FEEL THE POWER

The Texas A&M power plant and utilities complex serves as the heart of the University, pumping water, electricity and air conditioning to sustain life on campus.

By John LeBas
The Battalion

It is the first day of exams. Thousands dread going to class to meet their fate. Suddenly, the power goes out in Bryan and College Station. The faucets run dry and the air conditioners stop running. Cries of joy echo through the cities because, surely, classes will be cancelled.

But this is not the case.

In the middle of the power outage, the A&M campus bustles with life, electricity and water.

A&M's lifeline is its own power plant and utilities complex, a jumble of pipes and cooling towers south of the Northside parking garage that supplies about 60 percent of electricity, air conditioning, heating and drinking water to A&M residence halls and buildings.

The power plant has come a long way from its first incarnation, a combination electricity and ice plant and laundry facility built in 1893 at the site of the present plant for about $10,000.

David Blair, power plant maintenance supervisor, said A&M had to generate its own electricity because, at the time, there was no local utilities company.

"You've got to remember, when A&M started, there was no College Station," Blair said.

He said the first plant expanded with the campus.

Parts of the complex have been replaced or expanded with new technology, but the purpose of the plant has basically stayed the same for over 100 years.

"The University provides, with the exception of West Campus, 100 percent of the electrical power, heating hot water, domestic hot water, and drinking water," Blair said. The plant also sends steam to campus dining halls for cooking and cleaning. The University draws its own water from a well field near the Riverside A&M campus for drinking, running electricity generators, heating and cooling. A&M also operates a sewage treatment plant west of Easterwood airport.

Blair said A&M's size makes it reasonable for the University to provide so many services.

"What you're dealing with is essentially a small city," he said. "What we have here is a full-blown utility service like what students might have back home."

And, like private companies, A&M utilities sometimes hit a snag — the power goes out, or a pipe breaks.

Leroy Kazmir, plant operations supervisor, said this is inevitable for a full-time operation.

"Just like any other power plant, we run 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," he said.

But Blair said problems are handled as quickly — and as quietly — as possible.

"We are here to serve the student body," he said. "Occasionally we have to dig and make noise. When something has to be done, we try to be sensitive to the students' needs."

He said power outages, for example, do not usually require on-campus work.

"When you have a campus outage, it's usually because of something off-campus, like a car hits a pole," Blair said.

Kazmir said A&M has avoided many potential service problems by putting most of its services underground.

"When you look at a city you see light poles," he said. "But here we have an almost all-underground system." Underground "steam tunnels," running from building to building throughout main campus, carry steam and hot and cold water lines, Kazmir said. There are also underground utility lines — from the days of a much smaller campus — that run directly from the plant to older buildings on campus.

More visible reminders of the past include the large blue water tower by the plant, which has a capacity of 2 million gallons; the skinny smokestack emblazoned at the top with the "A&M" logo, which services a boiler; and 30-year-old cooling towers on the west and south sides of the plant, now being replaced in a project scheduled to end next February.

Cooling towers remove heat from the water that cools steam from the generators. The steam runs in pipes through this water, recondenses and is again turned to steam for the

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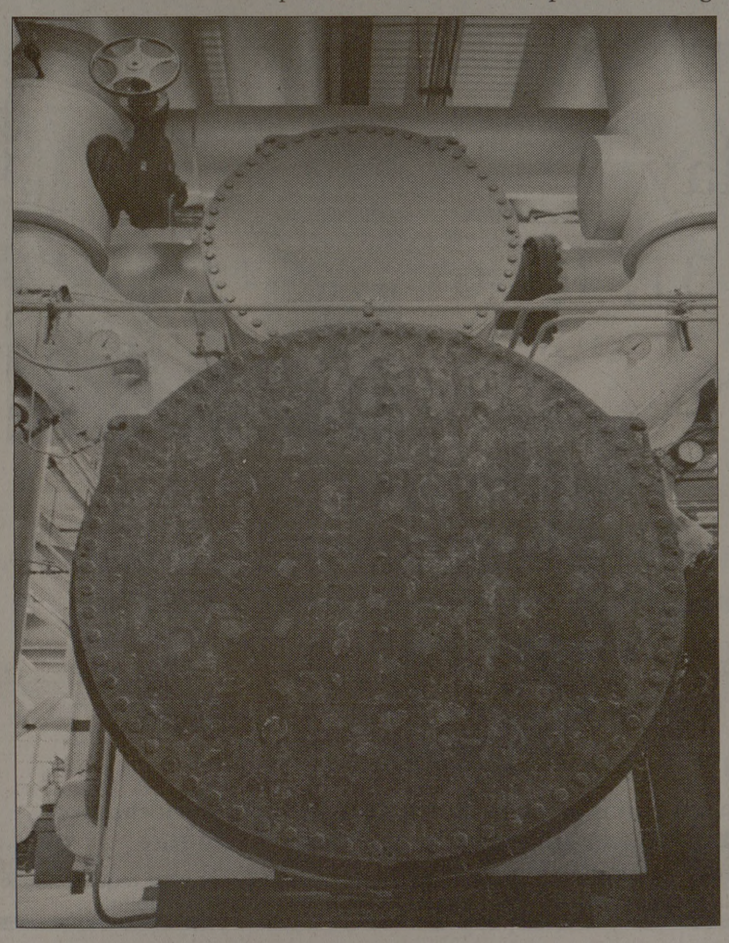

