

AMERICAN DREAM

| Former Wyoming governor and K-State alum Jim Geringer on his immigrant parents, political aspirations and work for NASA

- Jeff Chapman Contributing writer - March 27, 2026



Governor Geringer on his farm in Wyoming - Courtesy Photo

Jim Geringer was born in Wheatland, Wyoming, and raised on the family farm.

He received a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from Kansas State University. He was on active duty with the U.S. Air Force from 1967 to 1977, working on aerospace programs for the Air Force and NASA, including launches of reconnaissance satellites, early detection and warning system, the NASA Viking Mars Lander, and the beginning of the Global Positioning Satellite System.

During this time, he also served as chief of computer programming at a ground receiving station for early warning satellites. He was on active reserve status for another 12 years associated with the activation and then deactivation of the PeaceKeeper ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile). In 1979 he went into farming and cattle feeding full time in rural Wyoming. He was elected to the Wyoming House of Representatives in 1983 serving for three two-year terms then was elected in 1985 to the Wyoming state senate. During this period, the Geringers continued to operate their farm, while he participated in the Air Force Reserves. They leased out their farm when Jim was first elected governor in 1994 serving two terms from 1995 till 2003.

I've had the privilege of meeting Geringer a couple of times while he was visiting as governor and former governor on the campus of K-State, but this was the first time I got to sit down with him and visit in depth.

Chapman: Your entire life has been about community and giving to others and you and your wife were quite a team from the beginning, so it is a fitting tribute to her from you that you would selflessly do so. You have said you two met at K-State?

Geringer: Yes. We both were enrolled in a summer semester class on economics. When a mutual friend introduced us, the outcome was 58 years together for a wonderful life!

Chapman: Let's start on how you ended up at K-State in the first place and how you two met.

Geringer: Just like most of my life, it was a unique set of circumstances and the good Lord's guidance. A combination of challenges and serendipity! (Laughs.)

Chapman: So, I am guessing K-State may not have been your first choice?

Geringer: It wasn't. It wasn't even on my radar.

For perspective, my parents immigrated to the USA — Mom's family from Sweden and Dad was a Volga German who at 2 years old departed with his family from the Volga region of Russia in 1907. Fast forward to the early 1940s, Mom and Dad met at a free dinner hosted by a local farm group, dated, and then married. They took up farming, endured hardships,

raised a great family with faith-based values that they passed on to me and my six siblings. Up to that point, no one in either side of my family had ever attended college. I had done well in high school and decided to apply for appointment to the Air Force Academy shortly after it opened. In checking on eligibility, I was informed that applicants needed 20-20 vision, which would have disqualified me, so I requested appointment from our Congressional delegation to the Naval Academy but never heard back.

Because our small high school didn't have a college adviser, I didn't realize until midway into my senior year that I was a little too late when I applied to MIT and other prominent engineering schools for admission. They responded that while my grades and other activities were excellent, I was too late. Then about three weeks before high school graduation I was called out of class to the principal's office. He told me that I was offered a full ride scholarship to the University of Wyoming. Great news but I had other aspirations.

When I returned to class with a frown, my close friend and classmate Tom asked me what that was all about. I told him about the scholarship offer but my preferences were outside of Wyoming. He laughed and said, "My uncle is on the faculty at Kansas State, so I'm headed there to study architecture. They have a strong reputation for engineering as well. So, you know what, Jeff, I said why not? I'll do it. So, on a whim and a prayer I "chose" to go to college in Manhattan, Kansas. (We both laugh.)

Chapman: I don't think the college recruiters at K-State will want to use that story!

Geringer: (Laughs) Why not?

Chapman: Where did you live on campus?

Geringer: Well, that leads into small world coincidence. I spent my freshman year off campus then moved to Goodnow Hall. After a couple of semesters, I was selected to become a resident assistant. I worked with another guy I think you know well, **Mike Hayden**, neither of us ever thinking we'd later have the title of governor.

Chapman: No way! I love Mike. Great guy. That's wild!

