

30 Days, Season 3, Episode 1 – I Was Born A Coal Miner’s Filmmaker
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This episode is unsuitable for young viewers. To be honest, I really don't know why.

For the uninitiated, 30 Days is an amazing program created by documentarian Morgan Spurlock. He is best known as the Oscar-nominated filmmaker of Super Size Me. In the film, Spurlock lived for 30 days on an all-McDonald's diet and filmed the changes to his body. That idea spawned 30 Days where Spurlock or a substitute spends 30 days living in rather difficult or interesting conditions. Past episodes included a Minuteman living with an illegal immigrant family, Spurlock spending 30 days in jail, a man taking steroids for a month, and many others. This is one of my favorite programs and one of the few reality shows that truly make you think and question your belief system.

In this one, Spurlock heads home to West Virginia and one of the most dangerous professions in America: coal mining. Is coal the solution to the energy problems or is it too dangerous to the environment and the safety of the miners? We see a shot of a memorial for the miners killed on January 2, 2006 in Sago, WV. Spurlock is ready to tackle this challenge.

We see pictures of Spurlock the high school senior and a map of the US and a cameo by the Amazing Race's Amazing Travel Line marking Spurlock's move to New York to learn to make movies and TV. While he was earning an Oscar nod for chowing down on Big Macs, the guys he went to school with were following in their father's footsteps and going into the mines. Mining made the lives of most WV residents possible. Including Spurlock – his dad fixed the equipment used in the mines.

Using some of the giant graphics we know and love from this show, Spurlock tells us that 50 percent of our energy comes from coal. It enables us to listen to music, surf the web, and watch TV. We are connected to the black rock. Not the Black Rock; that is a pirate ship somehow connected to the Hanso Foundation. We see picket lines and are told that environmentalists believe that coal is a huge contributor to global warming. Scientists think that too, by the way. It also leads to tragedies like the one in Sago and the one in Utah. Some want us off of coal, but with so much available in the US, others question abandoning it.

This got Spurlock thinking, what about the guys who mine coal? What is life like for the guys he grew up around who stayed in West Virginia and go underground every day to keep us all powered up? Spurlock will be working as a coal miner (apparently from weird camera angles) for the next ... 30 Days.

Credits

Brooklyn. Mrs. Spurlock is not happy. Hey, it's Alex! Remember her? The vegan girlfriend disgusted by his McDonald's binges. Congrats guys! She is worried about "some crazy build up of gas and an explosion and that you'll be trapped and suffocate in the bowels of some mine somewhere. Or come back with black lung... please, please be careful." I like Alex. Spurlock is not

sure what to expect. He leaves and gets some smooches on the way out. He begins the long drive to the "wild, wonderful" views of West Virginia.

Coal is a rich part of West Virginia, as is having 20% of the population admit to not wanting to vote for a black man. But we will deal with that another time. It is the second largest producer in the country of coal with 500 active mines. Coal goes through boom or bust periods - now it is booming. As a result, the average coal miner makes \$65K per year. Boy, imagine what it's like when times are bad! Coal mining accounts for twice as much as any other industry in the state. We see many mining cars, hoses, dirty guys and tons of other images during this segment. Coal is certainly king in West Virginia.

The sign says "West Virginia - Open for Business."

Spurlock had to finish an 80 hour training course before even starting his stint in the coal mines. The Rules as told in cartoon form: For the next 30 days, Spurlock is going to work regular shifts in the mine and face the same dangers as everyone else. He will also explore the impact of mining on the workers and on the environment. He will be staying with a coal miner and his family; he and his relatives have been coal mining for generations.

Spurlock comments that he is a long way from Brooklyn as he meets Dale and Sandy, his hosts. Welcome to Soot Covered Island! Dale is 53 and looks 10 years older than that. He began working in the mines right out of high school. Dale is the supervisor at the mine and makes over \$100K per year. So, I should shut up I guess.

