Episode 504: Trails West: How Freedom Settled the West

Guest: Brad Birzer

WOODS: Unfortunately we can't talk about music this time; we're going to have to talk about something else — fun in its own way, but not quite as much as Big Big Train, but I'll link to that on the show notes page for people who don't know what I'm talking about. If you want to have your life improved, you will listen to their music. But we have foresworn to discuss this. Instead, I want to talk about your new course, which is getting rave reviews. I had somebody on Facebook — I think I forwarded this to you — saying that listening to your course has been one of the best experiences of her life. Now, how about that, Brad Birzer? You are improving people's lives in all different ways. The course is called *Trails West: How Freedom Settled the West*, available over at LibertyClassroom.com. Before we get into the weeds here, give me the overview. In a few minutes, give me the overview of the story of the settling of the West. What is the story about?

BIRZER: Thanks, Tom, and thanks for the nice compliment. I always like having some bragging rights, especially when I talk to my wife, so that's good. The course is really — it was a labor of love, Tom, and I appreciate so much that you allowed me to do it. It was great. I had been thinking about these things and the idea of the West, at least since growing up as a child in Kansas. I actually got a horse for my first communion, which I realize is unusual.

But I was very attracted to the Great Plains and to the American West, and so the idea of, well, what does that mean for us as Americans, why did we settle this, what does it mean for immigration history, what does it mean for the free migration of peoples, what does it tell us about the nature of association and how we work together in community. All these things have really been important in my mind since I was a kid thinking about settlement. My own family came over, my mom's side came over in the 1870s and my dad in the 1880s, all from German stock, and so I've been curious, how does this mesh, how do we have these Germans who had settled on the lower Volga River in Russia for 100 years then end up in Kansas. What did they think of the Comanche or the Cheyennes? So a lot of questions that I've been asking in my own life really kind of meld to find some culmination in the course that I was so privileged to do with you, Tom, on Liberty Classroom.

So a lot of the themes — the West is often taught as basically Plymouth Rock all the way to Rodeo Drive. Kind of a silly way of thinking about it, but it's very much a part

of our nationalist — and I do mean nationalist — narrative and the way we think about the settlement of America. But I'm also interested in, well, what happens if you're standing in Hays, Kansas in 1876. What does the West look like to you? Or if you're in San Antonio in 1718, or if you're in the Pacific Northwest in 1788, which was certainly a possibility. So how does the West look, and what if we place ourselves in different positions, not just standing on Plymouth Rock and looking west, but actually thinking about the West from different perspectives?

So what I found in my own work — and I've drawn upon a lot of people, of course. Most recently, I've drawn upon the work of Terry Anderson at PERC. But the idea that the West is a place where we can actually find a kind of Lockean understanding of the world — and I wouldn't regard myself as a huge Lockean. I think there are a lot of things in Locke that are troubling. But if we just take the idea of, all right, what happens if we go out into a state of nature? What if all of these people come together who really don't know each other well? What would happen to them?

I think the West provides us the greatest classroom possible to understand what could happen, and we see all kinds of things in the West. We see conflict, but we also see harmony. We see division, but we also see a lot of coming together, especially through trade and cultural interchange. So there is a sense where we can take Locke's notion of a state of nature and actually find some harmony and unity that comes out of that, where liberty really does lead to order. And it's not imposed; it just kind of emerges in a Hayekian way.

So that's why — you know, there are a lot of reasons the West is romantic. We can think about Crazy Horse riding across against Custer, riding across the Great Plains. We can think about the mountain men going into the Rocky Mountains. We can think of last stands — all kinds of things. There's a real nobility and a real romanticism.

But I also think there's a practical understanding to the West, and that is we can really find how community and association works. Whether it's in the gold camps or on the Oregon trails, we can find a lot to study and a lot that's worth studying in the American West.

WOODS: You start off, the first three lessons are all "10 Myths That Shaped Our View of the American West," and I'd like you to share maybe what you consider to be a couple of the most egregious. Of course, I think in the popular mind when people think of the Old West, well, they think of Yosemite Sam and shootouts, and it was a violent place where person and property were insecure. Maybe the reality is a little bit more interesting than that.

BIRZER: Yeah, it most certainly is. And certainly, Tom, I don't want to dismiss all myth. I mean, myth, when properly understood, can give us a great window into the past. So I don't mean "myth" in way maybe Larry Reed might mean it or you might mean it when we're talking about economic myths —

WOODS: Right, a mythos. Yeah.

