Colorado’s history is rife with imagery of rugged bravado: Zebulon Pike’s daring mountaineering expedition, the fortunes won and lost during the Gold Rush, the cowboy herding cattle across the plains. But—perhaps because of Hollywood’s influence—almost all the Western heroes are white.

M. Dores Cruz, an assistant professor of anthropology at DU, wants to help people understand that people of different backgrounds and origins were part of the history of the West.

“When people talk about the history of Colorado, particularly the homestead, the image that comes to mind is white homesteaders,” Cruz says. “One of the project’s goals is to show how much more complex the history of Colorado is.”

Cruz leads a team conducting archaeological research at an African American homesteading community in southeastern Colorado known as “The Dry” because of its arid climate and stark landscape. Thanks to grants from DU and the Colorado State Historical Fund, Cruz is researching how the African American populations who settled at The Dry lived.

The story of the settlement starts with the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, which opened up homesteading to areas not readily irrigated. Rocky Ford entrepreneur George Swink—who had acquired a significant amount of land for farming—encouraged Josephine and Leonora Rucker, two of his domestic workers, to travel to neighboring states to persuade family and friends to homestead their own land in Colorado.

The first African American settlers started arriving at The Dry around 1915. Before long, about 50 families were living in the area. But in 1923, when a major dam collapsed, agriculture became almost impossible and homesteaders started leaving the area.

Then the Dust Bowl hit, and whatever slight capacity the land had for farming completely disappeared.

Yet some families remained until the 1970s. Some purchased a few head of cattle for milking and butter production. Others got jobs on the railroad in nearby cities. But by the mid-1970s, every last settler was gone.

For her research, Cruz has relied considerably on interviews with and information provided by descendants of settlers of The Dry. But she also is employing technology pioneered by DU anthropology Professor Larry Conyers, an expert in ground-penetrating radar.

So far, Cruz and her team—Michelle Slaughter of Avalon Archeology in Denver, DU graduate student Jennifer Moon and Brown University graduate student Jessica Unger—have located 10 homesteads and found artifacts including canning supplies, toy parts, shoe horns, buttons and buckles.

“In addition to all the objects that can give us information about the economy of the homesteads, some objects of daily life are very personal and give us a window into other realms of life,” Cruz says. “Although the archaeology of plantation life and the history of slavery are central to the study of the African American diaspora, other histories should also be told. We want to make the descendants and the community stakeholders in the project, not only because of the information they can give us, but because it is important for the local population to preserve the memory and history of The Dry.”