



# THE GARDEN OF EDEN. MINUS EVE.

LONG BEFORE GAY MARRIAGE, TWO GAY MEN BECAME "FATHER AND SON" AND SET UP HOME IN HAWAII. THEIR ISLAND PARADISE ENDURES TO THIS DAY.





STORY BY **BRUCE SHENITZ**  
PHOTOGRAPH BY **LIA CHANG**

THE LAWAI STREAM ON THE ALLERTON ESTATE



JOHN GREGG AND ROBERT ALLERTON  
IN HAMBURG, 1932



Perhaps there was something extra-fragrant in the spring air on the day in 1938 when Robert Allerton, a 65-year-old Chicago millionaire, and his 38-year-old companion, John Gregg, first set eyes on a lush 64-acre plot on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. “We were so excited by what we saw that we didn’t dare look at each other,” Gregg would recall in an interview 40 years later. Although they had intended their Kauai visit only as a short excursion punctuating a return trip from Australia, where they’d been wintering, the two men were on their way to a decision that day that would change their lives. Smitten with the secluded plot, they did what any self-respecting millionaires would do and bought it.

Seventy years later, the garden they so lovingly transformed, now one of the five parts of the National Tropical Botanical Garden, stands as an enduring monument to a gay couple who created their own private Eden.

What led the heir to one of Chicago’s wealthiest and most socially prominent families (the Allerton name pops up all over Chicago buildings) to settle in one of the most isolated places in the world with the man he called his “adopted son”?

And how did this stunning example of a garden fantasy, built by a gay couple seeking a refuge, end up as part of a leading botanical research institution?

**BORN IN CHICAGO** in 1873, Robert Allerton—the only son of self-made “cattle king” and First National Bank of Chicago founder Samuel Allerton—abandoned a putative career as an artist at the age of 24 to take over 12,000 acres of his father’s land in the central Illinois town of Monticello, discovering his true talent in the process. The 33-bedroom mansion and extensive gardens that he created there and lived in for 40 years reflects many of the motifs and themes that would later be fully realized in his Hawaii property. It was not until Allerton was in his 50s, however, that he met 26-year-old architecture student John Gregg, who would

*“Robert Allerton had enough authority that he got a law passed allowing adult adoption in Illinois. I guess in those days that’s as close as you got to gay marriage.”*

become his lifelong partner. From the start they described themselves as having a “father-son relationship,” a suitably demure description of their setup, and one that was formalized in 1951 when Illinois passed a law allowing one adult to adopt another. Although the official materials at the Allerton Garden refer to Robert Allerton’s “adopted son” with little further explanation, the interpreters who lead guided tours are free to deal with visitor questions about the pair as they wish.

Before he died in 1986, John Gregg Allerton recorded two oral histories about his life with Robert and the development of the Illinois and Hawaii gardens. His account of their relationship easily lends itself to multiple readings, and he actually told two versions of the “how we met” story to an interviewer at Illinois’s Sangamon State University in 1984. In the first, he recalled their initial meeting at a “dads’ football game” at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: “Robert Allerton was invited over there for lunch before a football game and he didn’t have a son and I didn’t have a father, so we were paired off and lived happily ever after.”

John, then 84, went on to say that there were other stories about how they first met, and that there was “a certain amount of truth in them,” but “it really

A MERMAID STATUE, BASED ON ONE THE ALLERTONS SAW IN NEW YORK, REFLECTS THEIR ESOTERIC BUT FLUID VISION.



doesn't make much difference. We got together and lived happily ever after." He then added that a friend of Allerton's "realized how lonesome Robert was. So he threw us together as much as he could so that Robert would have companionship.... We just gradually eased into a father-son relationship. He needed me and I needed him."

The words offer a map of misreading, but which interpretation would *be* the misreading: the romantic friendship or the romantic couple? "It was very clear

*"It was very clear to everybody that they were gay—in Hawaiian society it's not an unusual or really bad thing. I think our community is actually very tolerant of that kind of thing."*

to everybody that they were gay," says Charles "Chipper" Wichman Jr., director and CEO of the National Tropical Botanical Garden, which includes the Allerton Garden. "In Hawaiian society it's not an unusual or really bad thing. I think our community is actually very tolerant of that kind of thing."

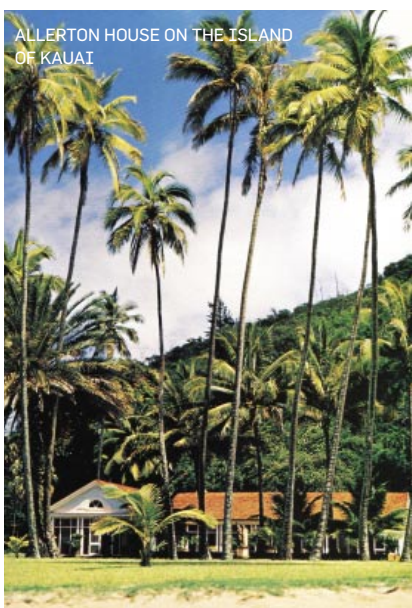
Wichman, 50, knew John Gregg Allerton a bit when he was growing up in Kauai, and he also brings a unique family

history and knowledge to his conclusions: It was one of his great-uncles who first showed the Allertons the land they eventually bought, and both men were friends with his grandmother. Regarding the 1951 adoption, Wichman offers an interpretation, echoed by several other members of the garden's staff: Richard Hanna, librarian at the National Tropical Botanical Garden and curator of the Allerton Garden, has lived in a section of the reconstructed Allerton house since 1992. He's become the resident expert

on the garden's history, and though not himself gay, he's a transmitter of the oral tradition that was passed along when he first started working there 16 years ago. "Maybe 75% of the male staff was gay," he says. "There's a high percentage of gays in botany—and among librarians!" Knowledge of the Allertons "was just part of the whole culture of the organization." When Hanna was first involved with training tour guides, "I made it real evident that the Allertons' lifestyle was different, and that they may have come to Kauai for that reason." But with changes in the garden's administration and leadership in the late '90s, "it became taboo to mention the Allertons."

