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# From the Iron Horse to Hell on Wheels: The Transcontinental Railroad in the Western

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# **From *The Iron Horse* to *Hell on Wheels* The Transcontinental Railroad in the Western**

Kenneth E. Hall

"I'm crazy about trains!" says Doc Holliday (Jason Robards) to his friend Wyatt Earp (James Garner) in *Hour of the Gun* (Sturges Ch. 6), explaining why he's waiting on the Contention train. Of course he's really there to help Earp get his revenge on Ike Clanton (Robert Ryan) — but then we never quite know with Doc Holliday.

Trains are central to the Western, and not just in name only: the Central Pacific was only one of the major lines which crossed the West in the years after the Civil War. Transcontinental rail service was perceived as economic and military necessity even before the War. Abraham Lincoln, prescient in so many things, was on the mark when he is supposed to have demonstrated his interest in such a project in his first meeting with rail pioneer Grenville Dodge. Lincoln was in fact a preeminent railroad lawyer before the war. He approved the construction of a transcontinental line even in the midst of wrangling with uncooperative Congressmen and generals.

During the Civil War rail, was essential to North and South, although much of the traffic was necessarily combined to the major theaters of war, mostly east of the Mississippi. Several films which qualify more or less as Westerns because of their period accoutrements (horses, carbines, revolvers, and so forth) despite their setting in more easterly regions concern the battles over railroads, usually efforts by the North to destroy Southern track as an efficient means of cutting off trade to the South. One of the more well-known of these films is Ford's *The Horse Soldiers*, about a daring raid by Union cavalry into Confederate territory — Mississippi — to tear up track and wreak general havoc with Confederate supply. Starring John Wayne as the cavalry commander and William Holden as a Union surgeon who gradually befriends him, the film was based on the actual raid by Col. Grierson, a commander with little formal military experience — he was a music teacher! — but with natural gifts as a guerrilla commander. Not one of Ford's best films but generally

entertaining nonetheless, it does highlight the difficult and dangerous task of attacking (and defending) the rails during the War.

Yet another example of a film about the battle over the rails during the War is the surprisingly effective Disney production *The Great Locomotive Chase*, with Fess Parker and Jeffrey Hunter. The film portrays, in a generally accurate fashion, the audacious attempt by the Andrews raiders from the North to steal a locomotive in Georgia in 1862 and use it to run along the rails northward, destroying bridges and track. Andrews (Fess Parker) and his men were pursued through northern Georgia by an intrepid train employee (Jeffrey Hunter) and his assistants in another locomotive and were eventually captured. Several were executed as spies and were the first recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor. The locomotive, nicknamed the Old General, is still on display at the excellent Southern Locomotive Museum in Kennesaw, Georgia, near the site of the original theft.

The Civil War conflict carried over into disputes and violence with the railroads — not yet transcontinental in the first years after 1865 — as film settings for robberies and financial manipulations and shenanigans. The border regions of the war — Missouri and Kansas, particularly, but also Arkansas and Tennessee — were the stages for continuing dissension and mayhem, and in Westerns (or maybe Midwesterns from our perspective), the Jesse James 'cycle' is central to this treatment. The first and in many ways the best of the James films is *Jesse James*, directed by Henry King and starring Tyrone Power as Jesse, Henry Fonda as Frank, Randolph Scott as the sympathetic lawman, and Henry Hull and John Carradine in important supporting roles. As do most Westerns based on historical figures, this film takes liberties with the known facts and creates, or perpetuates, a Robin Hood face for the sociopathic outlaw. For our purposes, the most important stretch of the factual record is the foregrounding of the role of the railroad and its interests in the depredations on the James farm which, according to the film, turned Jesse and Frank into outlaws. Although the James brothers and their cohorts, the Youngers, did rob trains and probably saw the railroad managers as enemies of a sort, historically their major animus — especially Jesse's — was directed against local Missourians and Kansans who had been Unionists or lukewarm Confederates in the war. The train robberies carried out by

the gang, bold as they were, appear from this perspective as means to an end.

The emphasis on the railroad as a perfidious Union corporation — a mechanized carpetbagger as it were — is even stronger in the sequel to King's film, *The Return of Frank James*, directed by German emigré Fritz Lang, with Fonda returning as Frank, Henry Hull as Col. Edwards, and with the addition of a rather insipid would-be newspaperwoman played by incongruously beautiful Gene Tierney. The real centerpiece of the film is a scene-stealing performance by engagingly hammy Hull as Col. Edwards, the lawyer defending Frank. Edwards launches into a folksy diatribe in his courtroom defense against the railroad and its iniquitous persecution of Frank and his dead brother. (The Edwards character is liberally based on the real John Newman Edwards, a veteran of the Confederate Shelby Iron Brigade whose journalistic efforts helped materially to create the Jesse James legend.) Other James-themed films featuring the rails include *The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid* and *The Long Riders*. (Ironically, as one of the bandits, Clell Miller [R. G. Armstrong] points out in *The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid*, they ride in the train on the way to the raid in Minnesota after having robbed their share of trains: "I cain't get used to bein' on a train that [I'm] not fixin' to rob!" [Kaufman Ch. 4].)

