



Political Landscape: Jerome Liebling's Minnesota Capitol Photographs, 1956 - 1969

Video Podcast Transcript
Minnesota Historical Society

Jerome Liebling's career as a photographer spans six decades. After studying photography in New York during the 1940s, Liebling moved to Minnesota to teach in 1949.

His work, grounded in an interest in documenting street life, transferred to a vastly different, yet somewhat similar arena, both conceptually and geographically. In his essay in the book "Jerome Liebling: The Minnesota Photographs," published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press, he states, "Far from inhibiting my work, Minnesota allowed me to extend the street out to the field and landscape." And his camera remained fixed on the people inhabiting these places - people who were often ignored or overlooked; the worker, the farmer, the indigenous, the migrant, the young and the struggling.

During the late 1950s and 1960s the social, political, and demographic landscape was rapidly changing in Minnesota, as elsewhere in the country. And Liebling captured Minnesota as it was then. In this way, his photographs serve as records of the time and place in which they were created.

But he also captures something else. Regardless of the subject, an underlying theme in Liebling's work is the sense of humanness and the connectedness that we share, with each other, and with our environments and landscapes. This theme is timeless – and in this way, his pictures move beyond documentary snapshots to become something else. They're tender, visceral, sometimes painful – and always powerfully human.

Liebling began photographing Minnesotan politicians in 1956, during a time when the State was becoming nationally known for its politics and politicians. He has stated that he attempted to capture these politicians at their most vulnerable and therefore most honest moments. That is - he aimed to find, and present them, as human. Recently, Jerome Liebling donated to the Minnesota Historical Society nearly 200 black and white photographs of these images, the majority of which are documenting activities of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party.

These photos include politicians campaigning in small towns across the State,

like these images of Orville Freeman, and this one of Karl Rolvaag.

Also featured are party conventions, and others are images taken during legislative sessions.

He also documented visits by former President Harry Truman and President John F. Kennedy.

In addition to producing his own work, which documented the relationship between Minnesotans and their environments, Liebling was also influential as an educator, training countless artist photographers in the Fine Arts department at the University of Minnesota.

In this way, as did the politicians in his photographs, Liebling has left his own legacy in our state.

This is Ben Gessner, Collections Assistant at the Minnesota Historical Society.