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Storing energy bunch-a-b'loons? way to cut costs

United Press International WASHINGTON — A big drawback of electricity — illustrated by the power of a lightning bolt — is that once created, it is very difficult to save for later use

Lack of good storage methods forces power companies to build costly oil and gas generating units that can be switched on quickly to meet daytime demand surges that exceed the capacity of regular coal and nuclear plants.

The problem occurs in reverse at night when not all the relatively

cheap base-load power can be used. Charles Clark, a West Coast utility consultant, said wide use of efficient storage could trim 2 percent from the delivered cost of elec-tricity — an annual saving of \$1 billion to \$10 billion.

In the case of wind and solar power, said technical director Herb Blinder of the American Public Power Association, "there aren't really any great ways to store that energy if it happens to be operating when it's not needed. They could become base-load generation in combination with a storage system.

The industry is currently investigating advanced batteries that transform the energy of zinc-chlorine and sodium-sulfur chemical reactions into electricity. Electrolysis of water to make hydrogen which can serve as a generating fuel is one more chemical storage method.

Fleets of electric cars, with batteries recharged by night using surplus base-load power, are really another kind of storage reservoir for the future

Other promising possibilities under investigation include under-ground pumped water systems and compressed air storage.

Underground water systems work on the same principle as normal pumped water systems but avoid some environmental problems if salt caverns, rock cavities or aquifers can be found to serve as the lower reservoir.

Compressed air storage, in which electric pumps squeeze air into tight underground formations from which it is released to help run fuel combustion turbines, seems even better.

"It's a good idea because it's cheap and it works," said Dr. James Birks of the Electric Power Research Institute.

The EPRI utility trade group and the Energy Department are sponsoring three engineering design studies that could pave the way for a commercial plant by 1985.

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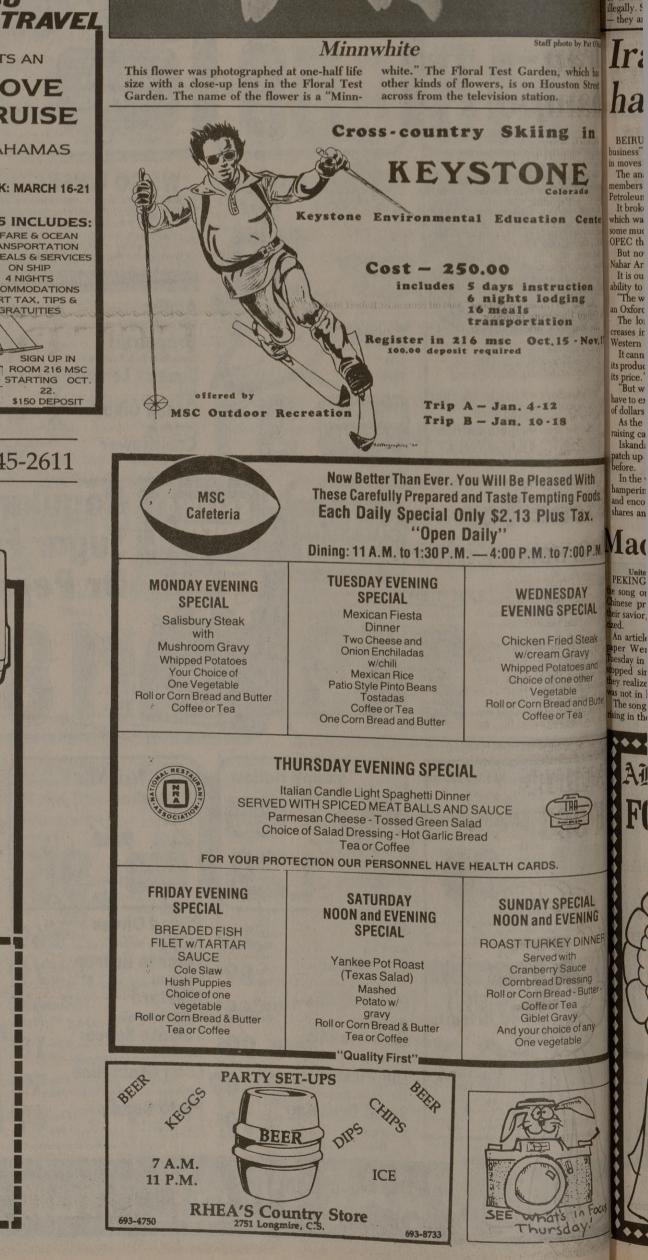
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