



Dear Calgary: Actor Anson Mount says thank you to his adopted home during production of Hell on Wheels

ANSON MOUNT

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Gavin Young, Calgary Herald CALGARY AB: JULY 26, 2014 -- Anson Mount walks the red carpet at the Hell on Wheels Season 4 premiere for cast and crew at Telus Spark on Saturday evening. *GAVIN YOUNG, / CALGARY HERALD*

My mother, for all her agnosticism, is as inescapably Episcopalian as she is southern, although many would argue that concept is redundant. Regardless, when raised in the south, such lineage comes with expectations shouldered upon you like a powder satchel at wartime. Of those expectations, three tend to be given the most importance during a southern upbringing: self-deprecating humility, vigilant honesty, and “thank you” cards. As I have learned not to incur the wrath of my mother — and as I am probably too old to begin the blacksmithing of tradition — it occurs to me that I do owe a card to Calgary.

But, just as thoroughly, I was taught that anything store-bought can threaten your humility and your honesty. So I have chosen instead to make this card from a more familiar pulp. In the South, ours was not the pecan or the dogwood or even the tulip poplar. Ours was a tree that had no name. Many not from there have never seen this variety and so doubt our sincerity in its existence. But transplants and curious wanderers will stumble upon it from time to time, and they claim, much as we do, that it is as corporeal and robust as the live oak, as fruitful as the persimmon. Its roots are firm and many: dirt roads, cake sales, the art of the auctioneer, red-eye gravy, Old Testament Sundays, midnight catfishing, an abiding fascination with the written word, an almost unhealthy fascination with football, mist that rolls into the hollers in late spring, music that yearns nostalgically for Ireland or Scotland or West Africa.

Its leaves seem to bark their colour at you come November, soon to lose strength and bed down the earth with that faint smell of life mouldering into sleep. But, at any time of year, if you wander far enough south you will see our tree draped in an almost silken, hairlike thing called Spanish Moss. Counter to the assumption of most visitors, Spanish Moss does not act as a leech or parasite upon the tree. This exotic bromeliad gains no sustenance at all from its purchase upon us. All of its nutrients, in fact, come from the wind.

One of the great joys of being southern is in being from a place of robust identity — albeit one that is constantly changing if not debated. It is a baseline to which one may return in order to gauge the vagaries of both life and self. It is a point of recognition for fellow southerners with itchy feet. It is the home we long for in the simple things.

Having spent time in your Calgary's arbour, I can honestly say that the roots are just as strong, the leaves just as verdant. The hospitality shown to myself and to the rest of the visiting cast and crew of Hell on Wheels has been nothing less than exceptional. From the moment we began production, the people of Alberta — from Calgary to Okotoks, from Tsuu T'ina to Canmore, High Plains, Drumheller, Bragg Creek, and all surrounding areas — displayed nothing but enthusiasm and welcome. As the seasons went on and fortune continued to shine, the famous spirit of Alberta celebrated with us and arms just grew wider.

When asked what the best part of Hell on Wheels was, I often give one of two answers: "Getting paid to ride on a horse" or "I learned." One of the many things I learned about television production is the importance of having a supportive community. In fact, you can see it on the screen. It is there, in every shot, reflected in the time we were allowed to achieve the ambitious values of today's television expectations. You can see it in the

optimism and excitement of the background artists who came day-in and day-out, their faces smiling, their hands ready to shake, unflappable in the face of often harsh conditions. You can see it in the fact that I — and the rest of the cast — graduated with all our limbs intact, supported by an incredible team of wranglers and stunt personnel, not to mention the attention paid by all those surrounding a kind of work that requires diligent safety. And you can see it in the very land.

The beauty of Alberta is undeniable. From the rich grit of the mud in spring to the dreamlike yellow of the rapeseed to the utter still of the fall, *Hell on Wheels* would simply be a different show, and lesser for it, had we not chosen to base ourselves in Calgary. Even the weather, which at first seemed daunting, became another player with whom we learned to dance and enjoy.

Alberta, simply put, is a film and television-maker's dream. With local talent already in place, and with a new versatility provided by the recently completed \$28-million Calgary Film Centre — not to mention the unforeseen opportunities presented by the new National Music Centre — the possibilities for Calgary's production future could be considerable. They are certainly tantalizing given the recent downturn in oil in a city that has seen unprecedented growth. I, myself, am constantly raising eyebrows in Los Angeles and New York when, instead of complaining about some presumed boredom, I actually have nothing but praise for both the spirit of your province as well as for the viability of more production.

To be sure, Alberta offers something unique in the world of film production. But that does not mean that such individuality trumps the bottom line in any industry. The new TV Series cap limit on Alberta Media Fund's production grant is threatening to severely limit, if not outright halt, the potential boon that your local industry has been working toward for so long. At its current level, it is only

competitive in attracting lower mid-level film budgets and below. Add to this the inexplicable continuation of the previous administration's non-bifurcation policies — disallowing television series to participate in Alberta film funds for multiple seasons — and the likelihood of Calgary attracting new series is almost nil.

Los Angeles used to carry the moniker of being “the entertainment capital of the world.” As the industry has grown; as production quality has evolved in both film and television; and as the partnerships between the United States and Canada have grown even more mutually beneficial and solidified, the mantle is now carried by all of North America. I feel privileged to have tasted Alberta's contribution, but I am ravenous for more. I want desperately to keep returning to Calgary — to the friendships I've made, to the quality of work I've learned to strive for, to the people who care for me and support my efforts without fail. I feel like a gratefully adopted son. Thank you for all you have done for me. I hope to see you again very soon.

Anson Mount played Cullen Bohannon for five seasons on Hell on Wheels. The series finale airs Saturday on AMC.