Dale is a big guy with a hardened look about him that a life in the mines would produce. He is drinking a glass of wine, which is somewhat unexpected. Sandy shows Spurlock his room and he offers to help in any way. She wants none of that. He offers to take out the garbage and do the dishes. I say, come on by, Spurlock, I'll let you do those things. Dale cooks on Sundays and Spurlock will be helping him out with that.

Spurlock brings up black lung. Dale has a man off right now that's got it. Dale went for a test when was "27 years in the mine" and he had nothing. Spurlock is worried about his own health. TO THE HOSPITAL!

We meet Debbie Johnson, LPN who doesn't think that you can work in the mines and not get something. It is at this point that I start to worry about Dale.

Spurlock shows off his city-boy lunch cooler. Dale tells him that most guys carry their lunch in a bag. Why? They just do, because they're "all the time on the move." They also hang it "from the top" so the rats won't get to it, because "They will get in your lunch anywhere on the bottom." Important safety tip, and one that most jobs do not experience. We had a mouse in our office once that chewed up all of my co-worker's business cards. Not exactly the same thing. Spurlock is a little freaked out and excited. He just needs to make sure he doesn't get into danger and he'll be ok.

DAY 2. 5:00 a.m. and Spurlock is up. He thinks it will take getting used to. My wife does it every day and has for a few years, so no sympathy here. He makes his sandwich and prepares for his hour commute to the mine. He yawns on the way there. Dale gets there at 2:00 a.m. Yikes! So Spurlock drives solo to Double Bonus Coal. Sounds like a bizarre slot machine. It is 6:30 a.m. and we get another working in the coal mine montage.

Spurlock is wearing a red hat to show that he is an apprentice. Not The Apprentice, although I would love to see Trump try and work here. He doesn't get to use heavy machinery, but will get all of the grunt work. So he has that going for him.

"Grumpy" is going to make his name tag for him. I wish I knew someone named Grumpy. I am curious if the other mine employees are also named after dwarves. Spurlock shows the coin-shaped ID tag and says how morbid it is because it is designed to be used to identify your remains if you get trapped for a long time.

Danny the Mine Foreman gives the orders. Spurlock suits up, but not in a cool Barney Stinson way, but in a coal miner kind of way. Someone asks him if he is from Beckley. He is. Same guy asks if he did "that McDonalds movie." Heh. Lots of smiles greet Spurlock wherever he goes.

He is going to be working a 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. shift and takes his first steps into the mine. It is dark and splashy. Spurlock says that the temperature dropped 20 degrees as he entered the cart. The descent is like an entrance into a lost world. It is musty and wet and no sunlight comes this way. The ceilings are quite low and Spurlock tells us that if you turn off the light, you cannot see four inches in front of you. It is loud and I am sure quite claustrophobic. They are a mile and half deep into the mountain. There are no dwarf cities here, this is tight and scary.

The automatic digger machine cuts into the mountain and sends the coal onto a conveyer belt. But since "coal is cash" they have to make sure that nothing is left behind. James teaches Spurlock "Shoveling 101" as they gather up whatever fails to make the belt. James tells him to always shovel going with the belt, to "watch these slices" and make sure your shovel doesn't get caught. He says you can "hear 'em coming down the belt. If it gets caught, don't hold onto the shovel. It'll take you down and it will kill you." Damn, that is some hard core job when you can get killed with your own shovel.

Spurlock says that he would like to think what he is shoveling here is powering the electricity in a Children's Hospital, but in reality it is powering some guy masturbating in front of a computer. I wonder what site he's looking at. Either way, Spurlock knows he is making someone very happy.

We get a montage of shoveling. He bends down, shovels and takes a breather. He eats his lunch in 10 minutes. James tells him that to be a coal miner you need a weak mind and a strong back. Our hero looks really, really beat. At quitting time, Spurlock says that he "can't begin to tell you how tired I am," that he was "beaten with a shovel for six hours straight and run over by a coal truck." This is the beginning of a very long month.

