



This Gritty AMC Western Is Perfect for Fans of '1923' — and It's Streaming for Free

By Collier Jennings



Image via AMC

1923 made its grand return to television, not only continuing to explore the history of the Dutton family but also strengthening **Taylor Sheridan**'s television empire following the grand conclusion of *Yellowstone*. It's not the only Western-themed television series that's burning up the streaming charts, as Netflix had a hit with *American Primeval* earlier this year. Yet there's another Western-themed series out there that doesn't just fit into the same mold as *1923* and *American Primeval* but also **serves as a precursor to the boom of Western-themed shows on television**, meaning many fans of the genre don't know it. That show is *Hell on Wheels*, which just hit Tubi.

Hell on Wheels chronicles the construction of the first-ever transcontinental railroad across the United States; it takes its name from the collection of buildings that formed a temporary town at work sites. Former Confederate soldier Cullen Bohannon (**Anson Mount**) soon takes on work at

the railroad **while seeking vengeance for the death of his wife and son**. But his quest for retribution runs into more than a few roadblocks, including the fact that he's constantly moving across the United States. Over the course of five seasons, *Hell on Wheels* delivered a complex and shifting narrative and remains one of AMC's most underrated original series.

Anson Mount Leads a Star-Studded Cast in 'Hell on Wheels'

The biggest draw of *Hell on Wheels* is its cast. In addition to Mount, the cast includes **Common** as Elam Ferguson, a formerly enslaved person who befriends Bohannon and helps him protect the railroad. **Dominique McElligott** plays Lily Bell, the wife of one of the railroad's surveyors. **Colm Meaney** appears as the ruthless businessman Thomas Durant (one of the few characters in *Hell on Wheels* who's an actual historical figure). And **Christopher Heyerdahl** is Durant's head of security, Thor Gundersen, better known by his nickname "The Swede." **All of these characters are given hefty arcs that carry throughout the series.** Elam carves out a position for himself as the chief of railroad police, while Durant deals with a brief arrest that leads to him losing power over the railroad. But it's Bohannon who changes the most throughout the show. At first, he goes to great lengths to get vengeance — even joining up with a group of robbers in Season 2. But by Season 3, he abandons his quest for vengeance and instead takes on a leadership position as head engineer of the railroad.

While the entire cast is impressive, *Hell on Wheels* thrives **on the dynamic between Mount and Heyerdahl**, in particular. As the show goes on, the Swede becomes a major thorn in Bohannon's side. Throughout *Hell on Wheels'* five seasons, a rivalry develops between the two, becoming a highlight of the series. The Swede is a slippery character, but Bohannon doesn't give up. It's their conflict that leads to one of the best scenes in the entire show during the Season 5 episode "Two Soldiers." This episode shows a side of Bohannon that is borderline unnerving and emphasizes his desire for justice to be done.

'Hell on Wheels' Constantly Progresses the Story Through Time



Since the story of *Hell on Wheels* covers the construction of the first transatlantic railroad, **there's a very specific and finite amount of time to explore that event.** Season 1 begins after the assassination of **Abraham Lincoln** in 1865, and each season progresses through time until Season 5 ends in 1869 with the completion of the railroad. The series finale highlights this by the finale being titled "Done" and by showing the ceremony at Promontory Summit, Utah, where a golden spike was driven into the railroad. The bookends don't stop there; another scene features Bohannon returning to a church he visited in the very first episode. But where that first episode had Bohannon gunning down a man in cold blood, the finale has him making a tearful confession to a priest — showcasing how much he's grown over the course of *Hell on Wheels*.

The passage of time also means that *Hell on Wheels* **deals with historical events that happened during that time period.** A great example is the fact that Season 1 revolves around Cheyenne braves attacking the railroad operations because it's infringing on their lands, which is a conflict that's based on actual history. In fact, it was that event that inspired *Hell on Wheels* co-creator **Joe Gayton** to develop the series:

"You just have this cursory information that the Chinese and the Irish built the railroad, but it got in underneath all the dirt and stuff that went on, with the financing of it, and the greed and corruption. And then, I heard about this Hell on Wheels place and I went, 'What a great setting for a western.'"

By digging deep into the history of the transcontinental railroad, *Hell on Wheels* crafts a compelling narrative that's ripe with danger **but also rich with character.** This type of approach made *1923* and *American Primeval* what they are, but only after *Hell on Wheels* proved how well it can work.

'Hell on Wheels' Remains One of the Most Underrated AMC Series



Image via AMC

When *Hell on Wheels* premiered, it was one of the most-viewed series on AMC — only trailing behind *The Walking Dead* in terms of ratings. But despite that impressive distinction, if you bring it up, most people will probably draw a blank. It's a shame so few people are aware of it because *Hell on Wheels* fits into the mold of programming that AMC popularized: men driven by a tortured past or a hostile landscape to operate in shades of grey. Yet while *The Walking Dead* and *Breaking Bad* have spawned multiple spinoffs, not to mention remaining a major part of the cultural conversation, *Hell on Wheels* is a footnote. The series undoubtedly deserves better as it is a well-crafted Western, not to mention it put Mount on the map. Mount later brought the same powerful performance that he crafted with Cullen Bohannon to *Star Trek: Discovery*, and later *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* as Christopher Pike. If you love the current boom of Westerns, you definitely need to check out *Hell on Wheels*. It's got plenty of grit, compelling characters, and set a path that other Western-themed shows have followed.

Hell on Wheels is available to stream on Tubi in the U.S.