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COWBOYS & INDIANS

'Hell On Wheels' Is Back

AMC schedules the return of the hit show and plans to add more classic westerns to its Saturday lineup.

By Joe Leydon



Photography: Frank Ockenfels/Courtesy AMC

Anson Mount is back in the saddle again, overseeing construction of the Transcontinental Railroad as Civil War veteran Cullen Bohannon in *Hell on Wheels*, the acclaimed western drama airing on the AMC cable network.

But when season three begins August 10, Mount's tough, taciturn Bohannon will be doing more than just working on the railroad all the livelong day. He'll also be spearheading an assault to reclaim Saturday nights for original scripted dramas in prime time.

Decades ago, you may recall, Saturday night was all right for popular TV dramas such as *Gunsmoke*, *Mannix*, *Mission: Impossible*, *Walker*, *Texas Ranger* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* (and hit comedies such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *All in the Family*). In recent years, however, millions of viewers have strayed away from the broadcast networks to cable and other entertainment options,

drastically reducing the number of 18-to-49-year-olds (which, as far as most advertisers are concerned, are the only viewers who matter) watching on Saturday evenings.

As a result, the decision-makers at ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox have become increasingly reluctant to “waste” expensive scripting programming on a night when not enough of the “right” viewers (i.e., those elusive 18-to-49-year-olds) are tuning in. (Remember: Advertisers will pay big bucks — the sort of bucks needed to finance original shows — only when they can reach the target demographic they desire.)

Which is why, if you do watch network TV on Saturday nights, you see nothing but reruns, sporting events, reality and/or news shows — and episodes of ill-starred series (such as *Zero Hour*, *Do No Harm* and *Smash*) that already have been canceled, and are being, in essence, burned off.

“For almost a decade,” Bill Carter of *The New York Times* recently noted, “Saturday night has been television’s version of Boot Hill — where series go to die.”

But Charlie Collier, president and general manager of AMC, doesn’t see Saturday night as a programming graveyard. Rather, he views it as a golden opportunity.

For its first two seasons, *Hell on Wheels* was must-see TV on Sunday evenings. By moving the show to Saturdays for season three, Collier is boldly planting his flag in what many view as barren ground. Not surprisingly, Collier has a different perspective on the lay of the land.

Moving *Hell on Wheels* to Saturdays “is an effort to open up another night of original programming, but also it’s strategic,” Collier told *The New York Times*. “I’m looking at the opportunity. We have decades of empirical evidence that western fans are available on Saturdays.”

Indeed, AMC has long enjoyed considerable ratings success (by cable TV standards) on Saturday mornings and afternoons by programming popular western TV shows and feature films. “We have been getting audiences for *The Rifleman* on early Saturday morning of 300,000, even 500,000, viewers, better than some big networks do in prime time,” Collier told the *Times*. The audiences have been even bigger for Saturday broadcasts of new and classic western miniseries like *Lonesome Dove* and *The Broken Trail*.

By the time *Hell on Wheels* returns in August, Collier says, even more western movies and TV shows will be added to the Saturday lineup, providing nonstop Wild West entertainment as build-up to the new adventures of Cullen Bohannon. In addition to reruns of *Rawhide* and *The Rifleman*, movies such as *Hondo*, *High Plains Drifter* and *Rio Bravo* will figure into the mix.

“A new episode of *Hell on Wheels* on Saturday night after a full day of western fan favorites is going to be like the saddle on top of the horse,” Collier proudly proclaimed in a prepared statement. “This is a programmer’s dream — to have a genre specific, 14-hour lead-in to one of your highest rated originals. We are so excited about this opportunity to entertain AMC’s audience in a new way.”

Back Into 'Hell'

John Wirth, the newly appointed showrunner for *Hell on Wheels*, promises that the series will remain, throughout season three, “a western about work — the building of the railroad, the binding of the nation after the Civil War, and the rehabilitation of the men who lived and fought their way through those exploits.”

The big difference this season, Wirth adds, is that the writers are “placing Cullen Bohannon at the center of the show, and taking him away from the revenge motive which propelled him into the series.”

For the benefit of those who tuned in late: *Hell on Wheels* started out as the story of former Confederate soldier Cullen Bohannon’s hunt for the rogue Union troops who killed his wife. He wound up on a Union Pacific work gang in the first place only because he thought — rightly — he could find one of the killers there. But he subsequently stuck around — and, after a detour into outlawry, returned to — the itinerant construction-crew community that gives the series its title.

And now, after the departure of flamboyant railroad boss Thomas “Doc” Durant (Colm Meaney), it’s up to Bohannon to make sure that community reaches the end of the line.

“Cullen will be entering a new phase of responsibility this season,” Anson Mount told *Cowboys & Indians*. “While he has been a leader of men — both in the construction of the railroad and in the war — his position has been limited to the lower ranks. Now the stakes have been raised and Cullen will be more or less running his own show.”

“This is not just a positive. Cullen is used to being on the front lines. Suddenly having to shoulder such responsibilities as administration, PR, and politics is going to seem very foreign and very infuriating to a man who wants to be out there getting his hands dirty. It's going to be an interesting change — and it is going to beg some maturation of the character, hopefully.”

Good news for faithful viewers of the show: Elam Ferguson (Common), the freed slave who has been Bohannon's not-always-friendly rival, once again will be around for the ride. And while Mount isn't yet privy to the specifics as to how the two characters will interact in season three, “There has been a lot of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* talk bandied about so far.

“While that seems rather saccharine on its surface, I believe there is a lot to be said for that insight. You can only go through so much animosity with someone before there is a deep well of shared experience.

“Eventually, that person who pushes and pulls you is either going to become an enemy or they are going to become someone you can depend upon in a deeply visceral way. I think we're headed for the latter.”

A good thing, too: A man needs all the help he can get while riding through the treacherous territory of Saturday prime time TV.