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Production drops, inflation does, too

United Press International
Production in American factories, including automakers' assembly lines, dropped at the end of last year, the government reported. This decline has added more fuel to the fires of recession.

Administration spokesman Robert Ortner, chief economist of the Commerce Department, said the Federal Reserve Board's factory production index, down 2.1 percent in December, was "extremely disappointing and unfortunate" but "no disaster."

It was the fifth consecutive monthly decline for factory production — a grim sign of continued recession.

Auto assembly production in December dropped to what would be an annual rate of 4.6 million units, according to the Federal Reserve Board's index of industrial production, which was released Friday.

But the total production cut-

backs among the nation's factories were so widespread that the auto portion contributed only a small amount to the overall decline.

Production and assembly-line employment drops when people and businesses stop buying and unsold backlogs of goods accumulate faster.

However, layoffs have been especially evident in the auto industry.

In a bit of good news, the Commerce Department also reported Friday that wholesale prices rose 7 percent last year — the smallest increase since 1977.

The Labor Department's Producer Price Index — a broad measure of wholesale price changes — showed only a 0.3 percent growth in December, finishing last year with a moderate 7 percent gain.

On Wall Street, the stock market was bolstered by the news of lower inflation and scored its

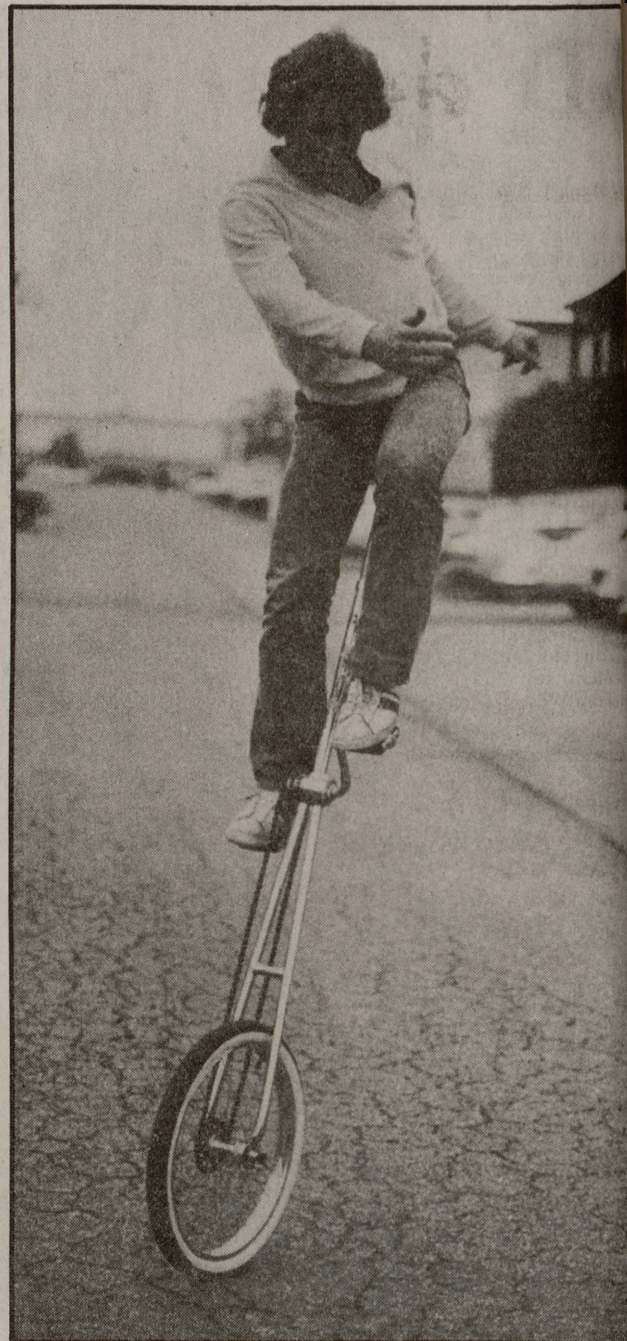
second consecutive gain Friday.

The Dow Jones industrial average, a 3.33-point winner Thursday, tacked on 5.32 points to 847.60. But the average lost 18.93 points for the week overall and is down 27.40 points for the first two weeks of the year.

Ortner called the moderate price increase for dealers "very encouraging for the outlook of sustainable growth in the economy."

In other economic news, California's Home Savings of America, the largest savings and loan in the nation, reached across the state lines of Texas and Illinois to swallow six other associations.

The Federal Home Loan Bank Board said Friday it was the most extensive combination yet of ailing thrift institutions put together across state lines by federal regulators, a strategy intended to avoid the collapse of ailing associations and huge losses of federal insurance funds.



Staff photo by Daniel Sanders

One-wheeled wiz

Donny Carter, a freshman bio-med major from Katy, practices yet another form of transportation with this unicycle outside his apartment.

Mine fire may have spread

United Press International
CENTRALIA, Pa. — Clouds of steam spewing from a "bottomless" hole outside Centralia

have renewed fears that a 20-year-old underground mine fire threatening the town is spreading and could be nearly twice as large as previously believed.

"I think it's bottomless," Joan Girolami, spokesman for the Concerned Citizens Against the Centralia Mine Fire, said Friday after visiting the site. "It's pretty big. I think this mine fire is a lot bigger than they (government officials) think it is."

Fumes from the fire leaking into homes forced 27 families to relocate late last year under a joint federal-state program.

Located midway between Centralia and nearby Ashland, the 4-foot-wide hole of undetermined depth is more than 1,200 yards south of where the fire has

been confirmed as burning.

Dennis Wolfe, a Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources chemist who inspected the hole Thursday, said it was impossible to know without more tests whether the mine fire was responsible for the steam. He said instruments found no trace of carbon monoxide or carbon dioxide fumes in the steam from the hole.

The U.S. Office of Surface Mining said it would send inspectors to the site to conduct tests.

If the mine fire is producing the steam, which was first noticed early in the week, it would mean the southern arm of the fire had spread westward.

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Haig soon to return to Middle East talks

United Press International
WASHINGTON — The United States will undertake an intensive, active role in the stalled Palestinian autonomy negotiations with Secretary of State Alexander Haig returning to Egypt and Israel in two weeks.

Although the mission is not described by Haig as a shuttle between the two capitals, the intense diplomatic activity amounts to an all-out effort to solve a problem which has not budged for about two years.

In Jerusalem Friday, Haig said he would come back to Israel and Egypt in late January after his Jan. 27 meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in Geneva.

Two days after Haig's next trip to the Middle East, Egyptian

President Hosni Mubarak is scheduled to come to Washington for a continuation of what Haig describes as "the political will" to find a solution.

The intensive process was planned to begin in December, but the Polish crisis intervened and the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights complicated the negotiations.

Haig defined his trip to the Middle East this week as a "fact-finding" mission to isolate and clarify the differences that have kept the autonomy talks stalled for the past two years.

Officials of all three countries described the principal problem to be the decision about how much power the interim Palestinian government would have.

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