



Alberta-filmed Hell on Wheels cements Calgary's and province's place in TV and film production

By [Bill Kaufmann](#), *Calgary Sun* First posted: Saturday, August 02, 2014 10:27 PM MDT | Updated: Saturday, August 02, 2014 10:36 PM MDT



Anson Mount in AMC's *Hell on Wheels*. (Frank Ockenfels 3 photo/Courtesy AMC)

NEAR OKOTOKS — Past bucolic scenes of ripening canola and barley under a turquoise southern Alberta sky, a bloody tale is afoot.

It's one that's been unfolding for nearly four years now, a staple of Calgary's film industry.

Nestled in a picturesque valley rimmed by evergreen and aspen trees near the confluence of the Highwood River and the Bow is an elaborate mockup of 1860s Cheyenne, Wyo.

It's the latest focal point of AMC's hit TV western drama, *Hell on Wheels*.

As the heat rises, a bearded man in grubby full-body underwear is marched in foot manacles down a wooden boardwalk.

It's the first shoot of the day and it's repeated several times in front of a hushed film crew composed almost entirely of Calgarians.

Leading man Anson Mount, in full cowboy regalia, takes a break in the shade of the railway boss's office.

"We like very much working in Calgary — I like working in a place that's not distracting," says Mount, who plays the ex-Confederate soldier Cullen Bohannon.

In earlier episodes, Mount's character ruthlessly hunted down one-time Union troopers who'd murdered his family.

On a hot southern Alberta day, he fiddles with his replica six-shooter and describes Calgarians' warm embrace of the series replete with greed, ambition, murder and betrayal in the building of the Union Pacific Railroad.

"It's a burgeoning film community here and Calgary is very hospitable, they seem very happy to have us here," he says in his Tennessee accent.

But he confesses he hasn't had a lot of recreational time away from the set, where the grind of long hours amid the elements is the norm.

"If I'm lucky, I try to get to the gym — weekends are about recovering," he says.

On this day, the crew is filming episode nine of the 13-installment *Hell on Wheel's* fourth season.

It'll take eight days to complete the episode and the plan for the day is to shoot 6 1/4 minutes of action.

Those on the set say the crew of a typical Hollywood feature would put a wrap on 90 seconds in the same time.

Part of the reason for that is the crew, most of which also worked last winter on the FX network mini-series *Fargo*, say those on the set.

"Almost every director says this is the best crew they've worked with — you end up having conversations with the gaffer and the makeup artist and they really care," says Mount.

The steely eyed actor is also impressed with the elaborate set, constructed last winter and spring in the span of six weeks.

About two dozen fully furnished buildings front a weathered-looking tent city that was a familiar sight earlier in the series.

A gaudy whorehouse is lined with boudoir art and plush antique furniture while a newspaper office marked as the *Cheyenne Leader* is host to a fully equipped 19th-century press.

A steam engine emits steam — even when not part of the shoot.

“The attention to detail is phenomenal, they’re amazing finds,” says Mount, pointing to carved period chairs and doorknobs.

It’s the handiwork of renowned local set designer John Blackie, who’s also worked on such films as Bye Bye Blues and Mutant X.

Hells on Wheels actor Jake Weber said the backdrop exceeded his expectations.

“I didn’t think it’d be as three-dimensional as it is — you expect a facade supported by sticks,” he says.

“It looks and feels like a real town.”

Regular, long-term shoots like these are what’s kept a pair of local crews busy for the past two years, said the show’s producer, Chad Oakes of Calgary’s Nomadic Pictures.

“TV series truly can be the cornerstone or foundation of a growing film industry,” he says.

Unlike fleeting movie productions, “TV series have that security” for workers, adds Oakes.

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While the bitterest winter conditions were virtually another actor in the local filming of Fargo, Hell on Wheels has been trapped in its own weather purgatory.

In its previous location along the Bow River, much of the set was washed away by 2013’s flood.

About 60 metres of riverbank disappeared and came within a stone’s throw of the set’s rail line, say those who were there.

But stalwart crews ensured filming resumed in a mere two weeks, said the show’s local producer, Chad Oakes.

When the current townsite went up earlier this year, “it was built in the snow because Cheyenne had to be built — it’s one of our main characters in season four,” says Oakes.