Geringer: It was a remarkable coincidence. Our terms were slightly offset. After his time as governor, he became secretary of Wildlife and Parks for Kansas.

Chapman: Were you close friends?

Geringer: We were good friends in college, but we didn't stay in touch after I moved back to Wyoming after my Air Force service. Maybe we both got busy politicking.

Chapman: (I reached out to my good friend, former Gov. Mike Hayden and asked him about Geringer.)

Hayden: Hey Jeff, Gov. Geringer and I have many things in common. We are the same age, we attended K-State at the same time, we both lived in Goodnow Hall for several semesters. We are Republicans. We both served in the military; we both served in the state Legislature. We both were active in the Western Governors Association.

When Jim was elected, I was really proud to see a fellow Wildcat sitting in the “big chair” in Wyoming. And also, the third RA during our time at Goodnow was Don Steeples, who ended up as provost at KU.

Chapman: Wow, that’s a lot of great leadership in one place and time, Thank you Gov. Hayden!

Chapman: Ok, Gov. Geringer, back to your K-State experience. What were you involved with on campus?

Geringer: Aside from studying engineering, I became curious about the Student Government Association. I decided to run for Student Senate representing Engineering and was elected. We were very active on issues working with President McCain on a variety of academic and social issues. I really enjoyed it. It was the time of the opening of the new Student Union, a cool place for students to meet. A good friend and I would go out to Tuttle Puddle to relax and water ski along with several hundred other students who frequented the area for swimming, water skiing, and picnics along with watching K-State’s rowing team practice. We hatched the idea to have a satellite student union at the lake. We took the idea to the director of the Union, Mr. Blackburn, who supported the concept then received the support of the student senate. But the Board of Trustees at the time never caught on to the idea.

Following that, I was encouraged by others to run for student body president, was subsequently elected and while I enjoyed it, I must admit that it was a tough balancing act to keep up academically. Often, I was an intermediary between students, faculty, and President McCain’s office on a variety of academic and campus life issues — a lot of engagement with affairs on campus. The combination of campus engagement and academics had a positive effect on my future.

Chapman: You met your wife, the former Sherri Slentz, at K-State. You said you have a humorous story?

Geringer: Yes, When I was governor of Wyoming, I went to several events with the President of the University of Wyoming, and at times when he introduced me, he would jokingly in a

somber voice say “and our governor, who did NOT attend the University of Wyoming...” Well, that irritated Sherri so after the third or fourth time she said “You know, Jim went to K-State to meet me! Any questions?” That settled the issue.

Chapman: Good for her. That reminds me, did you go to the Copper Bowl in 1993 when Wyoming played against K-State?

Geringer: Well, I was not available for the game, so I didn’t have to choose sides. That was K-State’s very first bowl victory and it set of the amazing turnaround under Bill Snyder! Prior to that, K-State football was a labor of love when I was among the small crowd that went to games in old Memorial Stadium, before the new Stadium hosted games. The Big 8 back then was often referred to as Oklahoma and the 7 Dwarfs. Occasionally Nebraska or others would have a good year, but not consistently. We (Wildcat Football) were so bad that we cheered for rare first downs like they were touchdowns. It is nice to see how great the program is now. Thank you, Coach Snyder!

Chapman: Any memorable games?

Geringer: I remember a Wildcats-Jayhawks game one year. In the dark of night before the game, some KU students invaded with black paint to make our white “KS” on the hill across the river to display “KU!” That insult could not be tolerated! So early that morning before the game, several of us climbed up and repainted it white again. For that game, our ‘Cats had a chip on their shoulders and played a tough defense and a great game. We were ahead 3-0 in the fourth quarter and time was running out as KU moved the ball down the field. K-State defense finally forced a fourth down and the crowd was wildly anticipating that we would finally win! KU decided to try a long field goal. Oh no! It was good — with no time left. A tie game. Sick. The stadium was as quiet as a funeral as we all walked out.

Chapman: It was the same for me during the 1980s in high school and the first couple years at K-State. First downs were still rare and well celebrated and quiet walks to the car too!

