



‘Hell on Wheels’ season 5, episode 8 review: Cullen vs. Swede

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A funny thing tends to often happen to us when it comes to AMC’s “Hell on Wheels“: Somehow, we continue to constantly underrate it in our head, and every time it returns with new episodes we’re continually surprised by just how

good it is. Maybe a part of it is because it's not spoken about enough in the media, or maybe a part of it simply comes down to it finding a way to outdo itself time and time again.

Either way, there was some masterwork throughout Saturday's midseason premiere, an episode that you could argue was the culmination of a several-year journey in the relationship / showdown of Cullen Bohannon versus The Swede. The two men finally made it to a point where there was no other course but violence; specifically, Swede made it that way by hunting down Cullen's wife Naomi and family, laying waste to many of them. In true Western hero fashion Cullen arrived there just in time to keep Naomi alive, and engage in what was one of several great exhausted man-battles of the night. In between these sequences and the mud fight a ways back, few shows really do this better. Yes, it's real life: People *actually do get tired*.

We suppose that the biggest surprise in the feud is that Cullen did not kill his arch-nemesis outright when given the chance. Why not? He had justification to do so, but at the same time, this is not the Cullen Bohannon of the first few seasons. He's been forced to kill before, and now he finds any way not to. That's why we bought him journeying towards Fort Douglas with a different objective in mind: Douglas. It almost proved deadly, but eventually, he found his way to some sanctuary and healing ... though not without some scars.

As for Thor Gundersen, he found himself in a cell after standing trial. He met Cullen one last time before going to the noose, and showed little repentance or remorse. Instead, he uttered one chilling comment that God should have mercy

on *his* soul, not his own. His last words at the noose were “I am Thor Gundersen from Norway,” and that was it. He tried to claim that last bit of identity he never perhaps had on his own.

Even in these final seconds we thought that perhaps The Swede was going to escape death once more, but even in this world the most deadly of outlaws meet their end. Tonight, that came for him with a rope and with Cullen looking on.

Was this the greatest episode of the entire “Hell on Wheels” run? It’d be wrong to make a snappy judgment given that the saga of Elam was especially phenomenal around the time the character was killed off. Still, this was incredible throughout, from the performances of Anson Mount and Christopher Heyerdahl to the creative decision to give some perspective on Thor’s life in the opening minutes of the episode. There are only six episodes of the series left, and this premiere had us feeling pretty darn sad about it.

Grade: A.