

R. Todd Williams, 69; winery founder, comic's brother

Known as 'Dr. Toad,' he was an ebullient promoter of wine with a 'larger than life' personality

By Dennis McLellan

August 18, 2007

R. Todd Williams, co-founder of Toad Hollow Vineyards and the older brother of comedian Robin Williams, who used his own outgoing personality to help build his boutique winery into one of Sonoma County's best-known, has died. He was 69.

Williams died Tuesday at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital of complications from heart surgery performed in July, said his wife, Frankie.

A onetime bartender at -- and sometimes owner of -- 17 bars, nightclubs and restaurants in Oklahoma, Chicago, Jamaica and Northern California, Williams had a background in wine sales, distribution and marketing before founding Toad Hollow Vineyards in Healdsburg with his late partner Rodney Strong in 1993.

The winery, best known for its unoaked Chardonnay and its distinctive labels featuring whimsical toads, saw its sales rise from 3,000 cases in 1994 to more than 100,000 last year.

It has won dozens of medals for its varietals, including a silver medal for its Chardonnay in the New World Wine Competition last year.

Williams, who for many years made cross-country marketing treks promoting his winery, was known as "Dr. Toad."

He had picked up the "Toad" moniker as a boy and later added the "Dr."

"He said he was a Doctor of Lively Living," his wife said Thursday.

In fact, when he was tapped to play a bit part as a bartender in his brother's 1993 comedy "Mrs. Doubtfire," Williams was listed in the credits not by his own name but as Dr. Toad.

"He used to say he suffered from LSD: Lack of Self-Denial," Erik Thorson, Toad Hollow Vineyards' controller, recalled with a laugh.

Thorson said the usually bearded Williams had a "larger than life" personality.

"He was a great storyteller, boisterous, fun-loving and a friend to everyone he met," Thorson said. "Certainly, he was a showman, and I think that was a large part in how he built his business. When I first started here over 10 years ago, he spent at least half the year on the road. He loved to travel, shake hands, give winemaker's dinners -- just talk about the wine.

"He related to every kind of class of people," Thorson said. "Wine for so many years has been considered by many people to be somewhat snobby, and Todd never wanted it to be. Todd wanted wine to be accessible to everyone, and I think when people saw him talk about it and saw his passion for it, that was contagious."

Robin Williams was unavailable for comment Thursday, but in an interview with the Press Democrat of Santa Rosa this week, he said he'd often be "in a little town somewhere and they would go, 'Hey, you're Toad's brother.'"

"In a lot of places around America, I'm just Toad's brother," he said. "That's so cool."

Robert Todd Williams was born June 14, 1938, in Chicago to Susan and Robert Williams. They divorced while he was young, and he was raised by his mother in Versailles, Ky. He later served a stint in the Air Force.

Several years after meeting his wife in the early 1970s, they launched Toad Manner, a bar in San Francisco's Marina district, where the fun-loving Williams dubbed himself the Mayor of the Marina.

In addition to his brother and his wife of 29 years, Williams is survived by another brother, McLaurin Smith.

A public celebration of his life will be held from 2 to 5 p.m. Aug. 25 at Richard's Grove and Saralee's Vineyard in Windsor, near Healdsburg.

dennis.mclellan@latimes.com