Grady Auvil's 10-year-old, four-wheel-drive American Motors Company Eagle claws up a narrow, steep, sandy trail cut in the side of a mountain on the east side of the Columbia River near the small town of Orondo, WA. The 84-year-old's steady hand guides the vehicle to a vista several hundred feet above the river. There Auvil stops to show his visitor the 200-acre home orchard where he has farmed for 62 of his 65 years as a grower of apples and other fruits.

As principal owner of a corporation that owns two orchards totaling 600 acres and that has an operating budget of $9-12 million a year, Auvil could be squiring his guest around in a new pickup. The fact that his personal "get-around" is a dusty, old car is vintage Auvil.

"I get used to a car, I like to keep it," he says. Judging from the way the vehicle purrs, he must treat it like a friend when it comes to maintenance.

For 30 years, his orchard get-around was a Model A Ford. He says that his company has not bought more than four or five new pickups since it was formed. "We buy used pickups," he explains.

Auvil is not tight or lacking an appreciation for the latest technology. Auvil Fruit Company is a completely modern operation, from its orchards through packing and storage to its marketing facilities. It is fully computerized and communicates by facsimile machines. On a given day, its offices may transmit several messages between the two orchards, which are 70 miles apart, and send or receive facsimile messages from buyers in New York, Chicago, Dallas, or even New Zealand or London. Auvil's adrenaline surges when he contemplates the prospect of technological advances and other opportunities ahead.

Overcoming Obstacles

Few of the State's apple growers have coped with the adversity that Auvil has conquered, and few can match his influence on Washington's $500-million-a-year apple industry.

He was just getting started when the Great Depression hit. It bankrupted his father and many other farmers, but he survived.

He also overcame tree-killing winter freezes in 1950, 1964, and 1968. He had to relocate houses, buildings, and part of his orchard when the Douglas County Public Utility District built Rocky Reach Dam on the Columbia River, and he lost more orchards when the utility district developed a public park along the river in the late 1970's.

There have been major changes in the U.S. and world fruit markets, and now Washington's apple industry is in the midst of severe market woes. Through all of these crises and more, not only has Auvil survived, he has also thrived.

Grady Auvil was born December 7, 1905, in West Virginia. He came to Washington with his parents in 1908 and got his start in his father's apple orchard near Entiat. In 1924, at the age of 19, he had bought his own 5-acre orchard at Entiat. He sold that in 1928 to buy his first land at Orondo, where he still farms. He was in business with his father and two brothers for many years, and after his father and the younger brother died, he bought out the other brother—who still farms with a son just a few miles down river.

Auvil's business philosophy boils down to three strategies: Practice the golden rule, have an inquiring mind, and take advantage of opportunities.

"The world's troubles would be very simple if we all followed the golden rule," he says. "If you're a fruit grower and you follow the golden rule, you'll

by Terence L. Day, News Writer, College of Agriculture and Economics, Washington State University, Pullman, WA
put that fruit out the way you personally would like to eat it, and if you do, and deliver it to the consumer that way, you'll have no problems. An honest product, an honest price, uniformity and consistency—when you do this, it's a piece of cake.”

Data and facts spew from his memory, and his conversation is sprinkled with frequent, easy chuckles.

### Changing Times

Washington’s apple image was built on the Red Delicious variety. The State still sells 60 million packed boxes of this popular apple each year. Auvil, who has marketed under the Gee Whiz trademark since 1949, still has about 10 percent of his land in Red Delicious. However, that variety is on its way out.

Most people in the Washington apple industry associate Auvil with new apple varieties. He was the State’s leading proponent of the now popular green Granny Smith. In 1966 Auvil planted a few Granny Smith trees to get some personal experience with that variety. He grew the apples, ate them fresh, made applesauce out of them, stored them, and scrutinized them at every step. He even traveled to New Zealand for a firsthand look at mature Granny Smith orchards.