Geringer: I was so lucky though to get to watch Tex Winter coach basketball and see the amazing Nick Pino (7-foot center). He could make baskets and rebounds from his tiptoes, in fact, I don’t think he ever left the floor! (Chuckling.)

Chapman: Did you ever interact with Coach Bill Snyder?

Geringer: I met him a couple of times when I went back to speak on campus. Great guy!

Chapman: I reached out to you to chat about your time as governor and at K-State, but the most interesting part of your life to me was your time in the Air Force.

Geringer: The US space program was in its fledgling years when the Air Force assigned me to the Space and Missile Systems Organization (SAMSO) in El Segundo California. Up until that time the Air Force was largely about fighter jets, transport planes, and bombers. Sub-orbital launches of bomb carrying ICBMs such as the Minuteman II and III led to interest in rockets to put satellites in space. The unit I was with worked with contractors to develop rockets to put up polar orbiting spy satellites, communication satellites, and equatorial orbiting early warning satellites to guard against ICBMs launched out of Russia. We developed a reputation for launch success that caught NASA's interest, so we launched NASA's High Energy Earth Observatory HEAO, the precursor for the more recent James Webb Space Telescope. Then NASA asked the Air Force to launch the Mars Viking Lander, their first interplanetary vehicle, which we did successfully. The last series of space launches I participated in was the Global Positioning System GPS, strictly for the military for several years but later made available for all of us to use.

Chapman: It must have been the perfect time to be an engineer right out of college with NASA getting underway.

Geringer: It was for sure. As junior officers fresh with engineering knowledge, I, and many of my colleagues in the same age group were the experts about the space and rocket science far more so than the senior ranking officers in charge, so they were dependent on us for both technical and strategic decisions. We had significant influence at a high level in all projects.

Chapman: As a side note, given your experiences, what is your response to the people that say we never went to the moon, the conspiracy theorists?

Geringer: As engineers, we just laugh at them — or pity them for being gullible. People can believe whatever fantasies they want, but that's an admission of ignorance. I know how it happened, we all know it happened. Life certainly is difficult for people who can't tolerate fact.

Chapman: Your experiences are amazing; how do you follow that?

Geringer: My last three years in the Air Force was as chief of computer programming for the early warning satellites, keeping them in precise orbit and providing constant updates to the military HQs and the White House.

I had oversight of 23 computer programmers that maintained the software to keep satellites on orbit and make sense of the overwhelming amount of data gathered by the infrared sensors. Infrared light seen from space could be a reflection from many sources such as a snow cap, a chimney on a power plant, reflections off of clouds, a forest fire, or a Russian ICBM rocket launch. We had to strip out all the extraneous data and then make a

determination if there was a profile of a hostile launch and have high confidence it was a probable attack. In our protocol, if something was a threat, we had to have 100% confidence and then notify the White House with no less than a 30-minute advance notice with no false alarms. During my time on the program there were no hostile launches so you might say we were 100% successful!

Chapman: This is fascinating, governor, is this what Greenland is all about?

Geringer: Without commenting on politics or the approach, Trump's idea has merit. Previous administrations have also considered it. If Russia or China were to launch, the shortest distance is not east to west. It would be north over a polar route which would traverse over Greenland. The best place to have early detection of incoming ICBMs would be in Greenland.

Chapman: After all of that, you left the military?

Geringer: It evolved to my departure. At the end of that tour, not knowing what might be next, I received an order to report to a two-star general in DC for a top-secret job. For a young officer, it was the best possible situation. But I had a young family, my wife was pregnant with our fourth child. An assignment to the Air Staff would be ideal for me but my family would not see me nearly enough as I'd be putting in lots of travel and long days. At first, I asked if I could turn down the assignment. The answer was You have no choice. Then I discovered that I could turn down the assignment but would have to accept being discharged from active duty within seven days of the notification. Wow. What a choice! Choose family or career! Sherri and I spent an afternoon poking around in our backyard garden and discussed our choices. After prayer and contemplation, we decided to leave the Air Force. Three months later I was formally discharged, and we moved back to Wheatland, Wyoming. Within two days I found a new job at an engineering firm as an engineer overseeing the construction of a huge coal fired electric power plant. I worked there for two years and then we took up farming and ranching.

