How will future reckon with Cousin Kenneth?

11/25/93

By J.B. Sisson

Cousin Kenneth earned Christmas bonuses that were more than most people make in a year, or so his mother often proclaimed. After graduation from the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, Kenneth struck it rich working for some megacorporation. I remember him as a boy rendering "Lady of Spain" on the accordion one Thanksgiving. In the course of a previous Christmas afternoon he inadvertently demolished a toy service station with miniature car lifts and water-squirting gas pumps, just like the garage where his father worked.

This fall for the first time in a decade I saw Kenneth again and, at a dinner for a dozen assorted relatives, heard his views on vacationing in Mexico ("Don't breathe the air"), the North American Free Trade Agreement ("Inevitable in a global economy — let's get our heads out of the sand"), and national health coverage ("An administrative nightmare — can you name me any federal agency of comparable size that isn't completely screwed up?"). Cousin Kenneth advocates laissez-faire opportunity for one and all and let the losers take their lumps with no government freebies.

As for him, when his bosses decided to relocate Kenneth to the Southwest, his wife, a high-rolling banker, refused to move again, so Kenneth resigned, and the corporation continued his salary for the following four years — more than most people make in a lifetime, I suppose. Cousin Kenneth advises getting all you can because you never know what the underclass might try to pull next. And that's the crux, the fundamental split in modern politics: Either you believe there could be enough food to go around with an efficient system of worldwide distribution, or you don't care.

Kenneth grew up in a town near Providence, R.I., founded by Roger Williams in 1636 when the Massachusetts Bay colony banished him for expressing "new and dangerous opinions" in favor of religious freedom and recognition of the property rights of Native Americans. He considered the Narragansets and Wampanoags "humane and courteous," until King Philip's War at least, and in a poem in his first book, "A Key into the Language of America," Williams wrote, "Sometimes God gives them fish or flesh, / Yet they're content without; / And what comes in, they part to friends / And strangers round about." When the Wampanoag retrained the agriculturally challenged Pilgrims at Plymouth in 1621, Thanksgiving became our grandest holiday, a pledge of interracial, international sharing of hard-won harvests.

A few years ago Cousin Kenneth's father died after a long ordeal of an excruciating cancer. The last time I saw him, we were sitting in a grove of tall red pines, against whose particularly plaintive sough my uncle recited that once-famous protest anthem on "the world's blind greed" and oppression of the poor, Edwin Markham's "The Man with the Hoe," which ends, "O masters, lords, and rulers in all lands, / How will the future reckon with this Man? / How answer his brute question in that hour / When whirlwinds of rebellion shake all shores? / How will it be with kingdoms and with kings — / With those who shaped him to the thing he is — / When this dumb Terror shall rise to judge the world, / After the silence of the centuries?"

Cousin Kenneth plans to answer with a fusillade of high-tech weaponry.

J.B. Sisson is an editor from Edina.