Commercials – The Shield. I hear it is a great show. I have never watched it, but Chiklis will always be the Commish to me.

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Day 3. Spurlock thinks that there is only one spot on his foot that doesn't hurt. The mine is dangerous from the minute you enter the portal. Dwight McClure is the safety inspector. So is

Homer Simpson, so, not that impressive of a job title. There are two basic jobs in the mine: mining coal and keeping the mine safe. Because, you know, the place could go boom!

A cartoon scientist tells us that mining releases coal dust and methane gas. If something sparks underground, it "could get ugly." Miners used to bring singing canaries down with them to act as a gas censor. If the singing stopped, get the hell out of there. Nowadays, ventilation chambers keep the air circulating and gas monitors keep the air flowing. One way to help is to slap plaster onto cinder block walls. That is what Spurlock is doing today. McClure is 55 years old and thinks he has a couple of years left. He "comes here and has a good time and may not make it outside tomorrow."

Spurlock is covered in coal and has to clean up back at Dale's house. Dale shows him a trick using Vaseline on his eyes. Spurlock joins with Dale for a family picnic. They play horseshoes and he meets Dale's family; a family with over 180 years in the mine combined. Dale says that mining is the "bread and butter of West Virginia life," without mining, it would "shut out the lights." Two relatives say that without the mining, one would have gone to school and the other would have gone into construction. What kept them in the mine? Lots of money. Dale's brother says that his son is a night watchman at the mine but he won't go inside. "I don't want it for him. I would hate for him to go inside and get covered up. Or get killed or something. It would be tough to live with."

Let me just say that this little quote from a coal miner in West Virginia sums up what most folks believe, and if they don't, they should be ashamed of themselves. I want my boy to not go through the troubles that I have seen. I want his path to be less rocky. That is life here in a nutshell. These men don't want to go underground and it seems that this generation of miners certainly doesn't want yet another generation of West Virginians to suffer the way they did.

Day 5. If you didn't already love Dale and Sandy, now you will. Dale leaves a note every morning for his beloved. This one says "Sandy, I love you with all of my heart." Spurlock explains that this could be the last thing that she ever hears from her husband. That may be the sweetest, most potentially heartbreaking thing that I have heard in a long time.

Back in the mine, they are doing "retreat mining" today, and this sounds mega-scary. There are pillars of rock that is holding up the chambers that the miners were previously working on that prevents the roof from collapsing. They are going in to these chambers to facilitate the collapse after they have finished mining. This was the cause of the Utah collapse. Spurlock thinks that this is a "lump of realism" in one day. Eric says he does the job for the money. "I gotta eat and pay for that baby," he says. Spurlock says that people go out and put their life on the line to enable us to turn on the lights, turn on the TV and use the internet. As he delivers this TH, his face is totally covered in coal residue. He says he can put a face to this now and it humanizes everything.

Day 7. We have returned to working with Shovel Man James. Spurlock says that he was told to take off his wedding ring while working. James never does because it "reminds me of why I am down here." I always yell at my wife for taking hers off because it is a symbol of my everlasting love and fidelity. She loves it when I do that.

Today they are "rock dusting" which entails tossing rock dust into the air to knock down coal dust. It looks like chalk being thrown into the air. You know things are bad when you have to throw actual rock particles in the air to knock down the really bad ones.

James takes Spurlock to his family barbeque. We meet his wife, Karen, and James' stash of

homemade moonshine. I just get flashbacks to old Dukes of Hazard episodes. Uncle Jesse James says that you won't care what it tastes like after four drinks. He is also still covered in soot. Dude couldn't even wait to clean up before downing the moonshine!

That is one cute baby.

