



Hell on Wheels ends, a documentary series begins, and AMC continues its hunt for a new western



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Anson Mount in Hell on Wheels. **MICHELLE FAYE/AMC**

When John Wirth took over as showrunner for the Alberta-shot series Hell on Wheels, he would give writers, producers and actors homework assignments.

They weren't particularly taxing. But he wanted them to watch certain movies in the western genre, particularly ones he thought would overlap thematically with what was happening in the series. They ranged from the fairly obvious, such as John Ford's 1956 classic *The Searchers*, to the not-so-obvious, such as the Sydney Pollack's 1979 satire *The Electric Horseman*, which starred Robert Redford as a boozy, ex-rodeo star. Jeremiah Johnson, another Redford film released in 1972, became a touchstone for *Hell on Wheels* with its survival tale about a man pitted against the wilderness. The 1966 Burt Lancaster film, *The Professionals*, and 1969's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, were also assigned.

When it came time for mining the vast back catalogue of westerns as inspiration for *Hell on Wheels*' farewell episodes, which begin airing on Saturday, Wirth suggested writers, producers and star Anson Mount watch the 1970 Lee Marvin film, *Monte Walsh*, a relatively gentle drama about an aging cowpuncher taking personal stock in the dying days of the Wild West.

"It's a show about the end of the cowboy era," says Wirth. "Thematically, it really struck a chord with everybody."

While we don't know the particulars, the end of line for *Hell on Wheels* will cover the actual end of the line for the building of the first Transcontinental Railway, which has been the main thrust of the gritty AMC series for five seasons. The pounding of the "Golden Spike" in 1869 Promontory Summit, Utah Territories, where the Union and Central Pacific lines crossed, will figure into the final episodes and mark the end of a journey that took viewers on a gritty ride through corruption, violence and racism on the American frontier. By while AMC may be done with *Hell on Wheels*, it's doubtful that it is done with the western genre. Episodes will be followed Saturday nights by *The*

American West, a documentary series that has historians and actors such as Redford, Burt Reynolds and Ed Harris taking viewers on a journey through the post-Civil War years of American history while examining historic figures such as Jesse James, Sitting Bull and General George Custer.

Since AMC morphed from a classic movie service to the carrier of prestige cable dramas it is today, series such as Breaking Bad, Mad Men and the Walking Dead have come to represent a new golden-age of narrative television. Hell on Wheels may not have received the same accolades or water-cooler attention, but it maintained a loyal fan base and is the one series that best harkens back to the network's early history airing classic western films and TV shows, a tradition it maintains every Saturday.

AMC's history with the genre overlaps with Alberta's prowess in creating it, which dates back to Guy Weadick's early forays into cinema such as the 1928 western flick, His Destiny.

When it came to developing their first scripted drama, AMC brass opted for the Emmy-winning 2006 western miniseries Broken Trail and chose Alberta as its location.

By 2011, westerns seemed poised for another comeback. It had been more than a decade since Clint Eastwood revived the genre with Unforgiven. The cable series Deadwood had ended three years earlier. A few years earlier, executives reached out to Calgary's Nomadic Pictures, the company that co-produced Broken Trail, and asked co-chairmen Chad Oakes and Mike Frislev if they wanted to "saddle up for another western."



From the documentary series, *The American West* - Courtesy, AMC **MICHAEL MORIATIS/AMC**

It came along at a good time for the Alberta industry, which had fallen into a bit of a downturn. More importantly, it cemented the province's reputation for producing first-rate period pieces and the place to go for the western genre.

"We're so grateful for what *Hell on Wheels* has done for us," says Oakes, who grew up watching westerns with his grandfather. "It showed our industry — in Hollywood, Europe, Asia — that we can do it right in Alberta. We have the crews, we have the incredible locations."

But as with many good westerns, *Hell on Wheels* used the pliable genre as a vehicle to tell a bigger tale. Just as 1969's *The Wild Bunch* is now often interpreted as a critique of the Vietnam War, or how *The Searchers* appeared to address the sort of racial divisions rampant in 1956 America, many saw the greed and corruption on display in *Hell on Wheels* as a comment on the corporate crookedness that led to the 2008 financial meltdown in the U.S.

While it examined many of the grand themes of the western — revenge, redemption, men at work — genre was just one aspect of a multi-layered show.

“I think we get way too caught up in genre, I really do,” says Mount, who plays vengeful ex-Confederate soldier turned railway man Cullen Bohannon. “I think that genre really serves no purpose whatsoever than for us to point very generally in a particular direction. (Creators) Joe and Tony Gayton said from the very beginning that it’s not a western, it’s an eastern because it’s about eastern industrialism heading west. I liked that. Does it fit within the western genre? Absolutely. But that only takes you so far and, at the end of the day, who cares?”

Wirth says his impression when he took over the reins as showrunner for Season 3 was that the Gaytons “had figured out a way to create a western that was in some ways not considered a western but in other ways very much a traditional western with a new way in.”

Which, one could argue, doesn’t make it all that much different from some of AMC’s other series. Arguably, the DNA of the western genre can be detected in a lot of the network’s shows, whether it be the fragility-of-civilization and lone-fighter-against-the-world themes found in *Into the Badlands* or *Preacher*, or how *Mad Men*’s Don Draper and *Breaking Bad*’s Walter White wrestled with the darker aspects of their own nature in true anti-hero fashion.

“The *Walking Dead* is a western ... of sorts,” says Tom Halleen, EVP of programming and scheduling for AMC. “It just happens in a post-apocalyptic world. There’s commonalities of theme and of heroes and of judgment that are present in many other genres. There are those overlaps.”

Will AMC venture into a purer form of the genre in the future? Halleen said *The American West* was developed because “there was more of a story to tell” beyond the years covered in *Hell on Wheels*. Right now, the network still sets aside much of its Saturday programming for westerns, which it doesn’t do for any other genre. In 2015, *Deadline* reported that the network was developing *Gunsights*, based on Elmore Leonard’s novel, as a new western series to follow *Hell on Wheels*.

Halleen wouldn’t talk about shows in development, but said “we’re continuing our search.”

“I can’t get into specifics,” he said. “It took a little bit after *Broken Trail* until we were ready for the right project with *Hell on Wheels*. We don’t feel it’s a rush to just put a genre piece on. When we find one that we feel is of the same calibre, we’ll be ready. At this point, we’re seeking it out.”

Hell on Wheels and The American West air Saturday on AMC.