CURE SOUGHT FOR GAS BINGE

by Dayn Lelan

Like a broke wino beginning to think he'd better just sip at his last half-bottle of Thunderbird, our state government is beginning to grope for ways to curb the enormous waste of vanishing natural gas.

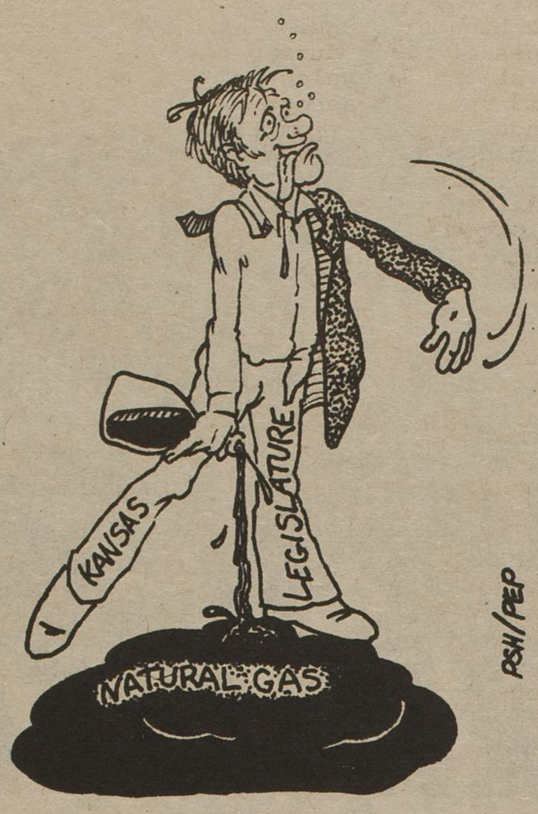
As of 1975, there were 12,660,000 MMcf(million cubic feet) of natural gas reserves left in Kansas. At the '75 rate of production , we'll have guzzled that up by 1988. (Source:U.S.Bureau of Mines) And there will be no more where that came from. Not for a few million years anyway. Obviously, a state gas conservation program is long overdue. The Kansas Corporation Commission (KCC) and the state legislature each recently took a first small step in this direction.

The KCC seems to be groping for a way to discourage the use of natural gas to generate electricity. In '75, over 1/5 of Kansas gas-use was for electric generation. Electric utilities gobbled up more gas than either industry or residences. This seems particularly stupid since this electricity could be generated by burning coal, of which the country has a 4-600 year supply.

The KCC has up to now taken the position that they lack the authority to tell the utilities what fuels they can use. But a recent decision by the KCC might indirectly discourage the use of natural gas by that fat fossil glutton, Kansas Gas & Electric(KG&E).

This decision came in response to an attempt by KG&E and its major pipeline supplier to pull a fast one on the KCC. KG&E and Kansas Gas Supply(KGS) asked for permission to amend one of their contracts. They claimed the effect of the proposed amendment would be to double the price KG&E pays KGS for gas piped by KGS to KG&E. KGS claimed this was necessary because the gas-well producers are saying they can't produce much more gas at the current price of about $.20/Mcf (thousand cubic feet).

But when the KCC took a closer look at the contract amendments proposed by the companies, they found much more than the companies had led them to beleive was



there. "This amendment, if approved, would give the parties to the amendment carte blanche to increase prices whenever desired, without approval of the Commission," the KCC stated in its order on the matter. The order stated, "KGS falls short of any showing that failure to increase prices paid producers would result in premature abandonment of wells." The KCC was led to conclude, "The parties to this amendment, both in their exhibits and testimony, did not rise to the level of candor in this matter which the commission desires."

The companies' request was denied. Consumer groups can only hope that this was done partly to encourage KG&E to convert its gas-burning plants to coal capacity.