BIRZER: A kind of platonic mythos. And it's very interesting to me, Tom, because from the very first settlement of the Americas — so if we go back all the way to Columbus, there's always this kind of meta view or mythological view of what the West is and what it will play out to be, and quite often, Tom, our understanding of the West is either what we see that's best in ourselves or what's worst in ourselves. So we very often — and I don't mean to sound too post-modern here, but I think we have very often projected our best and worst selves onto the possibilities of the West, just because in our minds — that is, those of us who are not indigenous peoples — we tend to think of this as open space and territory to be grabbed.

So those 10 myths — actually, my wife and I came up with those. I have to give her equal credit, my wife, who's also a PhD with a specialty in borderlands and American West.

WOODS: I didn't know that.

BIRZER: Yeah, yeah.

WOODS: Why didn't she teach the course then?

BIRZER: Well, when we teach it at Hillsdale, we actually team teach it. So yeah, she would have been perfect, and I always run these ideas by her before we do anything, Tom. But she's done some fascinating things, especially with more popular culture in the West and also law in the West.

But the myths that we came up with were really ways of patterns of thinking, and I think some of them have been very, very helpful, especially when we think about the republican myth, that idea that there's self-sufficiency, that we take our families out, and we risk much but we also gain much; we create this almost small kingdoms, small republics of our families out in the West, which has happened quite often.

But there are terrible ones too, as you mentioned, Tom. The idea of the Black Legend, which has nothing to do with Africans, but has everything to do with the Spanish. The Black Legend, the idea that the West was originally settled as a way in which Catholicism, representing all the forces of darkness, was combatting against a kind of really tapioca Protestantism, this kind of Enlightenment idea. And the Spanish were really saddled with the notion that they were brutal, and they did nothing but harm the Indians, and they were out to rape and pillage and steal their gold. It's just not true. Every empire that went west had its good sides and its bad sides, and certainly there was brutality, but the brutality of the English among the Indians was no less than the brutality of the Spanish. So that Black Legend, which arises — and I think it — you know, Tom, you and I would probably agree for a whole variety of reasons, but arises now when we think of a terrible kind of bigotry of Hispanics as lazy or just taking siestas. A lot of that goes back to this repressive myth that we had about the Black Legend, and of course we know it's not true. All you have to do is drive around Hispanic communities in America, and generally the yards are the best kept up and you see orderliness and families and tidiness. But this myth lingers. The kind of

wetback myth, which is terrible that it's lingered for so long, and it really has its origins in that.

Or we can jump forward to — which is related — but the kind of racialist myths of the 19th century, which say that America has to be conquered from sea to shining sea by whites and white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, and no one else need apply. These things, which had a strong, strong power for a very long time, a hold over us. But then there are the good myths, such as can we create republics here or small republics — not that they don't have their downsides. They do. But these are a way of thinking about what is the West. And we get into the 1950s, and we have the kind of John Wayne Hollywood West, which is not necessarily true, but there are times where if it were true, it wouldn't necessarily be bad.

So those are the kinds of things that my wife and I try and deal with us when we look at the 10 myths. What are 10 ways of thinking? And we kind of drop it off with the New Age myth, and that's probably cheating; it's a little lazy on our part. We're not quite sure where we're at right now. I think we've tried to think, is there an 11th myth of what the West is, maybe resource extraction, something like that. I'm not quite sure, and my wife's not either. We've played around with it, and I hope we can come up with something. So we really kind of end with almost *Dances with Wolves*, and the idea of New Age man going out and settling the West, the Sedona, Arizona kind of myth and that mother goddess and Gaia — that doesn't seem as powerful today as it was 20 years ago, so I think we've got to revise some of that.

WOODS: Let me run down some of the topics that you hit on — you spend multiple lessons on some of them — just to give people a sense of the scope that we're dealing with here: Pre-Columbian Indian Cultures; The [r]epublican West, lowercase "r," of course; Demographics and Migration West; Great Plains Indians; Post-Civil War Indian Wars; and Sitting Bull, Ghost Dancing, and the Closing of the Frontier. That one I'm going to put up as a freebie, so on the show notes page, TomWoods.com/504, I'll have that one waiting there.

