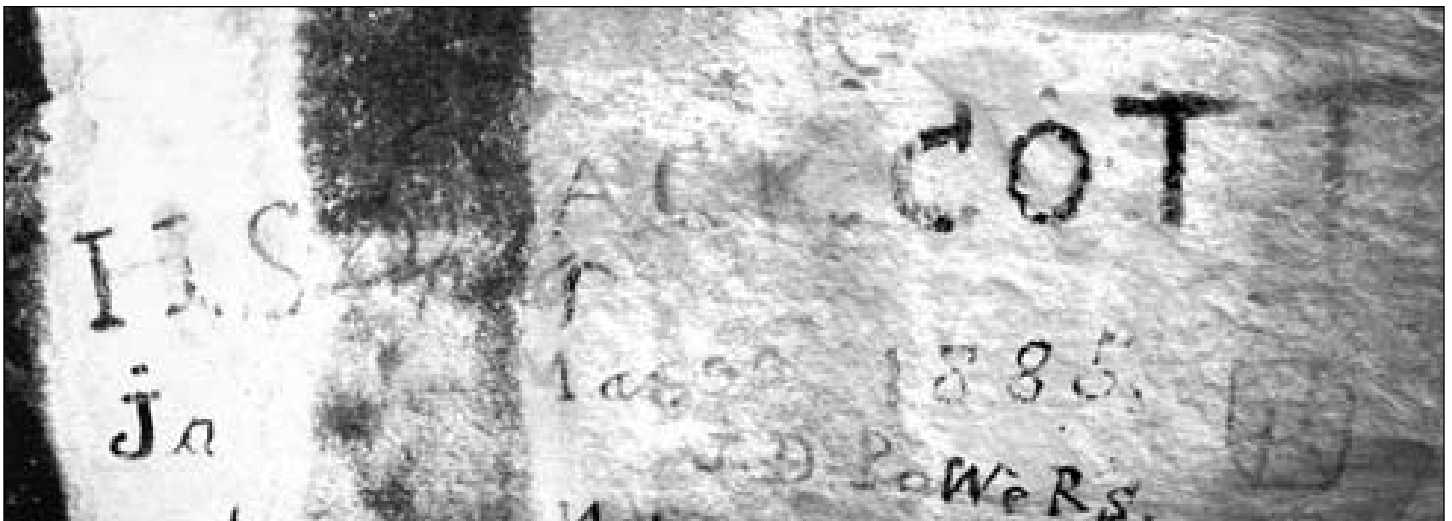
Interestingly, as an aside, these relationships allow the determination of snowfall in years prior to that of 1900 when local records were not kept. The oldest local snowfall records for southeast Utah commence in 1900 and were from Moab. Four inscriptions were found in the Chesler Park/graben area for the period prior to the twentieth century: 1887, 1889, 1892, and 1896. The 1889 inscription year lacked a month and a correspondingly legible name, but based on the above analysis it can be assumed to be from the winter months of January to March. In fact the winter of 1888/1889 is known to be a significant year of snow in nearby Monticello, amply testified to, as it was the first year that Mormon settlers wintered there.^{10,22,23} The other years have only vague or contradictory descriptions about snow levels for southeast Utah.

We suggest that, at least in the Chesler Park/graben area of present day Canyonlands National Park, the years of 1887, 1889, 1892, and 1896 had significant snows.

But was Shisler even present when the major byways of the Chesler Park/graben area

were named? The answer to this is certainly yes. Running parallel on the western side of Chesler Canyon is Butler Wash. Its junction with the Colorado River was called Butler Canyon (now named Lower Red Lake Canyon). The crossing of the Colorado River at this spot was referred to as Butler Crossing. These were all named after Monte Butler, a member of the Wild Bunch who used to rustle cattle across the Colorado and who lived in Robber's Roost near the Maze District of Canyonlands.²⁴ The Wild Bunch was in this area from the late 1880s until the late 1890s. Butler, himself, was present during some of these years, apparently between 1893 and the turn of the century, and he left his inscription in the Maze District in 1897.^{24,25}

Devil's Lane, Devil's Kitchen, Devil's Pocket, Devil's Park, and Devil's Pinnacles were all named because cowboy D.L. Goudelock indicated that one night he saw the Devil ride his hobbled mule up and down the Kitchen and Pocket area.^{15,26} "Just been over there too long and the rocks started moving," is what he said.²⁶ Goudelock, himself, did not arrive to settle in the Indian Creek area until around 1893.^{27,28} This spate of naming occurred, therefore, during



H.S. inscription along Indian Creek near Newspaper Rock. Photo by Clyde Denis.

