

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

#75 • Season 3 • Episode 14

12/17/2025

X Marks the Spat

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their Black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

X Marks the Spat

#75 - Season 3; Episode 14

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Host: Jim.

Jim traces the history of the word "Xmas," and pushes against the Christmas tradition of being offended by everything.

[Music]

JIM: Hello and welcome to another episode of our **Making Our Way** podcast. This will be a brief Christmas episode, not so much a gift under the tree as a stocking stuffer.

I'm Jim, and I have a question for you today. When you see the letters X-M-A-S, do you pronounce those as Xmas or as Christmas? As a kid, I'd say Xmas without a thought. Stores would paint XMAS on their windows as big as possible, where Christmas just wouldn't fit. But let me ask: X-M-A-S; do you find that to be offensive in any way?

Turns out, a lot of people do. I call it the Christmas spat, and it happens every year, and it goes something like this:

"You shouldn't be using Xmas because Xmas means we are taking Christ out of Christmas, and this is a Christmas nation founded on Christian principles, and they are turning a holy day into a holiday and we're not allowed to say 'Merry Christmas' anymore. Isn't that sad? And they're making us say 'Happy Holidays' because the lunatic left is conducting a war on Christmas. So don't use Xmas."

And that's just a neighbor on one side.

So, welcome to our brief episode, "X Marks the Spat."

Educated people, such as all of our faithful listeners, will know that the X in Xmas isn't really an X at all. Or it didn't used to be. It used to be the Greek letter X [pronounced] "hee" or "kye", which is the first letter of Christ in Greek. Xmas is not an obliteration of Christ, it is an abbreviation for Christ, and abbreviating Christ in this way turns out to be a very old, legitimate, and even reverent practice. Let's take a look.

First, a note on pronunciation. "Hee" is the Greek pronunciation, but "kye" is now how we say it in English. because we regularly mangle Greek pronunciation, which is the fault mainly of mathematicians. You remember your math teacher teaching about pi, don't you? She might ask, "Class, who can tell us the value of pi?" And some kid wearing glasses would raise his hand. "Three point one four one five nine two six..." and the teacher would stop him there, knowing that he had a good ten more decimal places ready to go. But what would have happened if the teacher had pronounced pi correctly, like this? "Class, who can tell us the value of "pee"? The value of "pee"? Anyone? Pee? Anyone?" That's how it's pronounced, and that is why mathematicians mispronounce Greek. It's really for the common good.

And, this has to do with Xmas - how?

Well, abbreviating names, especially sacred names, was once a common practice. In Latin it's called *nomina sacra* - "sacred names" - and scribes would draw a horizontal line above the name to let the reader know it's an abbreviation. The point wasn't to save space. The point was to highlight the name and afford it due reverence. And it wasn't just Christian scribes doing this. Hebrew scribes had done something very similar with the name of God as given to Moses which they abbreviated as י – ה – ו – ה [yod-he-vav-he] in Hebrew or Y-H-W-H in English. Those four letters are known as the Tetragrammaton, and many of us might pronounce Y-H-W-H as Yahweh or even Jehovah. That's where the names come from. But cautious Jewish readers would not. They would avoid pronouncing that name out of reverence. It is too sacred to utter. When reading a passage aloud, the reader might pass over the name with a paused silence. Or they might substitute other words such as Adonai or Elohim or HaShem. The Tetragrammaton is not printed in English Bibles. I checked many translations. Most versions replace it with the word LORD in all capitals, a practice that goes all the way back to Tyndale himself in the 16th century.

When Christian scribes came, for example, to the name of Jesus, they could employ *nomina sacra* to use just the first three Greek letters of the name: ι [iota], η [eta], and σ [sigma], and then draw a horizontal line above to show it's an abbreviation. In Latin and in English, those three letters look like I-H-S. But the name Jesus begins with a J, so why would they use an I instead? As all fans of Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade know, "in the Latin alphabet, Jehovah begins with an I," because Latin doesn't have a letter J. English didn't get the letter J until after Shakespeare, which means he never got to use it. And so he never wrote a play called Romeo and Juliet, but I hear his play Romeo and Juliet is quite popular.

So, IHS represents the name Jesus. But people have given it other meanings, too. In Latin, IHS could mean *Jesus Hominum Salvator*, which is "Jesus, Savior of men," quite appropriate. Or it could mean *in hoc signum*, which is Latin for "in this sign," which is the way Constantine saw it in a vision on his way to becoming emperor. "In this sign, conquer."

In English, IHS is sometimes interpreted as "in his service."

And now finally back to Xmas.

When Christian scribes came to the name Christ, they would often use the first two Greek letters - Χ ["hee"] and Ρ ["rho"] - as an abbreviation, and those two letters were also used to abbreviate the word Christmas as early as the 12th century. By the Renaissance, the standard abbreviation was Xmas ["hee-mas"] or Xmas ["ex-mas"].

So Xmas is not some modern dismissal of Christ. It has a 500-year history behind it, and it certainly does not take Christ out of Christmas. The only people who should be offended by Xmas are those who make a living out of taking offense at everything, or those who take offense to raise their own social capital to gain status in their social and political identity groups.

When we celebrate this season, whatever we celebrate, let's not fall for the social scammers seeking to recruit us into their program of division and discontent and false outrage and imagined persecution.

Let's instead celebrate according to the good that is in us. Let's celebrate for the good we

can impart to others. Perhaps doing so will elicit good from them as well.

[Music begins]

When I see the letters X-M-A-S today, I pronounce them as they were designed to be pronounced, not as Xmas, but Christmas. Problem solved.

And that concludes "X Marks the Spat." Next week we'll take a look at how celebrating Christmas might just be like sending Jesus a belated birthday card.

Thank you for your company today. We look forward to you joining us again as we continue making our way.

Oh! And Happy Holidays everyone.

Until next time.

[Music ends]