BIRZER: That's great. I love that lecture, and everything was really meant to kind of culminate with that lecture. I'm a huge fan of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, and I get very frustrated when Americans tend to think of them as enemies, when of course, and this part — not for our generation, Tom, and I realize I'm about five years older than you, but for our parents' and grandparents' generation, the idea that Custer was a great figure. Really, nothing could be further from the truth. The guy —

WOODS: Well, let's talk about that actually, because when people think about settling the West, and you're talking about how freedom settled the West, a lot of people — well, they know there was some kind of conflict with the Indians, and it was bad, but they don't know any details at all. And how do you fit that into a story of freedom settling the West?

BIRZER: Well, it's not easy. If there had been no indigenous peoples, no native peoples in the West, obviously the settlement of the West could be done without problem or at

least without that kind of conflict. So I don't ever want to lessen the pain that the American Indians went through.

What I would like to show, though — and I mean, there's no doubt that their culture was basically raped and destroyed, even though things like the Great Plains Indian culture in particular, that was a very short-lived culture. The Great Plains Indians, when we think of the Sioux or the Lakota or the Comanche, all of those mounted warriors, it's very noble, but that culture only lasted for maybe 100 to 120 years. It was as young as European culture was arriving there. And so the conflict for the Plains was really a conflict of various immigrant group, native as well as those who were coming over from Europe or migrating from the eastern cities. So that's not quite a fair topic, at least in terms of looking at the Indian Wars.

But when I mean we shouldn't lessen the pain of the Indians, I mean as a people probably 4.5 million strong at the time of Columbus, and essentially they're down to just 250,000 by 1890. That's a huge change for any people. So I don't want to lessen that by any means.

But in addition to that story, there is also the story of a lot of people getting along, a lot of people trading, a lot of people forming communities and being able to do so peaceably without a lot of conflict. So most of the kind of classic violence we think of, if we think of the O.K. Corral or the kind of *Gunsmoke* violence that we might have in Hollywood, most of that violence typically was violence between young men who chose to be in certain spots to shoot at one another. And I don't want to claim that's a good thing, but you generally don't have upper middle class families being involved in these shootouts. They typically happened at a specific bar where people chose to be there and know they were going to get into these violent fights. That's obviously a little bit different when we talk about white settlement coming up against Indian settlement.

But the republican idea, at least as Jefferson saw it, and it really didn't change until Andrew Jackson, was the belief that if someone like Daniel Boone, who's a perfect example, wants to go West and take his family and take his chances and settle in Kentucky, he has every right to do that. But when he gets there, he needs to expect that the local Indians are not going to be so happy with it, and he's going to have to figure out a way to have that conflict resolved. And it is a classic conflict, but nobody — you're not going to have the U.S. Cavalry riding into save Daniel Boone. He's on his own. And a lot of what we know of the nobility of what happens there, his conflict with the Shawnee and so forth, that was a conflict that essentially was freely chosen on both sides, and Boone took his chances.

So those are the kinds of things, Tom — and I realize I'm jumping around here historically — but those are the kinds of things that I think we have to take into account. It's not just here's the state moving Indians out of the way. That certainly happened, and it happened horribly. The forced migrations on the Trail of Tears was terrible. But those were things that were done at the behest of the executive power, not of individual families.

WOODS: I know Theodore Roosevelt wrote something about the settling of the West. Have you ever read what he had to say?

BIRZER: (laughing) Yes. Roosevelt's a great writer, and whenever I think about his own kind of crazy nationalism, and obviously I cringe at a lot of it, the man could write, and he could think. And he had certainly been out in the West. As a young man, he had gone out to the Dakotas to ranch, and he was very taken with the idea of the settlement of the West, and he fits what I call the progressive myth, he fits into the progressive notion that we find with other people like Frederick Jackson Turner and the belief that there's essentially a providential element of northern Europeans settling into the West and moving the Indians out. There's still in Teddy Roosevelt, even though I may not agree with all of that, I think there's still a recognition of the nobility of the American Indian and the idea, Tom, that when we walk onto the Naval Academy grounds in Annapolis, we're greeted by a statue of Tecumseh, who was a great enemy of the United States, but there he is, a beautiful statue, really honored at the Naval Academy. And that probably shouldn't shock us, because in a sense we respect Tecumseh. Even though he was our enemy, we respect him for defending his hearth and home, in the same way we should respect Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull for those same things.

WOODS: I want to ask you — suppose somebody is coming to this completely with no knowledge whatsoever —

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: — and they look at the title of your course with the word "freedom" in it, and you've got just a brief window to explain the connection between the settling of the West and the story of freedom and how one is a subset of the other, how do you make the connection?