After the war, momentum for a transcontinental railroad grew apace. The journey from one coast to another was very difficult and dangerous by any route, requiring a commitment of some six months for one-way travel. So the postwar era, with its emphasis on unity and reconstruction, of regions and of economies, was propitious for the construction of a rail system linking the already existing eastern railroads with the West Coast. The most celebrated aspect of the construction is the competition between the Union Pacific line, begun at Council Bluffs, IA, and the Central Pacific, begun in California, as they raced to reach Promontory Point, UT, designated as the connection point between the two lines. The rivalry was lively, tough, and sometimes violent, until the Golden Spike was driven at Promontory Point. The Union Pacific story has served as the subject of several films, including *Union Pacific*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, and of the continuing cable TV series *Hell on Wheels*, now beginning its fourth season. Other Westerns have been set on specific branches or

sections of the national railroad in the West, such as the Kansas Pacific (*Kansas Pacific*) or the Denver-Rio Grande (*Denver & Rio Grande*). Some films have featured railroad detectives (*Whispering Smith*, *Night Passage*), while others have used the train as the venue for conflicts concerning cattle towns (*Dodge City*). In still others the railroad is important but not central: the Earp films, including *Wyatt Earp*, *Tombstone*, and *Hour of the Gun*; the recent *Appaloosa*; and *The Wild Bunch* and *The Professionals*. Railroad workers are featured in several films but appear in a unique manner in the 1970s cult TV series *Kung Fu*, with the late David Carradine as an exiled Shao-lin priest who assists oppressed Chinese rail workers in the excellent pilot episode. An interesting example of a modern-day detective-thriller film set in the West and coded as a Western, with the railroad as a crucial plot element, is *Switchback*, with Dennis Quaid and Danny Glover, both Western film veterans, in a pursuit plot which features Colorado rail locations.

The great classic film about the building of the transcontinental railroad, *The Iron Horse* (John Ford, 1924), contains elements borrowed by many later directors. Concentrating especially on the building of the Union Pacific, the film pays tribute to Abraham Lincoln's role in approving the overall project. Besides the reverence accorded to Lincoln and to the work in general, John Ford contributes his now-familiar humorous touches — Irish comedy, rivalries over women, fighting in the saloons, and so forth. The film also includes direct references to "Hell on Wheels" as a moveable location, in this case the saloon/court of Judge Haller. A romantic subplot between the hero Dave Brandon (George O'Brien) and his childhood friend Miriam Marsh (Madge Bellamy) is neatly encapsulated in the image of the two rails from West (Central Pacific) and East (Union Pacific) joining at Promontory Point. The rail junction is explicitly tied to the two lovers reuniting, as Brandon had been working on the CP, while Miriam stayed with the UP (Ford, *The Iron Horse* Ch. 25). An elegant image shows Dave posed on the rails, alone with the landscape and the horizon of possibilities for the country (Ford, *The Iron Horse* Ch. 27).<sup>1</sup> The film also includes elements characteristic of the Western

<sup>1</sup> This optimistic perspective contrasts with the early 1960s environmental view put into the mouth of trapper Jethro Stuart (Henry Fonda) in *How the West Was Won*: "That blamed whistle's like the crack of doom for all that's natural" (Hathaway, Ford and Marshall Ch. 30).

genre such as Indian attacks, struggles with inhospitable nature, and gunfights.

*Union Pacific*, directed by the ubiquitous Cecil B. DeMille, focuses on difficulties in the construction of the railroad. True to the showmanship of its director, the film features big action setpieces and liberal dashes of moralizing. DeMille was always an entertainer, and this impulse shows clearly here in the engaging performance by Barbara Stanwyck as a wise-cracking and driven Irish "daughter of the railroad." DeMille displays a strong command of the genre here, as one might expect from the man who had been involved with Westerns — despite his reputation as an epic showman or huckster — since 1914, when he co-directed *The Squaw Man*. More recently, he had directed Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur in *The Plainsman*. Brégent-Heald and Wagner discuss *Union Pacific* and other DeMille films, including *The Plainsman*, as examples of his epic Western production.