Karen says that sometimes the mine work bothers her and she worries a lot. If he is late she expects a phone call and wonders if she should turn the news on. Sort of like the life of a cop spouse. Uncle Jesse James wants a job that can give him more time with his family, but is there one that will earn him \$60,000? He wants to go to college so he doesn't have to stay there and mine coal. He enjoys what he does, but he hopes for better things. Spurlock says that James' dad didn't want him to mine, just as James doesn't want his kids to mine. It has become an unchosen right of passage. This, my friends, is a small snapshot into why poverty exists.

Commercials – I love the Direct TV spots with the Christopher Guest Players.

Day 11. Spurlock has taken a page out of the Dale playbook and has begun to write a post card to Alex each day. He chomps on an apple on the way to work and tells us that hardly anybody wears a respirator in the mines and he wants to find out why. He straps one on and feels like a fighter pilot. I think he sounds like Darth Vader. Of course, I can take almost any conversation and turn into a Star Wars reference. Everyone says that he will have it off before the end of the day. They are correct. Eric works in one of the dustier parts of the mine and he doesn't wear his. Spurlock takes the filter out and shows what one hour of use took from the air. The white pad is almost half dark now – multiply that by days, weeks, months and years.

Eric gives Spurlock a ride and hopes that he doesn't get car sick. Or maybe the cameraman? Hard to say. Methinks that Eric is a reckless driver. He is 28-years-old and has been in the mine for two years because, once again, \$60,000 is hard to pass up. He shows Spurlock the "slurry ponds" where the wastewater used to clean the coal returns to the stream. Friends, the creek? It is black. Somewhere an American Indian is crying.

Eric thinks that coal helps things go, but perhaps it is time to pursue other energy sources. He says that people think that coal miners are stupid, they are not, they are just uneducated and they lack opportunity. There is not much other industry in the state. Eric is conflicted by the presence of the jobs and the utter destruction of the state.

To bring home the point we see shots of what surface mining does. Underground mining is rapidly diminished and is becoming difficult to get to. Almost half of all mining in West Virginia is done by surface mining now, where the top of a mountain is blown off and heavy machinery comes in to scoop up the coal. The companies are required to restore the land after they are done but many environmental groups say this is not enough. It is utterly sad to see these old mountains shaved off like a corn on the foot of industry.

Also sad? Are Bo and Chuck, former miners that are fighting the companies with the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition. The companies say that coal is not the future so they want to get all they can now. Maximize profits using the old methods while they still can and surface mining is the cheapest way to do it. It is devastating. Bo says the mountain is 360 million years old and the companies are destroying them in 5-10 years. Boom. They are gone. It is rather chilling. Chuck says that this is their home and it is being destroyed. Spurlock says it makes him want to cry, to see

such a beautiful place ripped apart.

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We meet Bill who represents the coal industry lobby interests. He says that there has never been an alternative offered. What they have now is the best way to mine and alter the coal. There is no better way to make electricity. We see picketers calling for them to “stop destroying my mountain” and the other side represented with “tree hugger” signs. Spurlock says that without an environmentally sound and economically viable option, what becomes the tradeoff?

My only comment: a tradeoff has never been adequately pursued, funded or taken remotely seriously by the powers that be. Until that day comes, that will always be the answer. My question is, will it be too late?

Day 17. Spurlock is applying more plaster. He finds it to be somewhat peaceful and somewhat grounding about going into the depths of the earth and seeing things that no one else sees. Soldiers in Vietnam would talk about the beauty of the jungle amid the death and destruction. There is something therapeutic in finding beauty where no one else sees it.

Day 18. Spurlock is helping Dale make bacon and coffee. They are cooling for Dale’s brother Coy and his wife Connie. Coy can barely walk due to black lung. He was forced to quit the mines as a result. Coy played ball into his 50s and after only three years he can barely move 100 feet if on an incline before needing 2-3 minutes to rest. Coy loved the mines and given the choice, wouldn’t change a single thing. Dale repeats that he doesn’t have black lung and I am seriously starting to worry about Dale.

