As a historical archaeologist in the DU anthropology department, Bonnie Clark uses documents, artifacts and places to study the fabric of everyday life. Her current research is investigating and preserving the tangible history of Amache, Colorado’s WWII-era Japanese American internment camp.

“Amache is a reminder of the high human cost of racism, with people being incarcerated for no reason other than their ancestry,” Clark said of the historical site located in southeastern Colorado near Granada. “The stories we hear from survivors and their families are often heartbreaking. And yet, they are also about triumph, and the archaeology confirms that side of the history.”

Since 2008, Clark has led the Amache Research Project which brings together DU graduate students, undergraduate students, interns and volunteers from the community, including former internees and their relatives, to research and interpret the physical remains of Amache.

The Project includes a summer field course in archaeology and museum studies, laboratory analysis of objects from Amache, and exhibits that incorporate student learning and community stories.

“Despair comes easy in a place like Amache, and yet the internees did not give up, nor did they give in to their bleak surroundings,” she said. “They made baseball diamonds, taught each other painting and flower arranging, and created beautiful gardens. Their efforts to take care of each other and transform the place they were forced to inhabit are incredibly inspiring.”

Clark will lead another five-week field course starting in June. Crews will work in the morning on-site, applying field methods for finding, recording, and analyzing the archaeological remains at the camp. Students will learn how to survey, map, excavate, and use ground-penetrating radar. In the afternoon, crews will work at the Amache museum, where they’ll learn how to handle, store and record museum collections. They also will be involved in public interpretation through exhibits and site tours.

Artifacts recovered from the site are brought back to the archaeology lab at DU where they are analyzed by students in historical archaeology courses. Undergraduate and graduate students will use that data, as well as data recovered in the field, to support thesis research. That research, with insight from community members, often finds its way to museum exhibits.

“The materials from the field school are assets for the community, who often come to see the collections or study our collected archival materials,” said Clark. “My students, our museum staff, and I are often invited to share our results through talks or at public events.”

As an undergraduate, Clark was a dual major in anthropology and English. After graduation, she got a job as a field archaeologist and never looked back. She earned an MA in Anthropology from the University of Denver, and a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California,
Berkeley. Her interests include cultural landscapes of the western U.S.; race, ethnicity and material culture; and community engaged research.

“I love it when students are able to connect ideas or data in ways they never thought of before,” said Clark, who has taught at DU since 2003. “That can happen through a case study they discuss, a theory they encounter, or their own research. It’s particularly satisfying when those connections spark a commitment in students to the greater good beyond themselves.”

She also says that we can learn a lot from studying the past.

“People of the past were just as smart and enterprising and interesting as people in the present. Studying human history reveals strategies for living, many of which we would be wise to embrace.”

[photo by April Kamp-Whittaker]