As Scott Eyman notes, "*Union Pacific* is essentially a remake of John Ford's *The Iron Horse*" (Eyman 335).<sup>2</sup> He distinguishes DeMille's style from Ford's in the important respect that DeMille is "interested in spectacle for its own sake," while Ford used it to deepen the complexity of the film (Eyman 336). And Eyman observes that "Unusually for DeMille, the plot mechanism involves capitalist chicanery on the part of railroad entrepreneurs" (Eyman 336). In fact, the structure of the film bears some similarity to *The Plainsman*, as both films, about the opening of the West, begin back East in Washington, shortly before the death of Lincoln. Both contain early scenes of "capitalist chicanery," one about railroads, the other about selling surplus arms to the Indians. A further source for the screenplay, at least "nominally" so, was the Ernest Haycox novel *Trouble Shooter*, which gave DeMille his hero character, a railroad trouble shooter played by Joel McCrea.<sup>3</sup> Although an unwieldy film, *Union Pacific* succeeds in entertaining, with the irrepressible Stanwyck and with solid contributions from other cast members, including the offbeat bodyguards, Fiesta and Leach, played by Akim Tamiroff and Lynne Overman. As one would expect from a DeMille film, the

<sup>2</sup> Louvish (348–49) also notes this connection.

<sup>3</sup> A cleverly placed reference to the Haycox source has Jeff identifying himself to Sid Campeau (Brian Donlevy, one of the crooks) as "Assistant Superintendent" of the railroad, to which Campeau responds, "Fancy name for trouble shooter."

production quality is high. The railroad setting is displayed quite well, with good special effects for the period.

The points of contrast between the current television series *Hell on Wheels* and the DeMille film are instructive. ('Quality TV' has in recent years become a locus of very innovative and sophisticated cinematic work for the smaller screen [see *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*].) Both deal with the construction of the Union Pacific. Leaving aside the obvious differences in language, violence, and sexual content, explicable in part because of the very different eras in production, the series and the film approach the building of the railroad from distinct points of departure. While DeMille builds his story around a romantic triangle, duly resolved according to Production Code norms, and a rousing adventure plot, the writers of *Hell on Wheels* highlight the corruption, power struggles, and the social gaps between workers and managers. DeMille's film does mention, more or less as backstory to explain the main battle in the plot, the role of financiers and politicians in the railroad work, with a particularly nasty turn by Henry Kolker as Asa M. Barrows, who plans to sell UP stock short after manipulating events to prevent the UP from reaching its desired rendezvous point with the Central Pacific. But the TV series foregrounds the story of Thomas C. "Doc" Durant, played with fierce élan by Colm Meaney, and his cynical manipulation of funds and resources which became known as the *Crédit Mobilier* scandal.

The series also highlights the racial and ethnic divide between management and workers and within the workers' camp itself. The *Kung Fu* series had used the Chinese-Caucasian conflict on the railroad as a plot element, but *Hell on Wheels* goes much further. The antiheroic hero of the series, Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount), is an unrepentant Confederate soldier out for revenge on the Yankees who killed his wife and child, in an echo of *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. He soon clashes with Elam Ferguson (Common), one of the leaders of the black workers on the railroad, and much of the power in the early story of Bohannon in the series is his gradual shift from racist Confederate to a man who evaluates others on terms of competence, loyalty, and integrity; thus he and the black leader become grudging allies and then friends. The storyline also includes racial and ethnic conflict and (sometimes) resolution between Indians, Irishmen, Germans, and

other groups. So the depiction of the work crews at Hell on Wheels (a common term for the camps at the end of the rail line)<sup>4</sup> is much more realistic and multidimensional than any such portrayal in DeMille's day. Class distinctions, real or imagined, are also integral to the plot. Durant, though a product of Hell's Kitchen, considers himself above the workers in a way not inherent to his status; he feels them to be lower-class. And Lily (Dominique McElligott), the widow of the surveyor of the line (based probably on Theodore D. Judah of the Central Pacific<sup>5</sup>) is an Englishwoman who has some difficulty at first acclimating herself to the grubby, rough world of Hell on Wheels. Finally, Bohannon sees himself as a Southern cavalier, or at least as a member of a class naturally superior not only to the slaves, now freedmen, but to "white trash" as exemplified by the Irishmen on the railroad. The arc of the narrative encompasses the forging of unlikely and changing alliances between erstwhile enemies as the goal of constructing the Union Pacific remains paramount, due largely (the series would have it) to the iron will of Durant.