Shisler's documented presence in the area.

The H. Shisler inscription near Red Lake Canyon is not the only mention of Shisler. Adjacent to Newspaper Rock State Park along Indian Creek there is an inscription (in charcoal) reading "H.S." tied to a "Ja" (with dot over the capital "J") as seen in the photograph below.²⁹ This location was near the site at which the first ranchers in 1885 constructed their homes and from which their hired cowboys would work.³⁰ No other cowboys whose initials were H.S. are known from this time period, making it very likely that the "H.S." inscription belongs to H. Shisler. On the opposite side of a run of desert varnish is the date "Mar 23 1885." While this date could be attributed to that of Jack Cottrell and J.D. Powers who put their names above and below the date as seen in the picture on Page 6, there is good reason to believe that H.S. wrote the date and not Cottrell and Powers. The "ar" in the month is written in cursive, a script style Shisler employed for his 1892 inscription and for the "a" in the "Ja," while Cottrell and Powers used only simple printing.

Because all three inscriptions at this site avoided the desert varnish and each other, they may have been written at the same time.³¹ The existence of these two inscriptions place H. Shisler in the Indian Creek area at least from 1885 to 1892 and, therefore, during the time period when the other major routes and regions of Chesler Park and the grabens were being named.

We can further conclude that Shisler was of German heritage, although the name Shisler is itself an Americanized spelling of the German Schissler or Schisler.³² While the word "Ja" is spoken in many countries (for example, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, and Holland), in the

1880 U.S. census, only immigrants who had come from Germany had the name of Shisler, Schissler, or Schisler.

Shisler's German nationality and probable accented speech may have been critical to the adulteration of his name to Chesler. His pronunciation of his name may readily have been misinterpreted by the cowboys who inhabited Indian Creek and who spoke with their own accents, many of them hailing from Arkansas, Texas, Georgia and North Carolina.

As for Shisler, we have little other information. In response to an extremely exaggerated report of gold "strewn all along San Juan Canyon"³³ by the Navajo trader J.P. Williams,³⁴ at least 2,000 individuals seeking their fortunes came through San Juan County between the fall of 1892 until about the spring of 1893.¹⁰ The non-native population at the time was only about 370.³³

In January, or thereabouts, of 1893, one of these individuals left an indelible impression on a local Mormon: "A German barber named Shisler, wearing a long patriarch beard, went from camp to camp and from door to door with razor, scissors and comb, offering to shingle or shave whoever had the price thereof."¹⁰ It is very likely that this description was of H. Shisler. Only five percent of the Shislars in the 1880 U.S. census were of direct German extraction, and given the population of the country at the time of 1893 (20 million) and the total number of male Shislars present in the country (about 300), there is less than a one percent chance that another German Shisler was in the area of a possible 2,000 to 7,000 itinerant fortune seekers.³⁵

As he was probably unsuccessful in finding significant amounts of gold like almost all of these individuals,³⁴ and was

obviously no longer trying to make money tending cows, proffering haircuts might have seemed like a reasonable alternative. It is, therefore, most interesting that in a little canyon near Bluff is the following inscription carved into the rock: HSHILER, 1893 JUNE 4 (with the 'J' backwards).²¹ This could be the work of H. Shisler at the tail end of the 1893 gold rush that was centered in Bluff. The presence of the first initial as 'H' and Shisler's demonstrated propensity to leaving inscriptions at different locations supports this supposition. Also, at that time the Shisler surname was eight-fold more common than was Shiler. The lack of the second 'S' may have been inadvertent, as inscription errors have been noted before.²⁴ Unfortunately, when carving into rock, one cannot go back and correct one's mistakes. The backwards 'J' even suggests that the inscription writer's mental state may have been impaired. In southern Utah, no other record after 1893 has been found of an H. Shisler who was German.