Over at the Rimfire Grille, Spurlock convinces Dale to come with him to be checked for black lung at the end of the month. Uh oh.

Commercials – FX has a show about bikers and I am starting to wonder if there is nothing that won’t get a reality show now.

Day 21. Spurlock finally gets a chance to sit and talk to Sandy. It is not a very exciting or enlightening conversation. Bottom line, she wants Dale to live.

Day 23. More mine working, not much to report. Oh, except that Spurlock keeps ripping his underwear. He has gone through six pairs so far and thinks it is a special day and that he has a big hole in his ass. Well, a different one at least.

Day 25. They are having trouble with the digger when the word comes that fans have had to shut down. The dust is settling and now that the fans are off, they have 15 minutes to evacuate. Spurlock says that you can tell when the fans go off because it gets really hot and all that it will take is an igniter to light the place up. While waiting for a ride, Spurlock and the others do whatever they can to fight the dust. Someone shouts out, “Hey Squirrel! It’s already been 12-13 minutes. Load up and get.” I think Squirrel and Grumpy need to be my new friends. Spurlock can see the dust in the air.

Squirrel is nowhere to be found. They evacuate and Spurlock talks about how this has been one very scary day. I want to know what happened to Squirrel. I will never find out.

Spurlock attends a vigil for the victims of the Sago accident. Twelve were killed and Fred Ware Jr. was one of them. His daughter Peggy goes to the memorial often and tells Spurlock that all of them were family men and just trying to make a living. She is campaigning for safer conditions because Sago was not as safe as it could have been. She thinks that companies look at miners as expendable and that it is all about the "almighty dollar." She says that it has been hard on her and she never got to say goodbye to her dad. I didn't lose my parents to an accident, disease took them, and I never had a chance to say goodbye either. Nothing can ever fix that.

Day 28. Spurlock is in the home stretch. He is told that it takes about a month to get used to the mine and he finds great irony in that because right when his body gets used to this work, it will be time for him to leave. He apologizes to Dale, he will not miss the shovel belt at all!

We are in the health clinic and are treated to a shirtless Dale. He is convinced that his health is perfect. We have the results: Spurlock is negative, Dale, not negative. He has dust in both lungs. He will be in great danger with more exposure. He will be well served by using a respirator, and he needs to come back on a regular basis. Damn, ain't that a kick in the nuts.

Commercials – Sam Adams. Agitator. Patriot. Beer mascot.

Dale breaks the news to Sandy. She is not happy. He jokes that they are making it seem bad. He admits that he will not wear the respirator. Dale wishes nothing happened, but it did. The doctor told him that he needs to retire, but where will he go?

Day 30. Last day. Dale is riding in with Spurlock who tells Dale that Sandy really cares about him. Spurlock thinks that knowing Dale is a blessing and that he is his Mr. Miyagi. He gets lots of love from the miners and he thinks that he has earned their respect. He is given a knife with the inscription, "To Morgan; you are now one of us." He is honored to be a part of it. We get a montage of the dirty faces of the miners and Spurlock is thankful for the experience.

Now we have the goodbyes. Dale and Sandy see him off and there is much emotion. Spurlock sums up that he understands Dale and the men like him. They choose to work in a job that can kill them. Just like the miners, the rest of us know the risks to our world associated with the use of coal. But it doesn't stop us. We need to invest in other options. He is amazed at how much our lives are affected by coal. It is a finite resource and one day it will all be gone. What then? We have "one foot in the past, and one in the future" and the only choice is "progress." Spurlock gives us all a kiss to sign off. Thanks for that. I'm glad you cleaned up for it.

Commercials – The Hulk – I am willing to forgive and forget the Hulk Dogs. Please, Norton, don't let me down.

Next week: Former NFL star Ray Crockett lives an athlete's worst nightmare – paralysis. 30 days in a wheelchair... and there will be murderball.

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