Thomas Hill, *The Last Spike* (1869)

*Dodge City* also concerns the building of the railroad, although it places as well much emphasis on the cattle town aspects of the city. The

<sup>4</sup> "Hell," "Hell on Wheels," or "End Town" were expressions frequently used for the tent cities of railway construction gangs" (Meredith and Ericson 321).

<sup>5</sup> For Judah, see Ambrose 55-82.

film's early scenes highlight the contribution of Col. Dodge, showing the city being named after him in a rather casual way. The film opens with a good-humored race between the train carrying Dodge and some of his friends and three horsemen, whom we discover to be the heroes of the film. In a nice touch, later in the film the progress of the town is encapsulated by a shot which shows a man reading the town newspaper. He lowers it to reveal the train sitting by the city siding. *Dodge City*, a mixture of railroad and cattle town film, has the usual fanciful treatment of gunfights and saloons, but it also highlights some elements of Grenville Dodge's career which are likely fictitious. Like *Union Pacific*, which also includes Dodge and additionally shows him directing the work of engineer John Casement, *Dodge City* celebrates exaggerations in Dodge's biography. According to the careful historian Wallace D. Farnham,

Whatever his auxiliary duties, Dodge had no direct connection with the physical construction of the Union Pacific. He had no authority over graders, tie-cutters, bridge builders, or John Casement's track layers. He did not even have charge of the engineers assigned to the construction forces, the men who staked out the work and held the contractors to proper technical standards. (Farnham 642)

This is not to say that Dodge had no role in the railroad. His talents simply lay in other areas.<sup>6</sup> The film bookends the adventures in *Dodge City*, which include a well-staged fight aboard a partially burning train, with appearances by Col. Dodge. At the end, he is shown encouraging Hatton (Flynn) and his deputies Rusty (Alan Hale, Sr.) and Tex (Big Boy Williams) to move on to Virginia City (in fact, the title of the next Flynn Western, also directed by Curtiz).

Three other examples of road-construction films are *Kansas Pacific*, *Santa Fe*, and *Denver & Rio Grande*. The first mentioned is similar to *Union Pacific* in its thrust toward political unity under a newly ascendant post-Civil War government, as the Union Army sends in Captain John Nelson (Sterling Hayden) undercover as a troubleshooting engineer to assist Cal Bruce (Barton MacLane) in getting the ailing Kansas Pacific line to progress into Nebraska, that

<sup>6</sup> Farnham summarizes:

The Dodge fables are faulty in two ways. On the one hand they follow too eagerly the stereotypes of romantic history. On the other hand they omit much that actually happened. Dodge did not perform some of the acts usually attributed to him, by others and by himself, but he did much else. He was an able and important officer for the Union Pacific. (Farnham 644)

is, to expedite its joining into a transcontinental line. (Often in railroad construction tales the absorption of a regional line into a national one is a metaphor for the subsuming of regional interests under national ones.) Suspected at first of selfish motives by Bruce, he soon proves himself both unselfish and highly competent and is revealed to Bruce and the others as a military agent. Hayden's rough exterior lends a populist, everyman feel to the railroad work, de-emphasizing its corporate nature. Much the same is the case with *Denver & Rio Grande*, a film rather different from the former ones in that it takes place somewhat later (near the turn of the 20th century) and relates the partly factual tale of the violent rivalry between two competing rail lines. Edmond O'Brien, like Hayden, lends a tough authenticity to his anti-corporate role, as he opposes his superiors in trying to defend the Denver line against the nefarious Rio Grande (one of whose leading thugs is, incidentally, played by Sterling Hayden).

*Santa Fe* stars Randolph Scott as one of four Virginia brothers who fought for the Confederacy. Moving West, Britt Canfield (Scott) tries to assimilate into the new Union order by putting his skills to work on the Santa Fe Railroad. He begins to establish himself as an effective foreman, working for a man against whom he had fought in the war, and whose brother was killed in a cavalry charge led by Britt. The former Union soldier and Britt are also two points in a love triangle. But Britt's three brothers, led by Clint (John Archer), remain "unreconstructed" and soon begin to carry out raids against the railroad. They also sign on with a criminal gang, masters of a traveling saloon and gambling establishment which follows the railroad and preys off the workers. Eventually Britt must openly oppose his brothers, one of whom is killed, and the other captured, and the railroad is successfully extended westward. Like *Union Pacific*, this film advocates the need for all factions to work together in the bigger enterprise of rail-building. Antisocial elements like the moveable saloon and the oppositional brothers must be suppressed. The film thus fits in quite well with the political environment of its era, the early 1950s, when suspicion of fifth columnists was rampant and the general social emphasis was on conformity and on the need for corporate progress. Like the Gilded Age when the rails were laid down, the goal was stability, profit, and advancing order.

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