When Australian and New Zealand production increased sufficiently, the Safeway grocery store chain put Granny Smiths in all its western supermarkets. Within 2 years, Auvil says, every other supermarket chain had to follow suit, and he was ready. He harvested his first commercial crop in 1973 and was prepared to go full bore with the new apple.

“We had been trained all of our lives to believe we couldn’t sell a green apple,” he chuckles. Today, Granny Smith apples account for about 6 percent of Washington’s apple production, and they occupy 70 percent of Auvil’s acreage.

Auvil is not standing pat. He is among the orchardists who have introduced Gala, another newcomer to Washington orchards, which he first planted in 1985 and which now accounts for 10 percent of the Auvil orchards. The Gala variety comes from New Zealand and competes in the Golden Delicious market, which Auvil believes will continue to grow for some time.

In typical Auvil style, however, the orchardist already is pursuing yet another variety—Fuji. He believes that Fuji will be bigger than Granny Smith and Gala combined, dominating world apple production for the next 50 years or more. Fuji is a Japanese variety created from Red Delicious and Ralls Janet.

“There have been hundreds of apples developed all over the world with various breeding programs. This is the only one that has the capacity, I think, to fill the sweet apple gap,” Auvil says. Auvil Fruit Company will not be the first to market Washington-grown Fuji apples, however; a neighbor will beat Auvil to the market by a year, in 1990.

Auvil’s apple trees do not grow straight up like most people’s. In Auvil’s orchards, row upon row of trees grow outward at a 60-degree angle, in closely planted double rows supported on trellises. He believes that this arrangement makes better use of light and produces more and higher quality apples.

### Cultivating Employees

Just as Auvil looks for the best apple and the best technology, he seeks the best people and cultivates them with all
The efforts of Washington's apple producers have created a $500-million-a-year industry in the State.

Auvil Fruit Company is slightly overpaid, including myself,” he chuckles. “I call it Fat City. We pay a higher minimum and higher wages than anybody I know of.” In addition to hourly wages, Auvil furnishes housing and utilities to employees. There are also profit sharing, stock options, and even a pond stocked with about 4,000 trout for his employees and their families.

**Maintaining a Healthy Business**

Another vital part of Auvil's success is the structure of his business. Most of Washington apple growers lose control of their fruit when it leaves the orchard, although they retain ownership of it until it is paid for by whole-salers or retailers. Thus, they remain exposed to risk. The Auvil Fruit Company began packing its own fruit in 1946. Three years later, it obtained a trademark for its “Gee Whiz” label. But in 1978 Auvil extended corporate integration to marketing his own apples.

Auvil was familiar with fruit marketing because he had always marketed the cherries, peaches, and nectarines that he grew. He also knew that by marketing his own fruit, he could benefit more fully from his reputation for quality.

Auvil fruit is sold all over the United States and in many world markets today. Auvil ships on a weekly basis to London and frequently sells apples to Taiwan.

Auvil's business is in excellent shape, but other apple growers are not doing so well. The entire Washington State apple industry has been reeling from the twin punches of 1988: the Alar scare and the State's largest crop in history. A Washington State University economist has estimated that the State's apple growers lost $130 million in sales when the 1988 crop's market was disrupted by consumer fears triggered by a television program on growers' use of Alar. (Apple growers have since quit using the chemical.) Still, Auvil tells anyone who asks that making money in the apple business is easy: “If you're doing the right thing, the orchard industry is a piece of cake.” He said 1989 was one of the best years he had ever had.

**Still No Retirement Plans**

“To me, this is the most fascinating life in the world,” says Auvil. “I'll be in this business until I die, and if I die under an apple tree, who cares? What's the difference? I enjoy working with people, I enjoy the fruit business, and I have a wonderful group of people to work with in this company. I still say it's a piece of cake.”

The care he gives his orchards. Auvil Fruit Company averages about 100 employees, with peak employment during the packing season exceeding 200. About 30 families live permanently on company property, and this housing is supplemented by more than 50 trailer homes and air-conditioned apartments for seasonal help.

Auvil's commitment to the golden rule is nowhere practiced more rigorously than in its application to employees. “Everyone who works for