In 1979, Henry Hampton, the founder of Blackside Inc., a documentary film company committed to presenting the "Black side" of American history, submitted a proposal to PBS for a multi-part television series "Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years."

The series, which had its nationwide primetime debut in 1987 (and the sequel, "Eyes II: America at the Racial Crossroads"), would become our nation’s main source of information about the civil rights movement in the second half of the 20th century.

The publication of "True South" marks the 30th anniversary of the premier of "Eyes on the Prize."

In the book, Jon Else, the series producer and cinematographer for "Eyes on the Prize" (and a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Journalism), deftly weaves together three stories.

**Behind the scenes**

Else recounts his own experiences as a civil rights organizer for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia in the 1960s.

He furnishes a biography of the dazzling, dedicated and difficult Henry Hampton, a phenomenally creative, productive "let's just do it" but not a balanced budget or rational cash flow guy.

And Else provides a refreshingly candid and insightful behind-the-scenes account of the making of "Eyes on the Prize," including fascinating details about fund-raising: successful and less successful interviews of people who "were there"; critiques following screenings; fact-checking; debates about whether to employ all-Black crews, re-enact scenes, put academic "talking heads" on air, and use only the music of the 1960s; and disputes over copyright with the estate of Martin Luther King.

**Refutes perceptions**

A fundamental goal of the producers of "Eyes on the Prize," Else emphasizes, was to refute pervasive perceptions of Blacks in the South as hapless victims, liberated (by Whites) from above and from outside of the South.

Hampton never stopped exhorting his colleagues "to honor the foot soldiers, honor the little people, the fan ladies, 'Miss Mary's.' and the ordinary word parishioners," who found the energy and courage to come forward, even when doing so might well mean "you could find yourself dead, overnight, bang; your family cut up, burned."

And so, "Eyes on the Prize" revealed that Moses Wright, a sharecropper, stood up in a Mississippi courtroom and pointed to the men who had killed his nephew, Emmett Till.

**'Unfinished and ongoing'**

In the episode on the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, the producers delayed Martin Luther King’s on-screen arrival for 30 minutes as they gave air time to local organizers. And "in an unbeatable combination of emotional power and narrative exposition," viewers watched and listened as young women defiantly sang "This Little Light of Mine" as they were loaded on to a paddy wagon.

The civil rights struggle, Else reminds us, is "of course, unfinished and ongoing." By almost every metric (income, health, wealth, housing, rates of incarceration), Else indicates, "America remains nearly as divided by
race as it was on the day I was born.”

**Positive changes**

In his conclusion, however, Else takes a page out of the late Henry Hampton’s playbook — and chooses to read into the record the positive changes in our nation since the end of legal segregation.

A Blackside diaspora of writers, producers, directors and cinematographers continue to fight the good fight, he notes, producing superb documentaries about race in America “with a glorious anarchy of style.”

Hundreds of Blacks now hold political positions and “no one can take away from us” that Barack Obama was elected and re-elected president of the United States by wide margins.

You can feel Else’s ambivalence. And his apprehensions about the future. Because it isn’t easy these days to keep our eyes on the prize.

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