

Joe Robbie, 1956



First impression: Gangster?
Ad man? Politician?

Model for menswear? I love this portrait by Jerome Liebling because it evokes so many speculations. The subject's jaunty air, natty clothes, languid hands, and slightly shifty eyes make us want to know more about him and this intriguing portrait.

To begin with, the Minnesota Historical Society's catalog records tell us this is Joe Robbie, taken by Jerome Liebling in 1956. When Minnesota's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party wanted photos for 1950s and 1960s campaign literature, they often turned to Liebling, professor of photography at the University of Minnesota. He worked with both parties, but mainly the DFL, to make convincing political portraits as well as documentary photographs for the *Minnesota Legislative Manual*. Many of these images have become icons of Minnesota political life.

So who is Joe Robbie? At the time, he was a Minneapolis lawyer running for the Fifth District congressional seat that had been held by Walter Judd since 1943. In a 1956 DFL brochure featuring a dozen of Liebling's photos, including this one, Robbie was touted as family man, combat veteran, successful attorney, and political leader. Two other photos now in the MHS collections were taken for the same brochure, but oh how different they are! In one, family man Joe poses with his wife, Elizabeth, and eight children. The other is Joe, hat in hand, in front of the state



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capitol. There is no mystery in those photos, blatant pitches for your vote. This dapper portrait gets my vote for outstanding appeal.

Robbie did not win in this presidential-election year that saw Dwight Eisenhower re-elected over Adlai Stevenson. After the defeat, he went back to his Minneapolis law practice and had three more children.

His life took a major turn in 1965 when he and actor Danny Thomas bought the American Football League expansion team in Miami. Both men were Lebanese, undoubtedly a factor in their partnership.

Robbie put up everything he had, including a mortgage on his Minneapolis home, in order to buy the franchise and create the Miami Dolphins. The rest is football history.

—Bonnie G. Wilson

Bonnie Wilson is an independent photo consultant and former curator of photography at the Minnesota Historical Society.

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