
Racket Group celebrates 125th anniversary

By **Melissa Silva** on July, 29 2016 | Catering



Racket Group, international airline supply company — and certified WBE (Women-Owned Business Enterprise) — celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. Business operations started even earlier, as Racket Merchandise Company incorporated in Kansas City, Missouri in 1891.



For 125 years, Racket Group has been owned and operated by the Hoagland family, now it its sixth generation. In its earliest days, Racket was an outfitting post on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. Before opening a storefront on Kansas City's Main Street, Racket had outfitted wagons to supply travelers moving west on these historic routes. The company's name is a souvenir of this era — when any such outfitter would ride about town, its supply wagon would clang loudly from the pots and pans and other wares moving about, and the outfitter would be generally known as "The Racket Man."

Racket's subsequent storefront on Main Street carried a complete line of housewares including cutlery, bowls, crockery, buggy whips, and anything else needed for the home at that time. By 1929, Racket had expanded its offerings to include "everything needed to start in the restaurant or hotel business."

In 1942, Racket moved its operation three blocks away to 713 Walnut, where its headquarters is still located today. The building had at one time been an annex to the old Railway Exchange Building and contained 25,000 square feet of space, providing much needed warehouse space as the company continued to grow.



Racket became more heavily involved with the restaurant and hotel supply business in the 1950's. The owners would make buying trips to Japan and Europe, selecting fine chinaware and other goods for their clients. In the 1960's, the company expanded its retail presence when shopping centers were booming and Kansas City continued to grow.

The 1960's also marked Racket's entry into the airline industry when they became the hometown supplier of Trans World Airlines, TWA, which was headquartered in Kansas City. The contact with TWA, made by Virgil Hoagland (Racket President 1942-1980, fourth generation), helped to create a strong network between Racket and the airline industry. In the 1970's, according to Joe Hoagland (Racket President 1980-2007, fifth generation), it "became very difficult to compete in the shopping centers... so many stores were selling the same things we were. Plus, increases in employee salaries greatly increased our cost." Joe Hoagland believed that in spite of changes going on in the airline industry at that time, including de-regulation and record-high-fuel costs, the future for Racket was in the airline industry. By 1980, "Racket provided glassware, cups, salt and pepper shakers, plastic dinnerware, blankets — anything passenger might use on a flight — to eight domestic and two international airlines." In 1980 Racket sold two million salt and pepper shakers to these airlines, becoming the world's largest manufacturer of such items on a contract basis.



Near the end of 1980, Racket sold the last of its retail stores to focus exclusively on the travel industry. Today, Racket has added locations in Brussels and Hong Kong to its office in Kansas City. Under the leadership of current President Anne Hoagland Bauer (sixth generation), Racket continues to supply the airline industry for traveler's needs, just as "The Racket Man" did 125 years ago.