



One Series From AMC Is a Forgotten Gem of the Western Genre

By Christian Petrozza

Period westerns aren't a common occurrence on modern television anymore, but AMC's *Hell On Wheels* remains excellent to this day.



Summary

- *Hell On Wheels* ' plot focuses on an unlikely lead which gives its anti-hero plenty of character development throughout the series.
- The variety of villains and supporting allies on the show open up a commentary on the history of the Wild West.
- One of the show's most deserved cold killings is served by a wonderfully unexpected character.

Westerns used to be the bread and butter of serial entertainment on Television for decades from *The Lone Ranger* to *Gunsmoke*. Television and films were enchanted with the romance of the old west. Fast forwarding to the last couple of decades, Westerns often take different forms than the typical period-style adventures. *Deadwood*, *Yellowstone*, and *Firefly* are all very specific

versions of the genre, from antiquity, to modern-day, to the far future, Television has had to re-flavour the genre to keep Westerns relevant. With *The Abandons* on its way with a stacked cast and up-and-coming creators, it's time to look at a show that trailblazed modern period-style westerns on television.

So what happens when a series truly allows itself to stay nuanced and contemporary, whilst staying true to its time and genre? What show brings that level of detail that blends fiction and history so close together that audiences feel like they are living it? One such show ran for five long and immersive seasons, and it was *Hell On Wheels*. From 2011 to 2016, AMC ran five seasons of a Western which truly transported audiences between 1865 and 1869. A time when people's identities were shaped by their roots, their jobs, and their previous loyalties in the U.S. Civil War. The show's honesty in portraying and representing characters from multiple experiences and sides allowed for a truly spectacular tapestry of the building of railroads during this time of enterprising frontierism, and the drama that ensued around it.

Hell On Wheels Has The Ultimate Anti-Hero

Character Name	Cullen Bohannon
State of Origin	Mississippi
Played By	Anson Mount

It would be extremely hard to write the character of Cullen Bohannon, played by Anson Mount, into a promising TV show in 2024 that would appeal to larger audiences. This is one of the many reasons this show is a great example of how to acknowledge but also present history through drama and character development. The rarity of headlining such a character and turning him into someone people could understand would be a huge undertaking for any writer, and *Hell On Wheels* did it perfectly. Cullen Bohannon's early life was steeped in the lifestyle of someone living in the Confederate States. He was born and raised in it, even continuing his family's tobacco farm and keeping his family's slaves. However, he met a Northern woman named Mary who convinced him of the evils of slavery that quickly made him change his ways. Although most of this past is fragmented in small moments of exposition and a few flashbacks, *Hell On Wheels* introduces audiences to the new Cullen Bohannon, constantly trying to do better, despite his past, and being reprimanded and chastised for trying to be different from those unwilling to change or acknowledge his change.

In a time when industry, immigration, and "progress" were rapidly changing the landscape of the United States, the mentalities of the people thrust into these changes were too stalwart in their religious, political, classist, and ideological beliefs to accept one another. However, they would tolerate it in the name of capital and community if the person was skilled and able. This is where Cullen Bohannon wins over the people. He's experienced as a military veteran, farmer, and railway foreman, and merits others for their openness and positive work ethics, which is why he is constantly combating the shadow of corporate greed that hangs over Cheyenne in the shape of railroad magnate Thomas 'Doc' Durant. His time during the Civil War was full of horrible deeds and learning about the railroad destroying supply lines, but he received his reality check when he returned from the war to find Union soldiers had destroyed his home and devastated his wife

Mary and their family. It's this deep trauma from his past that keeps him untrusting and cunning against any enemy who threatens his friends and the innocent. Cullen is full of depth, nuance, and grit that becomes a multidimensional Western lead in the series.

The Villains and Allies Expand the West's History



IMDb Score	8.3/10
Seasons	5
Starring	Anson Mount, Colm Meaney, Kasha Kropinski, Common, Christopher Heyerdahl, Robin McLeavy

Although there is plenty of creative license and fiction added to create *Hell On Wheels* as a Western series, the show is a creative retelling of the events surrounding the real-life historical characters of Thomas Durant, Collis Huntington, Brigham Young, and Ulysses Grant. Thomas Durant and Brigham Young are both considered profound antagonists throughout the series, Thomas "Doc" Durant being the spear header of the railway project that Cheyenne is centered on, and Brigham Young as the Mormon religious leader that "The Swede" Thor Gunderson allies with to gain religious power and protection. These real-life characters may be embellished and dramatized to fit the fiction of the show, but they also set the tumultuous landscape in which the show dips its drama.

Although Thomas Durant is often seen as an evil-doing taskmaster of the railroad, the show slowly reveals that he is also a cog in the wheel created by larger railroad magnates who are competing with him and dispassionately want to buy him out. A result of the popularity and opportunity for the common people that railroad building brought to an area also attracted those who wished to cheat and take advantage of its bustling community. This is where Thor

Gunderson comes in, quickly becoming Cullen Bohannon's "Joker to his Batman." The longer Thor descends into madness with every plot overthrown, the stronger and more confrontational he becomes, constantly testing Cullen to turn to his wartime barbarism again.

The Biggest Gun-Down is Best Served Cold



Character	Ruth Cole
Relations	Daughter of Reverend Nathaniel Cole
Appears in	30 episodes

Cullen Bohannon had many moments of weakness where he turned to the drink or finally threw the first punch in a fight, but one of the greatest and most shocking showdowns on the show was cut short by one of *Hell On Wheels'* darling characters, Ruth Cole. When Cullen Bohannon's rival, his old war buddy Sydney Snow, begins stirring trouble in Cheyenne, the plot begins to thicken on how Cullen will deal with his unhinged friend. At the time, Ruth became somewhat of an adopted mother to Ezra, an orphaned Mormon boy she had nursed back to health. Unfortunately, when Sydney Snow sets fire to a church full of wanted men, including Ezra, who had run and hidden in the church for safety.

For those familiar with Ruth, she was a very moral-to-a-fault and faith-driven woman with an immense amount of patience to tolerate the constant violence and horrors of the frontier. With the loss of this child, and with no one willing to make him atone for his sins, Ruth snapped. Cullen Bohannon, in an attempt to apprehend the unhinged Sydney, isn't able to before Sydney is gunned down in the street by Ruth with a shot in the knee, and then his ribs. The way the show *Hell On Wheels* subverts expectations of a showdown between these thick-as-thieves friends with a righteous and well-earned moment of local justice from Ruth was a huge stand-up-and-cheer moment for fans. Although this scene leads to some tragic consequences, Ruth is shown as

the unlikely grim reaper of justice against the corrupt and evil chaos of Sydney Snow, which for that one moment, put the entire town into submission. So often, characters in films and TV get ill-earned moments without proper build-up which is often just to pay fan service, but in *Hell On Wheels*, every character earns what they put into their story, with unique, intense, shocking, and satisfying results. This show is a must-watch for lovers of the Western genre.