Chapman: Farmers always seem to be at the pulse of politics, taxes and policies.

Geringer: Yes, I got involved with organizations including Farmers Union and the Farm Bureau who were often on opposite sides of issues, but that gave me a chance to listen to a variety of views on major issues. They were all people like us, having coffee together to discuss issues. We made trips to Cheyenne to the Legislature to make our views known. It struck me that these legislators were ordinary people who debated issues and reached conclusions just like those of us back home did over coffee — except that they got to vote. So, I got the bug. About that time the state representative from our county had decided not to run for reelection. He approached me about running. There were three others who had

already announced then I stepped up. The campaign was clean and cordial, four good candidates, and somehow, I won. Six years in the house, the six years in the senate. Campaigns were spirited competitions. I never quite understood what caused the votes to come my way. The good Lord seems to have a plan.

Chapman: Was it the same for the gubernatorial campaign?

Geringer: Again, I was approached by a number of people to put my name in the hat. One day as I was discussing the chances with my father-in-law, he remarked that with the court challenges hitting state government and deep shortfall in tax income, why would anyone want to be governor? I was keenly aware... But, Jeff, I gave it a shot, and it worked out. I served two full terms. It was a good time to be a Republican with the Newt Gingrich movement in Congress and even though Clinton was president, we tolerated things together.

Chapman: You said earlier you might briefly discuss politics of the day or the process, so I am curious if you think we can ever return to the civil discourse of times past?

Geringer: Most people in my generation viewed government from a perspective of respect and integrity. State and federal institutions operate with checks and balances, and all interactions and open debate should demonstrate mutual respect, and a willingness to reach amicable outcomes. Campaigns for office have become entertainment side shows and the truth and differences in opinion are no longer tolerated or dignified. I have had spirited debates with opponents over the years and then later sought them out as colleagues and neighbors. The person you disagree with on today's issue might be the one who pulls you out of a snowbank tomorrow or helps with a family emergency. Treat people as fellow humans, be neighborly. Is it possible? Yes. It's a personal choice and responsibility to do so.

Chapman: Was your farming community fairly neighborly?

Geringer: Jeff, here's an example of how a good neighbor came through for me during the fall of the year I first ran for governor. It was the fall leading up to the general election, a hotly contested campaign during the time when agricultural harvest had to take top priority. The last crop to be harvested that fall was sugar beets. I was running against a very well-known person in a tight campaign. The week before the election was also the deadline by the sugar company to deliver harvested beets to their receiving station. Harvest was typically hectic and labor intensive. That year it was a choice between our financial livelihood and the outcome of a spirited campaign.

One of my neighbor beet growers approached Sherri's father that week and gruffly asked "When's Jim going to dig those beets? It's late!" Her dad said he wasn't sure. Then after a

brief pause the neighbor said “Tell him to forget it! We’ll dig ‘em for him! “So, he rounded up several other neighbors, and they came, harvested, and delivered all my beets in a single day! On my own it would have taken a full week or more depending on the weather. And to top it off, I later learned that I was Grower of the Year for our Sugar Beets Association based on the quality and yield of my crop.

That’s what you call celebrating good neighbors and a community that pitches in to do the right thing.



Painting of Governor Jim Geringer by Mimi Jungbluth

Chapman: Governor, this has been extraordinary. I wish I had had the pleasure of hearing you speak more when you were leading. You definitely should have been a Landon Lecturer! All my best!

Geringer: I’m humbled and grateful!

Manhattan Mercury March 2026 https://themercury.com/features/american-dream-former-wyoming-governor-and-k-state-alum-jim-geringer-on-his-immigrant-parents/article_eba86f57-5f88-4217-98a2-396fa4acadc8.html

