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The first step in a "pilot" operation to test the feasibility of contracting for food service in Indian Bureau schools will begin at Cherokee Agency, Cherokee, N. C., on January 17 when Cleaves Food Service, Washington, D. C., takes over the job of providing noonday lunches at the five schools under the agency, Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay announced today.

Similar operations are planned for the near future at other Indian Bureau boarding and day schools in New Mexico and Arizona as part of the feasibility study. If the plan of contracting for food services proves effective and more economical than Federal operation of kitchens and dining halls at Indian Service schools, the Bureau contemplates turning the job over to private concerns under contract at all or most of its 263 schools throughout the country.

The contract with Cleaves Food Service was negotiated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs under a special delegation of authority from the General Services Administration. Negotiation was used for the "pilot" or study contract because of the difficulties inherent in advertising for bids on such an unusual operation. In the event of large-scale contracting, however, the Bureau intends to advertise for bids and award the contracts in accordance with standard governmental procedures.

The five schools covered in the initial operation are Cherokee Central, Big Cove, Soco, and Birdtown at Cherokee and Snowbird at Robbinsville. Their combined enrollment is approximately 800.