BIRZER: Oh yeah, great question, Tom. One of the things I try to bring up, and I editorialized maybe a little bit more than I should have, but there are times when we look at the settlement of the West and it should just be mind boggling to us in a very patriotic way, meaning the best of small "r" republicanism or libertarianism. When we look, for example, at the Oregon Trail — and I'm sure many of your listeners will have played the Oregon Trail game at some point on their computer, especially if they're our age or a little bit older — that game was actually quite accurate in a lot of ways, where you arrive in Independence, Missouri, you have to form a company, you join that company, you migrate across the Great Plains. And in the 1840s, it took roughly six months to move from Independence, Missouri out to the Willamette Valley in Oregon.

And yet, what do we see during that six months across a space of land that had absolutely no formal law across it? There was no law. You leave Independence, Missouri, and you were absolutely in no man's land. And yet, what do we find? The Oregon Trail was very orderly. There were very few crimes that were committed on the Oregon Trail. Most people got along extremely well, and we know that from their

diaries. Part of it was there was a culture that allowed them to get along, but we also know that from their diaries, most people understood what their natural rights were and what the natural law was, and this was a time period in the 1840s when there were very few laws, but the laws that existed were absolutely sacred. And so we have people who are experts on American law, even though they may be unlettered. And they're going out across the plains, and they respect one another. These communities work really well.

When they get to the Willamette Valley in Oregon, they treat each other with dignity. They form communities. And so this is the kind of thing, Tom, that I think is so important that when we see people settling in the West, they almost always are ahead of the political institutions. They are almost always ahead of the legal institutions.

And yet, the kind of Yosemite Sam, Boot Hill, *Gunsmoke* kind of idea is such a small percentage of the settlement of the West, the chances of getting gunned down in the American West were much less than they would have been in certain areas of New York City in comparable times. The West was relatively violence-free, and in part because people knew who they were, they were armed, they respected one another, they knew how deadly arms could be, and they used those arms as a last resort. It was the law that was sacred to them. The gun, which was very important, was only a means by which to back up the law when the law, at last resort, failed.

So you never resorted to violence as your primary means. Violence was something that you had no other recourse, and so you had to resort to it, unless as I mentioned a little bit earlier, you were an angry young man who enjoyed violent activities, and you went to the local saloon where you knew everybody else would enjoy those activities as well. But these were usually kept away from kind of mainstream, normal middle class culture and life.

WOODS: You mentioned Terry Anderson and his work a little while ago. I want to remind people, we had P.J. Hill on this show some time ago. I'm going to link to that episode also at TomWoods.com/504, because he worked with Terry Anderson on some of this material that you're drawing from, showing that the conventional wisdom about the West that you'd get from watching the movies or television is not altogether accurate, and that the real story is much more interesting than a bunch of shootouts. The real story of people settling and somehow figuring out ways to live peaceably among one another when they often came from disparate backgrounds, and it would seem as if you had a recipe for violence there, it's interesting that it didn't turn out that way.

Let's take some of the remaining time we have to say something about the Indian Wars after the Civil War. Is this purely and simply a matter of a fight over turf? What exactly is going on in these wars?

BIRZER: Well, thanks, Tom. That's a tough question and a very fair one. The Indian Wars that we know of, the ones that we remember especially through Hollywood movies, the wars that happen after the American Civil War, were all, every single one

of them without exception, all of the wars — and they're not really wars; they're a series of battles that we call wars — but they really were all attempts by the U.S. government to keep American Indians on the reservations.

And there's a long history to this. Prior to Andrew Jackson, the belief was that almost everything west of what was called the Permanent Indian Frontier, which would essentially be today the dividing line today between Kansas and Missouri, but running north and south, so that line that separates the Dakotas from Minnesota all the way down to the Gulf Coast, that whole line was seen as the Permanent Indian Frontier. That is, everything west of that line starting where Kansas City is today, that would all be Indian territory. That changed pretty dramatically once we started the Oregon Trail and we realized that we could settle the Pacific Northwest and the West Coast, but people still jumped over the Great Plains. So for most of the 1840s and 1850s, it was presumed that the Great Plains would remain all Indian land.