“The scripts were written for the weather — we get unexpected weather and we adapt.”

When filming begins in April, winter and early spring conditions reign, turning the dirt streets into goeey mud bogs.

Lead actor Anson Mount said even when those dry out, they leave ripples.

“You can turn your ankle, which I did in episode seven,” he says.

“Every year we’re challenged by the weather — we don’t have the time to change the schedule, you’ve got to dance with the weather you’re given,” he says.

He said the supporting crew does just that.

“They’re really upbeat even if it’s a long day and cold — they keep us going,” said Mount.

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Hell on Wheels newcomer Jake Weber won’t apologize for the show’s violent pedigree.

It recreates an often bloody, lawless era in American history and the historical background of his character, Wyoming Gov. John Campbell.

“He’d been a brigadier-general in the Union Army and had a special aptitude for war and killing, which translates well to Hell on Wheels,” said Weber.

“It’s mostly about entertainment, but there’s some veracity to the story and to history.

“That country was built on blood, sweat and tears and built on the backs of indentured workers and brutality.”

He points to virtual slave labour in building major projects in the developing world.

“There’s some resonance today to the story.” he adds.

Colleague Anson Mount agrees, saying he’s glad the show doesn’t sugarcoat history.

“There was a murder a day building the railroad — not a death, a murder,” he said.

“Think about it — you’re driving a steam-driven hoe and committing partial genocide along the way.”

In season three, Mount’s character was held captive in a Mormon fort in scenes that included multiple wives.

It was filmed in a province with a large Mormon population and elicited some angry press backlash in Utah.

“There were a few things on social media, that we were being completely inaccurate, but multiple wives is historically established. What were we getting wrong — the clothes?” he said.

Weber’s asked if he could foresee a Hollywood western filmed in Alberta and set in Canada — now a distinct rarity.

He wouldn’t say it’s a sure thing, but added “I’m sure there’s a great history for it.”

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A new \$22.8-million film studio promises to be a tonic for Alberta’s film production future, say Hollywood Hell on Wheels creators.

Watching repeated takes of a boozy jailroom scene on a monitor metres away from the actors, producer Michael Rosenberg said it’s long overdue.

“It’s about time — there’s going to be more and more filming in Calgary,” he said.

“We love it — it’s only two-and-a-half hours out of L.A.”

But the studio — to open in the Foothills Industrial Park in the summer of 2015 — won’t make a big difference to Hell on Wheels, which is an outdoor production, said Rosenberg.

Even without the facility, say actors and producers, the Calgary area is unique in its production qualities.

“This is the only place we can do this show,” said Hell on Wheels producer Bruce Romans.

“It has the prairie, the local talent and Chad (Oakes) and Nomadic — it’s unbelievable.”

The filming of Fargo last winter further solidified the region’s reputation in Hollywood, he said.

“I’ve been in meetings in L.A. and, yeah, everyone references Calgary — it’s not even an up-and-coming place anymore,” said Romans.

Even so, the studio will be “a game changer,” he said, because it’ll defy Calgary’s harsh winters.

Hell on Wheels has not only made use of a diverse prairie landscape, it’s taken the show to the Exshaw area, where scenes of blasting the railroad through the Rockies were re-created.

The film set was used as a base for rescuers who plucked an injured climber off Mt. Yamnuska earlier this year, said one crew member.

That scenic backdrop, says actor Jake Weber, doubles as after-hours relaxation.

“I try to get out into nature, it’s so beautiful here ... I’ve worked all over Canada, it’s my favourite place to be,” he says.

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There’s no decision yet on a fifth season for Hell on Wheels, but lead actor Anson Mount hopes there’s another — and more.

His complex, ever-evolving character and the ebbs and flows of the Hell on Wheels story practically pleads for more railway track, he says.

“I’ve never gotten to play an arc that’s gotten so long and I really like the trajectory so far,” he says.

“I don’t think we can finish the story in 16 episodes, so I would like to see two more seasons.”

AMC executives are happy with the drama’s progress and its 3-million-plus viewership, moving it from the Sunday to Saturday slot last season.

Hell on Wheels airs Saturday nights on AMC.