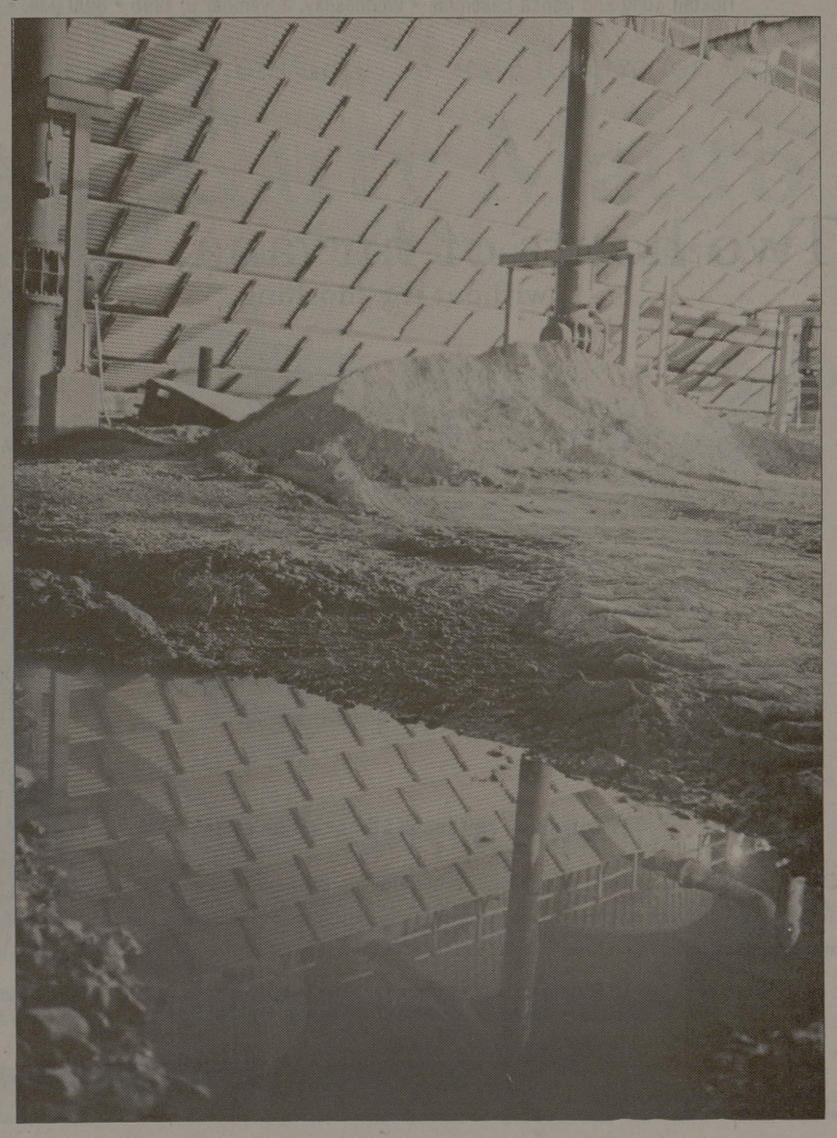

Photos by Ryan Rogers

Top: The outsider's view of the water power plant and the water cooler which sits to the south of the Northside parking garage. *Left:* A freon unit housed inside the plant helps cool the air that is pumped into buildings across campus. *Right:* The 30-year-old cooling towers on the west and south sides of the plant are responsible for converting steam from the plant's generators into water.