

AMC Shifts a Series to Saturdays, but Not to Kill It



CHRIS LARGE/AMC

Anson Mount and Dominique McElligott in “Hell on Wheels” on AMC, which is filling its Saturday lineup with westerns.

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Published: April 15, 2013

For almost a decade, Saturday night has been television’s version of Boot Hill — where series go to die.

Starting this summer, AMC, the channel behind some of television’s most talked-about dramas, like “Mad Men,” “Breaking Bad” and “The Walking Dead,” plans to march head on into the programming Death Valley that has been Saturday night with a strategy built around a simple premise: a lot of men still like watching cowboys.

This week, at the network’s upfront, the annual programming presentation for advertisers in New York, AMC, whose hits thus far have all come on Sunday night, will announce a plan to open up a second night of original drama. Starting Aug. 3, it will move its established western series, “Hell on Wheels,” to Saturdays.

And unlike most recent moves of shows to Saturdays, like NBC’s decision to exile its most painful recent flop, “Smash,” there, AMC executives say they are enthusiastic about this move.

“It’s an effort to open up another night of original programming, but also it’s strategic,” said Charlie Collier, the president of AMC. “I’m looking at the opportunity. We have decades of empirical evidence that western fans are available on Saturdays.”

Much of that evidence has come from AMC itself, which has filled its Saturday schedule with classic western movies like “Hondo” and “High Plains Drifter,” and more recently with classic cowboy television shows. The network acquired “The Rifleman,” and in the last 18 months has had remarkable ratings returns for that hit from the late 1950s.

Mr. Collier said: “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.” On one recent Saturday afternoon, “The Rifleman” attracted 509,000 viewers.

Looking to repeat that success, AMC will announce at its upfront that it has acquired another classic from that television era, “Rawhide,” which starred a young Clint Eastwood.

And AMC intends to use those series and its store of classic movies on Saturdays as “a 14-hour lead-in,” as Mr. Collier put it, to “Hell on Wheels,” a show about a former Confederate soldier working on the construction of the transcontinental railroad as he hunts for the Union soldiers who murdered his family.

In its first two seasons, the western drama has been a moderate success for AMC, and for cable dramas in general, attracting an average of 2.4 million viewers for its second season.

Now it will start a third season on a night where, except for sports or news shows like “48 Hours” on CBS, nothing of any ambition is scheduled in prime time. (“Saturday Night Live” on NBC, of course, continues to be the night’s steady phenomenon in its 38th year.)

Mr. Collier expects there to be skeptics, perhaps among the ad buyers who will attend the AMC upfront Wednesday.

But he insisted that the decision to transfer “Hell on Wheels” to Saturday is no demotion. “I look for the show to do as well as it’s done on Sundays and even to grow from there.”

Brad Adgate, the senior vice president of research for Horizon Media, a media buying firm, said there was risk but potential reward in the move.

“I think there is an audience there, especially since the broadcast networks have given up on the night,” he said. “It’s an opportunity.” He noted that another recent western shattered ratings records on cable. “‘Hell on Wheels’ is another example of cable taking a risk, like ‘Hatfields & McCoys’ on the History Channel.”

Mr. Collier acknowledged that as much as 20 percent of the viewers that AMC sells to advertisers — adults ages 25 to 54 — are not watching television on Saturday nights. “But if you look at the competition in summer, they are delivering 36 percent fewer rating points” on Saturday nights, he said.

The disparity is more pronounced among male viewers, he said. With few strong sports attractions on Saturday nights in summer, and a network strategy to reach men ages 25 to 54, Mr. Collier said, “you can imagine that the western genre plays right into our wheelhouse. If you can picture that 40-something-year-old male looking for an option on Saturday night, I think we’re going to have one of the few original series that really super-serves that viewer.”