

a glimpse into the dark

West Virginia coal industry featured in Spike TV reality documentary series

By ANGELA HENDERSON-BENTLEY
For The Herald-Dispatch

The coal industry has always been a very important part of West Virginia culture. But most of us have never seen what it takes to work in a coal mine. Now, a new television documentary-reality series is giving us that opportunity.

"Coal," a new one-hour series on Spike TV, will premiere at 10 p.m. Wednesday, March 30. It is executive produced by Thom Beers, who is the man behind "Deadliest Catch," "Ice Road Truckers" and "Ax Men."

"I've always wanted to go in a coal mine," Beers said. "It's just taken me years to get there."

The show follows the activity at the Cobalt Mine in Big Sandy, W.Va., which is located in McDowell County. Beers said that after three years of searching for the right mine, he found all the elements he needed for the show at Cobalt.

"You want to be in a place that's kind of a family-owned business," Beers said. "The mine itself, that vein of coal, is a very small vein of coal so it was more interesting to me watching guys on their knees instead of standing up in a big hole. It had all the elements that we really need to make a darn good story."

Mike Crowder, the Chief Executive Officer of Cobalt, said he and his business partner, Tom Roberts, wanted to participate in order to get the truth about the industry out to the public.

"If you've never been around coal miners, they're a very inspiring bunch of folks," he said. "They'll motivate you to just get busy and do something when you watch them work. They're true heroes."

One of the miners prominently featured in the premiere episode is



Photo courtesy of Scott McDermott for Spike TV

ABOVE: From left, Section foreman Robert Jerry "Wildman" Edwards, Sr., his son, scoop man, Jerry Jr., 30-plus year veteran JC Woolridge and outside operations man Johnny Simms are just a few of the miners of Cobalt Coal featured in Spike's new docu-reality series "Coal" premiering on Wednesday, March 30, at 10 p.m.

RIGHT: Roof bolter Hank Toller is a multi-generational miner, and works in a crawl space more than 600 feet underground, with little light.

Courtesy of Byron Goggins/Original Productions/Spike TV

Andy Christian, Sr., who operates the continuous miner, the machine that extracts the coal. He was happy to be a part of the show as well.

"Through the years the coal miners have kind of been put back behind the curtain and nobody really gave them any recognition for what they do and what they've done for the country," he said.



Crowder said he did have some reservations in the beginning, especially about safety and liability, but the crew, which had also worked on "Catch" and "Truckers," quickly put

him at ease.

"The people were so professional and so seasoned in what they did that I was feeling very comfortable about having them around because I knew they knew what they were doing," he said.

All of the show's crew received extensive training before filming began.

"We're just like one big happy family," Christian said. "We all watch out for one another and even though they didn't have any experience, we were watching out for them. But in the same sense, they were watching out for us too. It worked out really great."

Christian hopes that viewers learn

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Coal

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just how hard coal miners work and how important coal is in our everyday lives.

"It's not for everyone," he said. "It's a hard, extremely difficult job. It takes a really intelligent group of people to get everything working together at one time. I hope when they watch the show they really recognize what a big part it plays in the world."

Crowder is excited about people seeing Christian and the rest of the Cobalt miners.

"I was thinking if anyone suffers from any kind of depression or anything, we've got medicine for them," Crowder said. "Let's just get them to turn on Spike TV's 'Coal' show and it will motivate them into something I'll guarantee it."

Beers agrees that the show will be inspirational.

"The biggest takeaway is that you see a group of men who is willing to risk their lives but at the same time there's an integrity," he said. "This is what made America great and it always will. These guys are great American heroes to me."