PEP's Paul Johnson attempted to raise such a possibility by intervening in the Feb. 25 hearing on the matter. Johnson was going to build a case based on the following facts:

A. In '76, KG&E burned 41,000 MMcf of natural gas; that's twice as much as was used directly in the city of Wichita in '75.

B. Generating electricity is a wasteful use of gas. It requires twice as much gas to heat a home with gas-generated electricity as with a gas furnace; the cost of home heating in Wichita is 3.5 times greater with baseboard electricity than with gas.

C. Converting KG&E's gas-burning generators to coal would probably take half the time and money of building a billion-dollar nuclear plant, which is KG&E's solution to the situation. An independent study of this alternative is urgently needed.

The KCC ruled that the issues were not germane to the KGS case; Johnson's petition to intervene was denied. But his challenge may have spurred the KCC to give closer scrutiny to the case. At least, that was the opinion of Commissioner Pete Loux.

Meanwhile, across the street the legislature has started taking a closer look at the wisdom of conservation. With a "We Will Freeze in the Dark" mentality coloring the public mood, it would be political folly for office-holders to ignore the problem any longer.

The legislature has passed a resolution sponsored by representatives Bob Miller (R- Wellington) and Don Mainey (D- Topeka) asking the KCC to study the feasibility of various conservation measures.

A. By allowing gas utilities to make a profit from insulating homes, the gas supply could be increased through conservation.

B. Utilities could be encouraged to get into the solar energy business.

C. Various rate reforms (reversing the current declining block prices so that the more electricity you use, the more per unit you would pay; discount prices for consumers who achieve a decrease in their consumption; higher rates for consumption at those times of day when demand is highest; seasonal peak pricing could be implemented).

The KCC is to present their findings to the legislature at the beginning of the 1978 session. Though this resolution is an encouraging first step, we're still a long way from home. The resolution is not an endorsement of these conservation measures, merely an expression that they are worthy of study.

Many hurdles loom between this resolution and the implementation of actual conservation measures. First the KCC has to find the time and money to make these sweeping studies in less than a year, while simutaneously carrying on its other duties. Maybe they'll report favorably on these reforms, and maybe they won't. Maybe the legislature will mandate some of these reforms and maybe they won't. If they don't, the KCC might feel it lacks the authority to act on its own. Then, if the KCC does order some reforms, the utilities might use every ruse and dodge in their book of tricks to avoid or delay compliance. Of course, the utilities might not mind making a profit from conservation measures made necessary by their previous promotion of waste and over-consumption in the name of profit. We can only hope that in the coming scuffle , conservation measures will actually be implemented while there is still something left to conserve.

Well, I'm beginning to think I shouldn't have compared the state government to a wino. It is more like a child pleading with ravenous dogs not to wolf down all the food on its plate. The use and consumption of our precious, vanishing gas supply is controlled by private companies who up to now have sucked it up and sold it as fast as they could. Yet they've known for at least twenty years that we would start running out about this time.

So far, the most the state has got up the gumption to do is wheedle, cajole, and entice from the sidelines. And the dogs merely respond with an occasional snarl as they pick the carcass dry.

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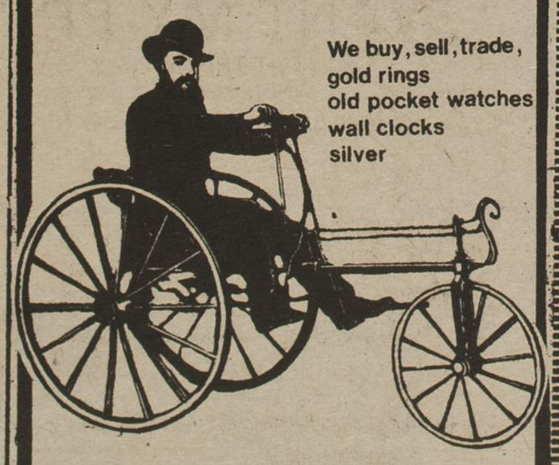
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