And there were some very fair — they didn't work out well, but they were at least intended to be fair — treaties that were signed with the American Indians in the 1850s, especially under Franklin Pierce as president. And these were called the Big Reservation Treaties, and what the American Indian agents would do is they would lay out these absolutely huge maps on floors at places like Fort Laramie in what's now Wyoming, and they would have the American Indian tribes draw lines. Now, there are all kinds of absurdities to this, but they would actually have them draw on the map where their territory was, and then the various Indians could dispute with one another how that worked out. But what the intent of this was was to give the American Indians huge pieces of territory on which they could live. Now, there are problems with it, but it was generally meant to be a very good thing.

After the American Civil War, especially under Andrew Johnson and then Ulysses S. Grant, the entire policy changed, so that rather than giving the Indians huge, basically what would be considered small nations or big republics in the middle of America, now they were given, under the new reservation policy post-Civil War, they were given tiny patches of land. Just horrific. And this was all part of what the post-Civil War progressives were trying to experiment with. They were clearly experimenting with social engineering and trying to see what they could do to the American Indians. So they took what was I would say very fair chunks of land to just these tiny postal stamp pieces of land that were often the worst forms of land, and they demanded that the American Indians not only Christianize, but learn American farming.

And when many of the Indians like Sitting Bull made the very logical argument — we're horse warriors; at least let us ranch — the response to that by the American government was no, ranching is not conducive to civilization; you must farm. It was just heinous. And of course we took American Indian children away from their families and educated them on the East Coast at boarding schools. All this was a part of the kind of proto-progressive movement of the 1860s and 1870s, all this social engineering, and an attempt to make the Indians into something that they clearly were not, or what we believe they should be. So all of the reservation wars without exception to my mind, Tom, were absolutely unjust. They were all attempts to put Indians back on

the reservation. But the reservations themselves were already just these horrific places after the Civil War, where the Indians simply could not eke out a living.

And there are some great ironies in this. So you find someone like William Tecumseh Sherman, who of course was brutal during the American Civil War, but when he found the Navajo Indians on this terrible postage stamp of land in New Mexico, he personally went to Congress and demanded that they be given back their own territory, and this is why, to this day, the Navajo have the largest single reservation in America. And it's huge. And they have that because of Tecumseh Sherman's intervention. And that's a fair piece of land. What the Navajos own today, that is essentially a fair piece of land. What most American Indians own, like the Sioux, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, it's a travesty.

And John Miller has done great work on this. P.J. Hill, you mentioned, Terry Anderson. We have over the last 150 years basically created the first welfare-dependent societies on these reservations. They are nothing but minor experiments in socialism — they're minor only in the sense of the size. But they're horrific experiments that have gone wrong in every single way, and they've been a disaster.

The casinos, ironically, Tom — and I'm no huge fan of gambling, but of course as a libertarian, if you want to do it, that's fine — but ironically, the casinos have been one of the greatest boons for American Indians, only because it has allowed them to have a source of wealth independent from what the federal government has been able to regulate. There are problems of course that go with casinos — huge problems — but that has allowed them at least to overcome some of the reservation policy that was imposed on them under Presidents Johnson and Grant.

WOODS: Brad, I'm going to let you run, but I want to point out one of the many virtues of this course is precisely that you simply tell the truth, and you follow the truth where it takes you. There are some people who are so opposed to political correctness that their knee jerk response is to defend the U.S. government in all situations, and so if somebody says, well, I think some of these peoples might have been treated unjustly, they see a liberal when they hear something like that. That's a Pinko. We can't admit that. We're going to wave the flag and shut you up. And that is not really what — I know that you've taught conservatism, and you've written a biography of Russell Kirk coming out later this year. That's not what conservatism used to be about or really is about, and so it's great to see in your course that you're just telling the truth. And we have nothing to be afraid of in telling the truth. Why not just tell it?

BIRZER: Let me put it this way, Tom, and I thank you for that. I would say this: if you're a real libertarian and Republican, you should love Crazy Horse. If you're a nationalist, you should love Custer. That I think would be the easiest way of separating that.

WOODS: Indeed, indeed. Well listen, everybody. Check it out, LibertyClassroom.com. It's our 14th course. We're going to get Brad on for a live Q&A one of these days, but you can download that course, listen to it on the go. Or if you prefer video, you can

watch Brad on your screen. He has exquisite PowerPoints. It's just top notch. So Brad is going to be working for me for the rest of his life.

BIRZER: (laughing) Yes. I love it. It's a good partnership, Tom. Thank you.

WOODS: Brad, the pleasure was absolutely mine to have you onboard. We're thrilled about it. I know you have to run to the airport, so go and travel safely, and we'll talk to you soon.

BIRZER: Thanks so much, Tom. Bye.