Though there weren't specific directives, he says, it became clear that tours should emphasize the plants and the ethnobotany of the garden rather than the lives of its builders.

During their lifetimes, in any case, the men played an active role in the social life of the island and were patrons of the arts in Honolulu institutions as well. Whatever their neighbors may have thought privately about them, the couple



NATIONAL TROPICAL BOTANICAL GARDEN ARCHIVES (MERMAID); RICHARD HANNA (ALLERTON HOUSE).



## FATHERS AND SONS

The Allertons were assuredly not the only same-sex couple to use adoption as an end run around their lack of marriage protections. Surprisingly, no one has looked at the subject systematically, according to University of Oregon historian Ellen Herman, who is writing a book about child adoption in the United States. "I've certainly heard of adult adoption being used to secure legal ties between adults in the absence of marriage or anything resembling officially recognized same-sex partnership," she says. "All of the evidence I've come across (like so much else in lesbian and gay history) is anecdotal." (Speaking of anecdotes, a subplot of François Truffaut's *Day for Night* concerns an actor and his much younger adopted son, who, it is clearly implied, is his lover.)

A recent example of adoption as a "marriage" option is found in the union of civil rights leader Bayard Rustin and his lover, Walter Naegle, 37 years his junior. "We had heard horror stories about gay people who were denied access to the hospital rooms of their partners because they weren't considered 'family,' not to mention the legal problems that could ensue regarding wills and estates," Naegle, now 58, says. Rustin discussed the adoption idea with him about four years into their relationship, in the early 1980s, "long before a public debate about gay marriage began, and we saw it as the only legal possibility for cementing our relationship." Rustin, who had read of a Midwestern gay couple who had tried unsuccessfully to use the adoption alternative, engaged a lawyer who was able to make it happen in New York.

I asked John D'Emilio, author of *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* and a historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago, whether an adult adoption is sometimes just an adoption. While he acknowledged that recent research shows a spectrum of same-sex relationships in the 19th and early 20th centuries, ranging from romantic friendships to sexual partnerships, "the farther along you move into the 20th century, the harder it is to plausibly claim romantic friendship." B.S.

appear to have been a well-recognized part of the community. "It may not have been readily accepted, but there were so few people on the island," says Hanna. "Everybody was strange, and that was their way of being strange," he chuckles as we climb a path in the late morning sun to visit a sadly neglected hilltop Japanese teahouse.

**WHEN ROBERT AND JOHN** first laid eyes on the Lawai Valley, most of the land, having been previously owned by sugar scion Alexander McBryde, was planted in sugarcane. The tram that now runs from the visitors' center into the valley pauses at an overlook where you can see the beachfront and coconut palms—a classically lush "tropical view" if ever there was one. And though the Allertons initially saw it from a different vantage, it's easy to understand why they immediately coveted



ROBERT ALLERTON (LEFT) AND JOHN GREGG ALLERTON  
ON THE LAWN IN FRONT OF THEIR HOME

the property.

Now, laid out in a series of "rooms" on the eastern bank of the Lawai River, which runs through the valley floor, one of the most striking things about the garden is the skillful way it blends the natural and man-made worlds, botanical beauty and theatrical artanship. Unlike the English style of gardening, which emphasizes flowers and borders, the Allerton Garden hews more to the Italianate mode, which tends toward all-green gardens built around architectural features, often ruins. Strolling into a Hawaiian garden that is *not* populated with bursts of lush color is a surprise—and refreshingly restful and meditative. A bamboo grove, for example, provides a hushed study in golden-yellow stalks crisscrossed and bent in all directions.

Every garden is a dialogue between the natural and designed: In *Arcadia* playwright Tom Stoppard writes, "English landscape was invented by gardeners imitating foreign painters who were evoking classical authors. The whole thing was brought home in the luggage from the grand tour." That last remark could apply equally well to the Allertons: They often built a new room of their garden around a piece of sculpture they'd brought back from their extensive travels in Europe or Asia, creating what Hanna calls "a memory theater" of their lives.

**INITIALLY, ROBERT AND JOHN** planned to spend only three months a year on Kauai, to avoid the notorious Chicago winters. But after being trapped on the

island by the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, they stayed on during the war, and afterward made it their permanent home.

Although the pair were active in the local social scene and well known for their lavish costume parties, it's easy to imagine that they might have felt they'd found their own refuge in the self-contained world of the garden. The valley had already been something of a retreat: Queen Emma of Hawaii, who had lost both her husband and her 4-year-old son by the time she was 28, lived there from 1870 to 1871, planting bougainvillea along one of the valley walls. Alexander McBryde lived there from around 1900 until his death in 1935; John Allerton described what he knew of him in the 1978 oral history:

"There is Gabriel, who is a ward of Mr. McBryde's and lived here quite a lot. When Gabriel was 17 or 18 years old he was introduced to Mr. McBryde by Daisy Wilcox, and Gabriel was quite a singer and they made a friendship and he lived here with Mr. McBryde, who was a bachelor and loved Hawaiian music—they developed a sort of a father-and-son arrangement, you might say."

The valley seems to have attracted more "lonesome bachelors" and "father-son arrangements" than one would expect in such a remote location. I mention this to Rick Hanna as we prepare to drive out of the garden, and he smiles and says, "I guess I'm the fourth old bachelor to live in the valley." At 60, he's hardly old, and he concedes he might yet marry, but as he is the custodian of the Allertons' memory theater, it has a nice symmetry. ■