

Robert Williams dies - winemaker, bar owner and bon vivant

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Thursday, August 16, 2007



He privately called one of his saloons the "Risky Liver Inn," referred to his pet dachshund as "a 10-pound bladder" in a national magazine interview, and at 14 ran away from home on a funky Whizzer scooter.

And that was all before he founded the Toad Hollow, the Healdsburg winery famous for its oddball toad-themed labels - and award-winning taste.

Yes, Robert Todd Williams was a character all right, his friends and wife recalled with chuckles Wednesday. And if he hadn't died from heart failure Tuesday, they said, he would be the first one to tell you so.

"The man essentially drove his life at 90 miles an hour until it went off a cliff," said Erik Thorson, Toad Hollow controller. "He enjoyed every minute he had on Earth, and he's probably in heaven right now having a BLT with extra bacon and laughing his head off."

His even better-known younger brother, actor/comedian Robin Williams, put it this way: "Toad left a big footprint with a cork, or as a friend said, he left a great trail."

Mr. Williams, who lived in Healdsburg and was known to friends as Todd or Toad, died at 69 at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital.

Over the past 14 years, he built a national reputation as a top-flight winemaker with the Toad Hollow Vineyards he founded with vintner Rodney Strong. The vineyard drew early attention with its whimsical wine names, including Eye of the Toad and Cacophony, and labels featuring toads hoisting glasses - but it was the taste that kept connoisseurs coming back for more, boosting the winery's sales from 3,000 cases in 1994 to 100,000 cases last year. Its varietals have won dozens of prizes, including a silver medal for its Chardonnay last year in the New World Wine Competition.

One of the key goals of the winery, Mr. Williams always proclaimed, was to keep the bottles affordable while still tasting great. Most Toad Hollow selections cost less than \$20.

"He wanted to make really good wine for the masses, where you wouldn't have to think about spending a big wad," said Mr. Williams' wife of 29 years, Francie "Frankie" Williams. "He tried to take some of the mystery and snobbery out of the wine business."

Mr. Williams was born in Chicago to Susan and Robert Williams, who divorced while he was an infant. He was raised in rural Versailles, Ky., by his mother - until the age of 14, when he left to seek adventure on a motor scooter. He worked at odd jobs until he found saloon work to be his calling, and with the exception of a hitch in the Air Force in the 1950s in Greenland, he spent the rest of his life selling alcohol in one way or another, friends and family recalled.

"He was full of stories, made everyone laugh and had a good time doing it," said his wife. "You never knew for sure about the details, because Todd went to the Mark Twain school of thought, where you don't let the truth get in the way of a good story."

Among these tales were recountings of running the Pink Elephant Club saloon in Oklahoma while serving in the Air Force, tending bar at 17 different nightclubs from Jamaica to California, and serving up drinks year after year with wild frivolity at Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

He lied about his age in so many inventive ways that at one point he forgot how old he truly was, friends recalled. Finally, when he was an adult, his mother pulled out his birth certificate and showed him he was four years younger than he thought.

Frankie Williams said she met her future husband, appropriately, in a saloon in San Francisco in the early 1970s, and the couple soon started up the Toad Manner bar in the Marina district. Mr. Williams called himself Mayor of the Marina, and his booming laugh made the bar a magnet for a dizzying collection of characters, from bikers and cross-dressers to lawyers and writers from Rolling Stone.

"There was one guy named Beefy, who wore a pillbox hat and a black housedress and had a big black beard," Robin Williams remembered with a laugh, phoning from a movie set in Connecticut. "In San Francisco, that's kind of like day-wear."

Mr. Williams called his customers and pals at the bar his "Marina maggots," which his brother deadpanned was particularly appropriate "because if you are a toad, it's always good to have maggots nearby."

"People were drawn to that bar not because of location, location, location," said Robin Williams. "It was Toad."

After running a bar in the Calaveras County town of Arnold and working as a salesman for companies including Shafer Vineyards in Napa, he hit his true stride with Toad Hollow, friends and family said.

"It was no surprise he turned that into such a success," said longtime pal Dick Donahue, co-owner of the Marina Lounge in San Francisco, which Mr. Williams continued to visit throughout his life after leaving the city. "He could be in a room with the longshoreman or the pope, and he'd get them to laugh, but he could also read people the minute he met them."

Robin Williams, who because of family divorces didn't know he had a brother until he was several years old, said it was only natural that his brother (who has the same father as the comedian) turned out to be funny. He cast his brother as the bartender in "Mrs. Doubtfire," but turning him into a pro was never a goal, he said. It was enough that the older Williams was just flat-out fun to hang with.

"It's in the genes," said the comedian. "Toad was outrageous, maybe even more than me. Hard to believe, but it's true."

In addition to his wife and brother, Mr. Williams is survived by another brother, McLaurin Smith of Memphis and eight nieces and nephews.

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

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This article appeared on page B - 5 of the San Francisco Chronicle