Prior to 1892, the two known German H. Shislars that were of the proper age for being a cowman (between 17 and 50 as of 1885) were not living even remotely near Utah. However, we believe Shisler's name could have been Henry, as the 1870 census lists a 16-year-old boy in Philadelphia (a major port for immigration at the time) of unknown ancestry and family connection living alone in a boarding house.

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- ²⁵Frank Silvey, "History and Settlement of Northern San Juan County," p. 58.
- ²⁶Bob Dunnagan, "Dark Canyon Plateau Trip," CANY 36607, Folder 381, p. 3.
- ²⁷Cortez, op. cit. p. 215.
- ²⁸Palmer, op. cit. p. 69.
- ²⁹The dot over the "J" is not normally found unless the "J" is in lower case. Perhaps it was mistakenly placed there. Alternatively, in Bavarian or Swabian sections of Germany, a small circle is sometimes placed over the "a" and this may have been the intention (<http://users.elite.net/runner/jennifers/yes.htm>).
- ³⁰Silvey, op. cit., p. 36.
- ³¹Interestingly, close scrutiny of the desert varnish area to the right of the "H.S." in the photograph on Page 6 suggests a scripted "Sh" that is close to the style used in the H. Shisler inscription of 1892. The rest of the name, unfortunately, cannot be interpreted.
- ³²Many Germans verify this. This fact is supported by the U.S. 1880 census. In 1880 only five percent of male Shislars were born in Germany with the rest being born in North America. In contrast, 24 percent of Schislars and 38 percent of Schisslers were born in Germany. This suggests that the longer individuals resided in America, the more likely the Schissler and Schisler names were changed to the non-German Shisler.
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- Legend: List of inscriptions and snowfalls in that year as recorded in Moab, Utah.³⁶ N.D.: No data.
- Legend: List of inscriptions that were identified and snow levels during that winter at Moab, Utah.³⁶ N.D.: no data.

Table 1. Number of inscriptions per season and snowfall at Moab.

LEGEND

Values given are the number of inscriptions that were located during each season in the years indicated. The values in parenthesis are the range of the number of inches of snowfall recorded in Moab for the years when inscriptions were identified.³⁶

Location (yrs)	Winter (range in)	Spring (range in)	Summer (range in)	Fall (range in)
Chesler Park/ Grabens (1886- 1945)	14 (6.7-22)	1 (1.5)	0	0
Chesler Park/ Grabens (1946- 2010)	0	5 (0-9.1)	4 (0-18)	0
Lost Canyon (1886-1945)	2 (22)	3 (0-6.6)	1 (3.7)	5 (10-17)

Supplementary Table 2. Inscriptions at Lost Canyon and snow in Moab.

Legend: List of inscriptions that were identified and snow levels during that winter at Moab, Utah.³⁶ N.D.: no data.

Inscription Date	Snow at Moab (in)
November 14, 1913	10
December 16, 1917	10
1919	N. D.
October 3, 1921	15
1922	7.0
February 29, 1924	22
March 8, 1924	22
June 25, 1928	3.7
December 14, 1932	17
May 2, 1936	6.6
1938	1.5
December 8, 1939	17
April 1, 1940	0
1944	1.0
May 18, 1945	0

Supplementary Table 1. Chesler Park/graben inscription dates and snow at Moab.

Legend: List of inscriptions and snowfalls in that year as recorded in Moab, Utah.³⁶ N.D.: No data.

Inscription Date	Snow at Moab (in)
February, 1887	N.D.
1889	N.D.
February 6, 1892	N.D.
February, 1896	N.D.
January, 1911	19
February 6, 1919	N.D.
February 23, 1923	12
February 20, 1924	22
March 2, 1924	22
January 26, 1925	19
January 26, 1926	6.7
February, 1926	6.7
February 16, 1931	7.1
February 6, 1933	12
1933	12
June 17, 1938	1.5
January 22, 1939	17
April 22, 1954	0
April 17, 1956	9.1
April 1956	9.1
June 11, 1960	4.5
May 9, 1968	0